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The Influence of Zen-Taoism on Thomas Merton's View of Contemplation

by

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University, in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Theology**

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ABSTRACT

This doctoral dissertation studies the relationship between the development of Merton's view of contemplation and Merton's extensive interest in and writings on Zen and classical Taoism. It aims to show that Merton's later view of contemplation is influenced by his appropriation of the teachings of Zen-Taoism.

The dissertation contains eight chapters. Chapters one, two, and three concern the growth of Merton's interest in Zen and classical Taoism and the depth of his learning in these disciplines. Chapters four, five, and six deal with the development of Merton's view of contemplation. Chapter seven addresses the main thesis of the dissertation, exploring the specific influences of Zen and Taoist wisdom on Merton's later understanding of contemplative life. Chapter eight attempts an evaluation of Merton's later thinking in light of these influences.

The opening chapter of the dissertation explores the origin, the extent, and the reasons for Merton's interest in Zen and classical Taoism. It explains how Merton's interest in Zen-Taoism grew enormously in the mid 1950s. Zen-Taoism became one of his chief areas of interest between 1959 and 1968, during the last ten years of his life. The depth of Merton's learning of Zen-Taoism is shown in the number of publications on the subject. Altogether, Merton wrote

three books and a fairly large number of essays on Zen and classical Taoism.

The second chapter analyzes the content of Merton's writing on classical Taoism, particularly *The Way of Chuang Tzu*. The chapter indicates that *The Way of Chuang Tzu* consists of 62 passages chosen from the standard version of the *Chuang Tzu*. Merton's version of the *Chuang Tzu* reflects his personal appropriation of the teachings of Master Chuang. The content of the 62 chosen passages centers on some major themes of the teachings of Master Chuang, including simplicity, joy, freedom, "uselessness," "non-action," and "complementarity." Interestingly, some of these Taoist concepts are found to be incorporated into Merton's later writings on contemplation.

The third chapter studies Merton's writings on Zen, including *Mystics and Zen Masters*, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, and a number of other essays. The chapter shows how Merton's understanding of Zen is informed by the writings of Suzuki, Hui-neng, and other Chinese Zen Masters of the Southern school. Merton digests the teachings of Zen and presents them in his own creative writings. His works on Zen evolve around a number of themes: Zen as awakening to one's nature, Zen as seen in the ordinary, Zen as not something not to be attained by techniques of meditation or withdrawal of contact with the external world. These themes have significant influence on Merton's later view of Christian contemplation.

Chapter four begins to explore the development of Merton's understanding of contemplation. It investigates Merton's foundational knowledge of contemplation by attending to his references to the works of Etienne Gilson, Jacques Maritain, Thomas Aquinas, Augustine of Hippo, and John of the Cross. The chapter reveals that Merton's early view of contemplation is nurtured by the thoughts of the classical writers and is therefore in line with the traditional model, which sees contemplation as the pure gift of God given to those actively disposed to mystical life.

Chapter five examines Merton's early view of contemplation by studying mainly three pieces of his early works, which were written in between 1949 and 1958: *What Is Contemplation?*, *Seeds of Contemplation*, and *The Ascent to Truth*. Merton perceives active contemplation as a possible transition to infused contemplation. Active contemplation includes a great variety of spiritual disciplines, such as mental prayer, detachment, solitude, exercise of faith, and finding one's true self. The grace of infused contemplation is depicted as an inexpressible experience of union with God.

Chapter six studies Merton's later writings on contemplation, which were written in between 1959 and 1968. These writings betray a substantially different way of understanding contemplation, one

which contains a number of new emphases and elements not found in the early writings. For example, Merton's later work draws explicit comparisons between Christian contemplation and Zen enlightenment, shows a much more positive regard toward the state of married life, and defines the itinerary of prayer life more in terms of depth of awareness than of progressive stages. This chapter also discovers that the new elements and emphases in the later writings are expressed in the light of Zen and classical Taoism.

Chapter seven further explores the scope of the influence of Zen-Taoism on Merton's later view of contemplation. It focuses on several areas of change in the later writings and investigates the extent to which those changes are influenced by Zen-Taoism. The first area of change concerns the approach of Merton's later writings on contemplation. The encounter with Zen-Taoism motivates Merton to fully adopt an experiential approach. The second area of change refers to Merton's attitude toward the world. The down-to-earth spirituality of Zen-Taoism stimulates Merton to make an explicit claim about his life-affirming attitude toward the world. The third area change concerns Merton's understanding of God. Zen-Taoism influences Merton in his perception of God as the ground of one's being and as the stream of life. The fourth area of change focuses on Merton's introduction of Zen-enlightenment into his discussion of Christian contemplation. The profound experience of Zen-

enlightenment impressed Merton to the extent that he uses it as a "clinical case" to illustrate the Christian experience of discovering the true self. The fifth area of change refers to Merton's perception of Christian prayer life. The practical wisdom of Zen-Taoism inspires Merton to move from a more structural and stage-oriented framework to one that stresses wholeness, spontaneity, and ordinariness. We can therefore conclude that Merton's view of contemplation is influenced by his own study of Zen and classical Taoism.

The last chapter of this dissertation evaluates Merton's later view of contemplation. It points out that Merton's later view of contemplation reflects a more ecumenical attitude. First, Merton is a "wider ecumenist." Second, Merton is an advocate of dialogue on religious experience. Third, Merton is a proponent of "common-core mysticism."

The thesis proves that Merton's extensive study of Zen-Taoism is significant. It brings direct and indirect influences on Merton's view of contemplation. Merton keenly absorbs the wisdom of Zen-Taoism in his understanding of contemplative life. The result of his encounter with Zen-wisdom is an enriched Christian view of contemplation.

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INTRODUCTION

A Christian Monk Well-versed in Zen-Taoism

Thomas Merton (1915-1968) is considered to be one of the most important figures in the reshaping of Christian spirituality in the twentieth century. Walter Capps calls him "the West's most influential fashioner of contemporary spirituality."¹ Merton's influence on contemporary Christian life is manifold, including the advancement of interreligious dialogue, Christian involvement in world peace, and the reappraisal of contemplative life.

Christians in different parts of the world are attracted to Merton's writings on contemplative life. One example is his *Seeds of Contemplation*, which has been translated into 13 languages and has become a widely read classic.² No wonder Jean Leclercq, perhaps the most respected historian of monasticism in our time, has ranked Merton with the Fathers of the Early Church and those of the Middle Ages.³ Sister Therese Lentfoehr, one of Merton's close friends, regards Merton as the contemporary spokesperson for contemplative life:

Since the days of St. Bernard and the Golden Age of Cistercian mysticism there has not been a spokesman for contemplative life such as Thomas Merton. For men of all faiths he has been a pervasive influence in our century, and when lesser names have been forgotten the name of

¹ Walter Capps, *Hope Against Hope: Moltmann to Merton in One Theological Decade* (Philadelphia: Portress Press, 1976), xx.

² Merton's *Seeds of Contemplation* has been translated into Chinese, Danish, Dutch, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Polish, Portuguese, Spanish, Swedish, and Vietnamese.

³ Jean Leclercq, *Introduction to Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 18.

Thomas Merton will be remembered.⁴

Influential as he is, Merton's younger life gave no indication that he would "turn out to be the most significant Christian figure in 20th century America."⁵ Merton received very limited religious education from his parents. His father, an Anglican, and his mother, a Quaker, were not professedly religious people. Though they had him baptized in a Protestant church at Prades, France, this was the extent of any formal religious upbringing he received in his early years.

Merton admitted that his childhood baptism had no effect at all on his attitude toward life. He wrote in his autobiography: "I don't think there was much power in the water of the baptism I had in Prades, to untwist the warping of my essential freedom or loose me from the devils that hung like vampires on my soul."⁶ Merton grew up as a man of the world. Long before he entered Columbia University in 1938, he was pleasure-seeking in a somewhat frenetic manner. But the young Merton found no real contentment in the sensual pleasures he enjoyed. In the depth of his being he sought to find the true meaning of his life.

After about one year of ardent searching, he finally sought Baptism as a Roman Catholic on November 16, 1938. Upon his graduation with a Masters degree at Columbia University, he went to teach with Franciscans at St. Bonaventure College from September 1940 to December

⁴ Therese Lentfoehr, "The Spiritual Writer," in *Thomas Merton, Monk: A Monastic Tribute*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Image, 1976), 122.

⁵ Elena Malits, "Thomas Merton, Symbol, and Synthesis of Contemporary Catholicism," *Cistercian Studies* 12 (1977): 283.

⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1948; reprint, London: Sheldon Press, 1975), 5 (Citations in the text are from the Sheldon reprint).

1941.

However, Merton felt that the life of a teacher "was too tame, too safe, too sheltered."⁷ As a new convert, Merton was ready to abandon absolutely the world he knew and to withdraw from his accustomed way of living in order to find truth and happiness in God. He wanted to give God everything by embracing the strictest form of Christian life available. He finally entered the Cistercian monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani on December 10, 1941, beginning an austere and prayerful lifestyle. Merton became a monk when he was 26 years of age. He stayed in Gethsemani for the rest of his life until he died accidentally on a trip to Asia on December 10, 1968, the 27th anniversary of his entrance into the monastery.

In the monastery, Merton learned contemplation from the monks and mystics of the past. In fact, he devoted the first years of his monastic life to intense scrutiny of the history of monasticism and mysticism. He read, studied, and translated writings of the mystical theologians, trying to understand as much as possible their testimonies about the spiritual life in which he himself was being formed.⁸ As Michael Casey rightly points out, Merton's approach to prayer is to a very large extent "colored by his years of immersion

⁷ Ibid., 358-359.

⁸ In the early years of his monastic life, Merton wrote a fluent account of Trappist history, ideals and way of life in *The Waters of Siloe* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1949; reprint, Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1962), and *Exile Ends in Glory: The Life of a Trappistine Mother B. Berchmans* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1949). He also published a theological study of St. John of the Cross in 1951: *The Ascent to Truth* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1951). His early writings on St. Bernard were collected and published posthumously in a volume entitled *Thomas Merton on St. Bernard* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1980).

in the tradition of mainline Western monastic thought."⁹

While Merton's understanding of contemplation in the early years of his monastic life was steeped in the spiritual theology of the Christian tradition, his perception of the matter in the last ten years of his life was broadened by his increasing awareness of the reality of the world. Beginning in the late 1950s, Merton was more and more preoccupied with the relationship which the Church and Christians could and should have with the world.¹⁰ He critically reflected on the major problems of contemporary culture and explored the works of contemporary writers.¹¹ At the same time, Merton began

⁹ Michael Casey, "Thomas Merton Within a Tradition of Prayer," *Cistercian Studies* 13 (1978): 371-378.

¹⁰ Merton's concern with the relation between Christians and the world can be seen in, for example, *Conjectures of A Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1966). The material of this book, Merton said, "is taken from notebooks which I have kept since 1956...these notes add up to a personal version of the world in the 1960s." See also *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964); *Redeeming the Time* (London: Burns & Oates, 1966); and *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968).

¹¹ Merton reviewed the God-is-dead movement in modern theology from the perspective of apophatic mysticism. See Merton, *Faith and Violence*, 239-258. In the same book he commented on Bonhoeffer's notion of a religionless religion: "Not that Bonhoeffer does not 'believe' in God, in Christ, in the Church, but his theory is that 'ultimate honesty' demands that contemporary man live in the world as though he had no God. This must be qualified of course: not a life of 'godlessness' in the sense of selfishness and immorality, but a life 'without God' as a source of comfort, of aid, of support, without God to help our suffering make sense." Merton, *Faith and Violence*, 266.

Karl Rahner, Teilhard de Chardin, Paul Tillich, and Gabriel Vahanian are other twentieth century authors to whom Merton would often refer in his discourse on the religious situation of the modern world. The existential question of human alienation raised by secular authors of the same period hit Merton's social conscience. In about the late 50s, Merton began to read on the most extraordinary scale. He enjoyed novels. The names of William Faulker, George Orwell, Henry Miller, Albert Camus, Julien Green, Flannery O'Connor, Andre Malraux often appear in his journals. His later reading included Sartre, C. G. Jung, Simone Weil, and Gabriel Marcel, Bertolt Brecht, Lewis Mumford, Christopher Dawson, Hannah Arendt, and Gandhi.

to explore the contemplative traditions of the major religious faiths. Islam, for example, interested Merton as a religion of the wilderness. He once wrote of the *Koran* that "It moves me deeply, with its spirit of loneliness, independence of men, dependence of God, emptiness, trust--the spirit of the desert which, for Muslims, is not the prerogative of a few."¹² Gandhi in India also attracted Merton's attention. He published his reflection on Gandhi's teaching of non-violence.¹³ It was Zen and Taoism in China and Japan as contemplative movements, however that impressed and influenced Merton in a very special way.¹⁴

Unlike some of his contemporaries, Merton did not reject Zen and Taoism as pantheistic or world-denying. He saw some aspects of Oriental mysticism as valuable to Christians in their pursuit of a deeper relationship with God. He stressed that much is to be learned from a study of "the techniques and experience of Oriental religions."¹⁵ Altogether Merton published two books on Zen Buddhism

¹² Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 9.

¹³ On Gandhi's non-violence Merton wrote "Gandhi and the One-eyed Giant," *Jubilee* 12 (1965): 12-17; "Gandhi on Non-Violence," *Diakonia* 2 (1967): 380-385; and *Gandhi on Non-Violence: Selected Texts from Mohandas K. Gandhi's "Non-Violence in Peace and War,"* [edited with introduction, Thomas Merton] (New Direction, New York, 1965).

¹⁴ Merton wrote extensively on Zen and Taoism. See, for example, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1961; reprint, New York: Dell Publishing, 1969); *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, 4th ed. (New York: New Directions, 1965); *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968); "Christian Culture Needs Oriental Wisdom," in *A Thomas Merton Reader*, rev. ed., edited by Thomas P. McDonnell, 295-303 (First published, 1967; reprint, Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1974, 1989); "Forward to Marcel and Buddha: A Metaphysics of Enlightenment by Sally Donnelly," *The Journal of Religious Thought* XXIV, no. 1 (1967-68): 51-57; "The Zen Revival," *Continuum* 1 (1964): 523-538; and "Zen: Sense and Sensibility," *America* 108 (1963): 752-754.

¹⁵ Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, 21.

and one on classical Taoism.¹⁶ His journals also contained many scattered references to Zen and Taoism.¹⁷ From the late 1950s to the mid 1960s, Merton wrote a number of explanatory prefaces to the Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese editions of several of his books, in which he frequently referred to Asian spirituality.¹⁸ His later poetry showed flavors of Zen and Taoism.¹⁹ And his many letters to Daisetz T. Suzuki, Thich Nhat Hanh, and John C. H. Wu were also related to various topics on Zen or Taoism.²⁰

Merton's ability to grasp Zen and Taoism is extraordinary. Both the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh remembered him as a Christian monk who had an excellent understanding of Buddhism.²¹ Suzuki also praised him for his perceptive understanding of Zen and his contribution in clarifying for Western minds the true meaning of Zen.²² John Wu, a Chinese expert in classical Taoism and Zen, wrote to Merton, "I am simply bewitched. If Chuang Tzu were writing in English he would

¹⁶ See footnote no. 14.

¹⁷ See, for example, Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, ed. Naomi Burton et al. (New York: New Directions, 1973; reprint, 1975); and the complete series of his journal, *The Journal of Thomas Merton*, vols. 1 to 7 (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995-1998).

¹⁸ See Thomas Merton, *Introductions East and West: The Foreign Prefaces of Thomas Merton*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (Greensboro, NC: Unicorn Press, 1981).

¹⁹ See Therese Lentfoehr, *Words and Silence: On the Poetry of Thomas Merton* (New York: A New Directions Book, 1979), especially ch. 4. See Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1977).

²⁰ With regard to the volumes of his correspondence with friends, see *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience & Social Concerns*, selected and edited by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985); *The School of Charity: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Spiritual Direction & Renewal*, selected and edited by Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1990); and *The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to Older & Younger Friends*, selected and edited by Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1989).

²¹ Paul Wilkes, ed., *Merton: By Those Who Knew Him Best* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 145, 151.

²² Merton, *The School of Charity*, 223.

surely write like this [*The Way of Chuang Tzu*]."²³

That Merton was so absorbed in Zen and Chinese classical thoughts had aroused different reactions. "His profound involvement with the works of Chuang Tzu and other Tao and Zen masters over the past years made any public notice to be almost a betrayal of his true vocation," pointed out John Howard Griffin.²⁴ While many "devout" Catholics at the time would think that Merton was a "half Christian," Brother Patrick Hart, Merton's secretary in the Gethsemani, who knew Merton for more than a decade, was convinced that Merton had never given up his Christian vocation. Hart wrote twenty years after Merton's death, "[Merton's] pilgrimage to the East helped him enormously to deepen his own monastic commitment to the contemplative search for God."²⁵

In any case, it is remarkable that Merton, being a Christian monk, could write with great depth on the thought of Zen and Taoism. Considering also his optimistic attitude toward Zen and Taoism, one is led to ponder a few questions: why was Merton, who was so richly formed in the Christian contemplative tradition, interested in Zen and Taoism? What did he look for in these religions? To what extent

²³ Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 637.

²⁴ Griffin, John Howard. *Follow the Ecstasy: The Hermitage Years of Thomas Merton* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 48. Griffin later wrote, "Attacks against Merton continued in letters directly to him, or in letters to Catholic magazines and newspapers. 'More attacks in *The Record* [Louisville Archdiocesan newspaper], ' Merton noted on March 15 [1968]. 'A devout Catholic is burning my books. I must be Godless, I wish to save lives rather than 'kill commies for Christ.' Went out again to my small west pond and did some Zen. It was right. When I came back, I saw two cars waiting by my gate. I hid in the cedars until three priests appeared. Disappeared they drove off and I returned to the hermitage.'" p. 139.

²⁵ Patrick Hart, "Thomas Merton Remembered: Twenty Years After," *Living Prayer* 21, no. 6 (1988): 8.

was his Christian view of contemplation influenced by the teachings of the Zen and Taoist masters, which he deeply appreciated? These are some of the questions that this study attempts to address.

State of the Question

The purpose of this study is to discover the relation between Merton's view of contemplation and his extensive reading and study of Zen and Taoism. If Zen and Taoism are religions without the concept of a deity (in a Christian understanding of the word), then why was Merton the Christian monk drawn to these religions and how did he integrate the wisdom of Zen-Taoism in his perception and experience of God? In other words, this study concerns two major themes of the writings of Merton: his view of contemplation and his understanding of the teachings of Zen-Taoism.

Though the theme of contemplation was indeed major axis of his thought, Merton was truly a "versatile writer."²⁶ He was interested in many areas of human concern and felt impelled to write on a wide variety of subjects. While he could discourse on big issues such as warfare and violence, he could just as well write a simple poem about an object he was contemplating. Not only did he deal with various subject matters, but he also wrote in diverse genres: short story, novel, poem, biography, translation, hagiography, autobiography, play, journal, book review, letter, article, and theological study. Yet, however diversified the style and content of his writings would

²⁶ William H. Shannon, *Thomas Merton's Dark Path: The Inner Experience of a Contemplative* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Grioux, 1981), 3.

be, the golden thread of contemplation move its way through the complicated canvas of his writings.

William Shannon is right in saying, "It is no exaggeration to say that contemplation was the explicit theme, or at least the implied background, of everything that Merton wrote."²⁷ The contemplative vision informed not only his views on Christian spirituality, monastic renewal, and ecumenism, but also his critique on warfare, on violence, and on racial injustice.

Contemplation was Merton's vocation. Contemplation as a lifestyle determined the meaning of his existence. Contemplative thoughts and experiences nurtured his mind and heart. Contemplation became the underlying theme of all his writings. Whatever he wrote, he aimed at fostering the development of the contemplative dimension of human existence. To study Merton's view of contemplation, then, is to touch the innermost core of his being and the basic orientation of his thoughts.

Merton's contemplative spirituality has stimulated modern scholarship. A fairly large number of studies on Merton's mystical thought have been published.²⁸ There are also unpublished works

²⁷ Ibid., 4. Thomas M. King also sees contemplation as the key to Merton's thought: "No term is more central to the thought of Thomas Merton than contemplation." Thomas M. King, *Merton: Mystic at the Center of America* (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1992), 37.

²⁸ See, for example, Daniel J. Adams, *Thomas Merton's Shared Contemplation: A Protestant Perspective* (Kalamazoo, Mich: Cistercian Publications, 1979); Raymond Hamby Bailey, *Thomas Merton on Mysticism* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Image, 1976); Richard Anthony Cashen, *Solitude in the Thought of Thomas Merton* (Kalamazoo, Mich: Cistercian Publications, 1981); John J. Higgins, *Thomas Merton on Prayer* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1973); Elena Malits, *The Solitary Explorer: Thomas Merton's Transforming Journey* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980); and Shannon, *Thomas Merton's Dark Path*.

comparing some aspects of his thought with those of the prominent figures in Oriental religion.²⁹ However, research on the direct relation between Merton's view of contemplation and his understanding of Zen-Taoism has not yet been undertaken. This study will therefore approach Merton's own writings on these two topics with a view towards understanding the connection between them.

As mentioned above, Merton was attracted to the teachings of the Zen and Taoist masters in the last decade of his life. This fact elicits another question: how did his view of contemplation relate to his extensive study and in-depth writing of Zen and Taoism? To answer this question, we have to examine Merton's own writings on Zen and Taoism. The purpose is to find out how he studied Zen-Taoism from a contemplative perspective and how his view of contemplation was in turn influenced by the teachings of Zen-Taoism.

As a matter of fact, quite a number of works have already explored Merton's relationship with Zen.³⁰ The link between Merton's Zen

²⁹ See, for example, Marguerite Davies, "Thomas Merton's Rethinking of the Christian Monastic Life in the Light of the Bodhisattvacarya of Mahayana Buddhism" (Master's thesis, University of St. Michael's College, 1973); Peter M. Charankat, "The Influence of Gandhi and Hinduism on Thomas Merton: The Consciousness of 'Being' and of 'Non-duality' in the Non-violence of Gandhi and its Influence on Thomas Merton" (Master's thesis, Jesuit School of Theology, 1982); Kun Ki Kang, "Thomas Merton and Buddhism: A Comparative Study of the Spiritual Thought of Thomas Merton and That of National Teacher Bojo" (Doctoral Dissertation, New York University, 1979); and Joseph Velamkunnel, "Transcendental Experience of God According to Thomas Merton: A Comparative and Theological Study of Oriental and Christian Mysticism" (Doctoral Dissertation, Pontifical Gregorian University, 1975).

³⁰ See, for example, William F. Healy, "The Thought of Thomas Merton Concerning the Relationship of Christianity and Zen," (Doctoral Dissertation, Rome: St. Thomas University, 1975); H. C. Steyn, "The Influence of Buddhism on Thomas Merton," *Journal for the Study of Religion* 3 (1990): 3-13; Chalmers McCormick, "The Zen Catholicism of Thomas Merton," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 9 (1972): 980-818; Bonnie Bowman Thurston, "Zen Influence on Thomas Merton's view of the Self," *Japanese Religions* 14 (1986): 29-47; James Conner,

sensibility and his later poetry has also been examined.³¹ However, studies on the relation between Zen and Merton's view of contemplation are almost absent.³² What is seriously lacking in Mertonian studies is research about Taoism's influence on Merton.³³ To date, no direct attempt has been made to explore the influence of classical Taoism, particularly *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, on Merton's view of contemplation.

Many of the current studies on Merton's exposure to Oriental religions concentrate mostly on his interest in Zen and seem to have ignored the importance of his writings on Taoism. Merton would disagree with this one-sided approach. He was well aware that Zen is the fruit of an encounter between Indian Buddhism and classical Taoism on the Chinese soil. "The true inheritors of the thought and spirit of Chuang Tzu are the Chinese Zen Buddhists of the T'ang period (7th to 10th centuries A.D.)," he said.³⁴ There is such close affinity between Zen and Taoism that one needs at least some knowledge of

"The Original Face in Buddhism and the True Self in Thomas Merton," *Cistercian Studies* 22 (1987): 343-351; Anne Carr, "Transformation of the Self in Thomas Merton," *Listening* 25 (1990): 251-266; Aldhelm Cameron-Brown, "Zen master," in Hart, *Monk: A Monastic Tribute*, 161-171; and Belden C. Lane, "Merton as Zen Clown," *Theology Today* XLVI (1989): 256-268.

³¹ See, for example, Therese Lentfoehr, *Words and Silence: On the Poetry of Thomas Merton* (New York: A New Direction Book, 1977); and Bonnie Bowman Thurston, "Zen in the Eye of Thomas Merton's Poetry," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 4 (1984): 103-118.

³² Catharina Stenqvist's articles, while comparing Huxley's phenomenology and Merton's understanding of Zen, have in passing dealt with the topic of contemplation. See her two articles: "Thomas Merton and His view of Contemplation," *Studies in Spirituality* 3 (1993): 271-286; and "Merton, Zen and Phenomenology," *Studies in Spirituality* 4 (1994): 236-244.

³³ Recently, a book on Merton's thought and Chinese wisdom has been published. It is, however, not a critical study of Merton's works but a free and creative association of some of Merton's thoughts and the wisdom of the many Chinese sages. See Cyrus Lee, *Thomas Merton and Chinese Wisdom* (Erie, Penn.: Sino-American Institute, 1995).

³⁴ Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, 9.

classical Taoism in order to grasp Zen. This study, then, aims to correct the oversight of the Taoist influence on Merton's thought.³⁵ It treats Zen and classical Taoism as two closely related schools of Chinese philosophy or spirituality and tries to determine how Merton's perceptive understanding of Zen-Taoism would contribute to some of the changes in his view of Christian contemplation.

Hypothesis and Methodology

This study is guided by the following question: "What impact did Zen-Taoism have on Merton's view of Christian contemplation?" Based on the fact that Merton had studied and written extensively on Zen and Taoism in the last decade of his life, we hypothesize that his perception of contemplation was influenced by his appropriation of the teachings of the Zen masters and Taoist sages. To verify this hypothesis, we will study the development of Merton's view of contemplation by focusing on two central aspects of Christian contemplation: (1) the concept of union with God; (2) the way to achieve this goal of union with God.

Two Aspects of Christian Contemplation

To conduct a systematic study of Merton's view of contemplation is almost impossible, for Merton related contemplation to almost every aspect of Christian life. In *Seeds of Contemplation*, one of his early works, Merton discussed the extensive topics of Christian life in his discourse on contemplation. He touched on topics like Christian

unity, holiness, self-discovery, solitude, moral theology of the devil, war and fear, hell as hatred, faith, tradition and revolution, the Virgin mother of God, and more. His later work, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, contained even more diverse and contemporary issues, such as monastic renewal, contemplation and atheism, ecumenism and contemplation, to name a few.³⁶ Merton "defined" the term "contemplation" more than a hundred times. The variety of his definitions seems to suggest that it is impossible to give an exhaustive study of his mystical thought. In fact, Merton himself warned against pseudo-scientific attempts to define contemplation.³⁷

This thesis is therefore not a systematic study of Merton's view of contemplation. It identifies the major lines of Merton's contemplative ideas. Since this project concerns the relation between Merton's view of contemplation and his appropriation of the wisdom of Zen-Taoism, it focuses on two basic and related dimensions of Christian contemplation on which Merton has eloquently written.

The first dimension of Christian contemplation concerns the concept of union with God. The idea of union with God was a dominant theme in the history of Christian mysticism. From the Patristic Fathers and the monastics to the late Medieval mystics, "union with God" was seen as the "goal" or ideal of contemplation. Although spiritual writers of various periods would express the contemplative ideal in different nuances, they all stressed that the divine is the One, the Ultimate, to whom the contemplative longs to return, and

³⁶ Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1971).

³⁷ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), 6.

that the Divine descended into humanity to make possible the human attempt to ascend to the Divine.

The second dimension of Christian contemplation is about the "way" through which the contemplative aims to reach the goal of union with God. Here the "way" of contemplation refers more to the prayer life or spiritual itinerary than to Christology. The Greek Fathers construed the way toward *theoria* (contemplation) as involving different phases.³⁸ While the Greek fathers disagreed about the number and content of the phases, they unanimously highlighted the importance of purgation, asceticism, or *fuga mundi* (flight from the world). They described the contemplative as one who was moved by the love of God to leave the world so as to reach a deeper intimacy with the Divine, and prayer as a discipline expressing and intensifying the desire for the ultimate union with God. Spiritual writers of the subsequent centuries continued to elucidate the idea of such a spiritual itinerary.

Union with God as the "goal" and prayer itinerary as the "way" constitute the basic framework of Christian spirituality. But in Zen and Taoism, the "goal" and the "way" of mystical life is not perceived as such. In Zen-Taoist term, the "goal" is no-goal and the "way" is no-way. If Merton was influenced by Zen-Taoism, he would have

³⁸ For example, Clement of Alexandria saw two closely related ways that lead to the vision of God as the passage of the soul to a state of "passionlessness," and as the gift of divinization. Origen presented the soul's exegetical-mystical ascent according to a basic triple pattern of pedagogy: purgative way, illuminative way, and unitive way. For Evagrius Ponticus, however, the return of the fallen rational creation to its source could be accomplished in three stages: ascetic living, contemplation of the physical world, and contemplation of God. Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century. The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 105, 117-118, 148-149.

construed the two basic dimensions of Christian contemplation differently and expressed them in light of the wisdom of the Zen masters and Taoist sages. To verify this hypothesis, it is necessary to explore Merton's view on the two aspects of Christian contemplation.

This project will first discover how Merton understood and explicated the "goal" and "way" of contemplation in his early and later writings, and how far his view of contemplation in the two areas differed from the mainline teachings of the Christian tradition. Special attention will be paid to his exposition on the experience of union with God and various spiritual practices, such as prayer, asceticism, and *fuga mundi*. The second task of this project is to analyze how Merton's later view of the "goal" and "way" of contemplation was influenced by Zen-Taoist spirituality, which Merton passionately embraced in the later period of his life.

Merton's Writings in Two Periods

There is very little doubt that Merton's view of contemplation had passed through two phases of development. Merton, like many others, matured as a writer and a contemplative in the later period of his life. Although what facilitated Merton's growth remains indefinite, signs of his maturity were explicit in his writings of the late 1950s.³⁹ Merton's maturity was reflected in his passionate

³⁹ Brother Patrick Hart, for example, said that, Merton had moved from a "world-negating spirituality, which was evident in the pages of his early autobiography [*The Seven Storey Mountain*]," to a "more world-affirming" one, which can be seen in "his journals of the late fifties and early sixties." Hart, "Thomas Merton Remembered," 6. Hart's judgement of Merton's spiritual

concern toward the integrity of humanity, his openness to learn from non-Christian faiths, and his honest and constructive criticism of Christian monastic life.

While it is quite clear that the middle of the 1950s was the period of transition in Merton's spiritual development, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly the year where Merton had reached a relatively mature stage. Merton himself said that he had gone through a very long transition period. In one of his letters, Merton wrote to a friend about the change of his attitude toward the world. Merton saw the time from his ordination in 1949 to "somewhere in the early sixties [as] a transition period which would end somewhere around Disputed Questions [published in 1960]." ⁴⁰

Scholars have not yet arrived at a unified view regarding the turning point of Merton's development. For example, Mark Anthony Quinn observed that Merton's perception of the Divine had shifted markedly at two points in his writing career. "These two shifts," he wrote, "one around 1960 and the other about 1965 - demarcate the three more or less distinct phases of Merton's prose writing."⁴¹ William Shannon, however, holds a different opinion. He says that the book *No man is an Island*, published in 1955, should stand as a

development is in fact based on Merton's own evaluation. Merton in a letter confided to a sister: "...after entering the monastery, I was totally isolated from all outside influences and was largely working with what I had accumulated before entering...I was quite ascetic, 'first fervor' stuff...This resulted in a highly unworldly, ascetical intransigent, somewhat apocalyptic outlook. Rigid, arbitrary separation between God and the world, etc...The second period was a time when I began to open up again to the world..." Merton, *The School of Charity*, 384.

⁴⁰ Merton, *School of Charity*, 384.

⁴¹ Mark Anthony Quinn, "Thomas Merton's Understanding of God" (Doctoral Dissertation, Marquette University, 1982), 300.

kind of centerpiece in the Merton corpus, as "a key that opens the door to his more mature appreciation of the meaning of 'Catholic faith.'" ⁴²

It seems that any attempt to divide Merton's works into early and mature phases is not to be taken as conclusive. As far as Merton's view of contemplation is concerned, this study suggests the following division. Merton's early writings can be dated from 1948, when his first work *What Is Contemplation?* was published, up to 1958. ⁴³ Later writings may fall within the period from 1958 to 1968. For two reasons this study chooses 1958 as the year of demarcation between Merton's early and later writings. First, for practical reasons it is more convenient to divide Merton's writing career into two approximately ten-year periods, from 1948 to 1958 and from 1959 to 1968. Second, we can see in his later writings, dated from 1959 to 1968, new insights on contemplation that are not found in the early works.

Major and Secondary Sources

Merton was a tireless writer. Before entering the monastery he considered writing a hundred books to say what he had to say. While he often affirmed that the mystical experience could not be put in words, his verbal output on mysticism was astounding, possibly greater than that of any other recognized mystic. This complex man left us

⁴² William H. Shannon, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton's Story* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 168.

⁴³ Not counting Merton's publications before he entered Gethsemani, Merton's earliest publication was *Thirty Poems* published in 1944, some of which were written in the early years of his monastic life. But as far as the subject of contemplation is concerned, his earliest work was *What is Contemplation?* which was published in 1948.

with complex materials. His earliest writings were short stories and novels; these were followed by a collection of poems. In the monastery he wrote histories, biographies, and an autobiography. In his somewhat short life, Merton published altogether about 60 books, many uncollected articles, book reviews, and prefaces, and about 3,500 letters. His journals amounted to seven thick volumes.

While taking these complex materials as an overall base, the present study selects six pieces of prose writings for closer examination, chosen as examples of Merton's early and later views of contemplation. The works representing Merton's early view of contemplation are: *What Is Contemplation?*,⁴⁴ *Seeds of Contemplation*,⁴⁵ and *The Ascent to Truth*, while his later writings on contemplation include *Inner Experience*,⁴⁶ *New Seeds of Contemplation*,⁴⁷ and *Contemplative Prayer*.⁴⁸

In addition to the above works, some of Merton's essays, letters, and journals offer valuable sources of information concerning his understanding of Zen-Taoism and contemplation. They will therefore be studied as well. But Merton's poems will not be treated in detail in this study, although they may be alluded to from time to time.

⁴⁴ Thomas Merton, *What Is Contemplation?* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1948; reprint, Springfield, IL: Templegate, 1960, 1970, 1996).

⁴⁵ Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Direction, 1949; rev. ed., New York: Dell Publishing, 1952).

⁴⁶ *Inner Experience* is originally an unpublished manuscript written in 1959. It was later published in *Cistercian Studies* vol. 18-19 (1983-1984).

⁴⁷ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961).

⁴⁸ Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969; reprint, New York: Doubleday Image, 1971, 1996). (It was originally published as *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* [Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1969]).

Since the purpose of this project is to study the influence of Zen-Taoism on Merton's view of contemplation as expressed in his own writings, it will not analyze the works of other authors in great detail.

Plan of the Study

This study consists of three parts. The first part concerns Merton's learning of Zen-Taoism. The first chapter surveys the origin, extent, and reasons for Merton's interest in Zen and Taoism. According to his official biographer, Michael Mott, Merton "had dipped into a book on Buddhism" when he was about eighteen years of age, and widely extended his interest and scope of study in the later part of his life.⁴⁹ The second and third chapter study respectively Merton's writings on Taoism and Zen. These chapters examines three major works, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, and *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, and some related articles.⁵⁰ The purpose is to find out what Merton understood of and learned from the teachings of the Zen masters and Taoist sages and how Zen-Taoism influenced Merton's life and personality.

Chapters four, five, and six belong to the second part of this study. They deal with the development of Merton's view of contemplation. Chapter four traces the foundation of Merton's understanding of contemplation. Merton's writings on contemplation were the fruits of his reading of and reflection on the works of various

⁴⁹ Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1984), 82.

⁵⁰ See footnote no. 14.

authors. Among others, the works of Etienne Gilson, Jacques Maritain, Thomas Aquinas, Augustine of Hippo, and John of the Cross had provided Merton with insights to construct his own view of contemplation. Chapter five examines Merton's early view of contemplation by studying three early works written between 1939 to 1958. The purpose is to show how Merton absorbed and interpreted the traditional teachings on mystical life with regard to the "goal" and the "way" of contemplation. The sixth chapter investigates another three major works written from 1959 to 1968. This chapter will reveal Merton's new insights into contemplation and show the difference between Merton's early and later view of contemplation.

Chapter seven brings together the findings of the first and second part and addresses the connections between the two. It concerns the main thesis of the entire study: Merton's view of contemplation was influenced by his appropriation of the wisdom of Zen-Taoism. It discusses some interesting questions: was Merton's concept of God changed because of his learning from Zen and Taoism? How did he see asceticism during the time he read the *Chuang Tzu* and the writings of Hui-neng? Did Merton, in the light of his understanding of Zen-Taoism, interpret differently the concept of "union with God," "flight from the world," and prayer life in general? This chapter proves that Merton had assimilated the wisdom of Zen-Taoism into his understanding of these concepts and therefore presented a different but enriched outlook of Christian contemplation.

The last chapter of this thesis is an evaluation of Merton's

expanded view of contemplation. It confirms that although Merton absorbed elements of Zen-Taoism into his writings, he was neither syncretistic in relation to other religions nor rebellious in terms of his commitment to Christian faith. His later view of contemplation was the outgrowth of his belief in wider ecumenism. Yet, his enthusiasm in defending Zen-Taoism sometimes clouds his awareness of the drawbacks of his ecumenical ideas.

CHAPTER ONE

MERTON'S INTEREST IN ZEN-TAOISM

Introduction

This chapter aims at exploring the development of Merton's interest in learning Zen-Taoism and showing the impact of Zen-Taoism on Merton's life situation. It consists of five sections. The first section concerns the origin of Merton's interest, covering the period from 1933 until 1941, the year he entered Gethsemani. During this period, Merton attempted to study Zen-Taoism on several different occasions.

The second section refers to Merton's impression of Zen-Taoism in the monastery. Merton stopped consulting primary references on Zen-Taoism for the first fifteen years of his monastic life, roughly from 1941 to 1955. In this early period of his monastic life, Merton's attitude toward Zen-Taoism was quite negative.

The third section describes Merton's renewed interest in Zen-Taoism from the period of about 1955 to 1959. The period is a transition in Merton's life. During this period, Merton was in the process of reconstructing his view on various aspects of Christian life. The exploration of the wisdom of Zen-Taoism is one of his many attempts to extend his understanding of Christian faith in general and contemplative experience in particular.

The fourth section focuses on the period from 1959 to 1968, during which Merton studied Zen-Taoism systematically and extensively. In the last ten years of his life, Merton made a strenuous effort to

learn Zen-Taoism. Merton also corresponded with many Buddhist writers and Christian scholars on Buddhist studies. His correspondence further revealed the depth of his immersion in the thoughts of Zen-Taoism.

The last section explores the impact of Zen-Taoism on Merton's life situation. It deals with his struggles for a solitary life. Merton took Zen-Taoism as a positive resource for his own spiritual development.

Early Study of Zen-Taoism (1933-1941)

When Merton was studying modern languages at Clare College, Cambridge, in 1933, he came into contact with Oriental thought by briefly reading a book on Buddhism.¹ Four years later he studied volumes of Oriental texts at the campus of Columbia. His active research on Oriental religions was the result of reading Aldous Huxley's book *Ends and Means*. Merton was deeply impressed by Huxley's religious sensibility.

Huxley was formerly a skeptic and had been attracted to the mystical thought of various religions, including Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism. In his book *Ends and Means*, Huxley compared the teachings of the mystics of different religious traditions and concluded that the fruits of their teachings "are peace, toleration and charity," which were the realization of "the ideal

¹ The official biographer Michael Mott writes: "Merton was doing the usual eclectic reading...He had even dipped into a book on Buddhism." Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), 82.

goal of human effort."² For Huxley, the mystical teachings of the founders of religions could be summarized by the idea of non-attachment. Such an idea, he said, "is at the very heart of the teachings of the Buddha. For Chinese readers, the doctrine is formulated by Lao Tsu."³

Merton was impressed by Huxley's basic premise that the ideal goal of humanity involves "liberty, peace, justice and brotherly love" and that "a return to religion" is necessary for its realization.⁴ In reading Huxley, he began to see the value of religions and admitted that he himself needed an interior life too. He wrote:

My hatred of war and my own personal misery in my particular situation and the general crisis of the world made me accept with my whole heart this revelation of the need for a spiritual life, an interior life, including some kind of mortification.⁵

"But the most important effect of the book on me," Merton continued, "was to make me start ransacking the university library for books on Oriental mysticism."⁶ He spent hours reading Leon Wieger's French translations of the writings of the Chinese Buddhists and Taoist sages.⁷ But, unsurprisingly, he had difficulty in grasping the

² Aldous Huxley, *Ends and Means: An Inquiry into the Nature of Ideals and into the Means Employed for their Realization* (New York: Harper & Row, 1937; reprint, New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), 381 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

³ Ibid., 4-5.

⁴ Ibid., 1-2.

⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (London: Sheldon Press, 1975), 188.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid. Leon Wieger's translation texts on Oriental mysticism include *Textes Philosophiques: Confucianisme, Taoisme, Bouddhisme*, 2d. ed, rev. et augm. (Hien-hien, 1930); and *Les Pères du Système Taoïste: Lao-tzeu, Lie-tzeu, and Tchoang-tzeu* (Paris: Cathasia, 1950). The first text, first printed in 1906, is an anthology of the three major schools of Chinese philosophy. The second text, first published in 1913, is a collection of the complete works of three early Taoists. Both works have included the original Chinese

meaning of "the strange great jumble of myths and theories and moral aphorisms and elaborate parables."⁸ Merton's first experience of studying Zen-Taoism was negative. Many years later in his autobiography he related that experience in a sarcastic tone.

The only practical thing I got out of it was a system for going to sleep, at night, when you couldn't sleep. You lay flat in bed, without a pillow, your arms at your sides and your legs straight out, and relaxed all your muscles, and you said to yourself: "Now I have no feet, now I have no feet...no feet...no legs...no knees."⁹

Merton made fun of the Buddhist idea of "nothingness" at the time of his first contact with Buddhism. He hastily concluded that Oriental mysticism "is not mysticism at all," for "it remains purely in the natural order," concerning mainly "techniques," but not "the supernatural."¹⁰ Furthermore, he thought that the difference between Oriental religions and Christianity consisted in the concept of the Absolute. Unlike the God of Christianity, he said, the "Absolute being" described in the Oriental texts is "impersonal Nothing."¹¹ On the whole, he referred to Buddhism as a nihilistic system, part and parcel of a false way of thinking.¹² This negative impression of Oriental mysticism had occupied Merton's mind for many years.

A year later, in 1938, Merton befriended a Hindu monk, Mahanambrata Brahmachari, who came to America for a "World Congress of Religions"

texts in parallel with the French translations. The original texts were classical Chinese, which is difficult even for contemporary Chinese to grasp. That Wiegner could translate the original texts quite smoothly into French shows the depth of his understanding of the Chinese language and culture.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 187-188.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 186.

in connection with the 1933 World's Fellowship of Faiths in Chicago.¹³ He was attracted to Brahmachari's prayerfulness and serenity, and therefore praised the spirituality of the Oriental monks. The life of these monks, he said, "may put to shame the actual conduct of many Christian religious."¹⁴ Wanting to seek the deeper meaning of his life, Merton asked the monk for advice on prayer and how to live "a life that was centered, as his was, on God."¹⁵ Brahmachari did not take this opportunity to introduce Hindu spirituality to Merton; instead, he guided him to the richness of Christian mysticism, suggesting he read St. Augustine's *Confessions* and Thomas a Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*.¹⁶ Merton was surprised by Brahmachari's generous advice, for Brahmachari seldom put his words in the form of advice. Merton recalled with gratitude in his autobiography: "[T]he one counsel he did give me is something that I will not easily forget."¹⁷

Merton never forgot Brahmachari, his personality and the Hindu spirituality that he embodied. When he finally became a Christian monk and wrote *The Ascent to Truth*, he consulted Jean Herbert's *Spiritualité Hindoue* and parenthetically compared the varieties of

¹³ Brahmachari (1904-1999) was born in a village in East Bengal, now part of Bangladesh. He became a Hindu monk, received master's degrees in Sanskrit and in Western philosophy from the University of Calcutta, then was sent by his monastery to the conference of the World Fellowship of Faiths in 1933. He became the Fellowship's international secretary and remained in the West until 1939, earning a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Chicago in 1937. He gave frequent lectures on college campuses during his period on aspects of Hindu thought, on Indian society and culture, and on the work of Gandhi and the struggle for Indian independence. He met Merton and his friends from Columbia University.

¹⁴ Ibid., 192.

¹⁵ Ibid., 195.

¹⁶ Ibid., 198.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Hindu spirituality with Christian contemplation.¹⁸

While Brahmachari and Huxley are both important to Merton's life, their contributions are different. Huxley motivated Merton to pursue Christian faith; whereas Bramachari taught Merton, through his own example, to respect and appreciate others' religious faiths. But it was only about twenty years later that Merton began to have the openness that Bramachari consistently demonstrated throughout his life.

When Merton was doing his master's thesis in 1938, *Nature and Art in William Blake*, he came into contact with Oriental thoughts again. He read A. K. Coomaraswamy's *Transformation of Nature in Art* and learned of the necessity in the Hindu tradition for the artist to practice asceticism and contemplation.¹⁹ He also briefly read the book of Chuang Tzu, and even included quotations from the Taoist sage in his notebook for the Blake thesis."²⁰ Although his understanding

¹⁸ See, for example, Thomas Merton, *The Ascent to Truth* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1951), 243-244; 147-148.

¹⁹ In citing Coomaraswamy, he thus wrote in his essay: "And one of the most important disciplines is that of contemplation. This implies a kind of asceticism, that is self-sacrifice, sacrifice of immediate physical goods for the good of the spirit, for the success of the work of art. The Hindu artist accompanies the artistic process with a strict routine of asceticism and contemplation. First of all, he must purge himself of all personal desires, all distracting influences. Then he visualizes his subject as it is described in a given canonical prescription (mantram); he contemplates this ideal model until he comes to 'reflect' it, becomes identified with it, holds it in view in an act of nondifferentiation, then draws it." Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981), 448.

Interestingly, Merton discovered new insights in Coomaraswamy's work many years later. In December 1960, when Merton was reading one of Coomaraswamy's works on Hinduism and Buddhism, he found in it "imcomparable richness." Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. The Journals of Thomas Merton*, Vol. 4, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 80.

²⁰ Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 118.

of the thought of Chuang Tzu at the time might not have been deep, his interest in the Chinese sage later proved to be a lasting one.

Attitude toward Zen-Taoism as a Young Monk (1941-1955)

Merton's conversion to Catholicism may not have happened if he had not read Huxley's *Ends and Means*, the Christian classics recommended by Brahmachari, and the works of the modern scholastics, such as Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain. These books led Merton to baptism on November 16, 1938.²¹

Almost immediately after his baptism, Merton wanted to be a monk. Entering the monastery on December 10, 1941, he decided to become a "good" Christian monk for the rest of his life. He vindicated the teaching authority of the Church and identified himself with the contemplatives of the previous centuries, who had a strong apologetic bent. He denigrated the spiritual practice of other religious traditions. "The religions of the Orient," said the young monk, "are pseudoreligions." He affirmed that there was a power at work "[b]ehind the screen of idiot doctrine...But that power is not God," he continued, "it is the power of an angelic intelligence...commonly known as the Devil."²²

Evidently, Merton held a negative view of Oriental mysticism in the early years of his monastic life. He considered the Oriental

²¹ Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain were professors of Columbia University. They introduced Merton to scholastic philosophy. Their influence on Merton's conversion and knowledge of Christian contemplation will be discussed in Chapter Four of this study: *The Foundation of Merton's View of Contemplation*.

²² Merton, *The Ascent to Truth*, 64.

religions as "the confused amalgam of spiritualism and theosophy."²³ He even went so far to say that the Church would not even bother to "formally condemn" the stupidity of the Oriental religions.²⁴

The young monk was defensive and imperialistic in his treatment of Oriental religions as a whole.²⁵ His negative attitude toward Oriental religions was shown in his early writings on contemplation. As far as the scope of this study is concerned, we will take a closer look at some of his critical comments on Zen-Taoism. The following examples reveal the fact that Merton, as a young monk, considered Zen-Taoist spirituality alien to Christian contemplation.

In *Seeds of Contemplation*, which was published in early 1949, Merton stated that the Buddhist experience of nirvana could not be compared with the Christian experience of union with God, and that outside the magisterium there was no true contemplation. "For outside the magisterium directly guided by the Spirit of God we find no such contemplation and no such union with Him--only the void of nirvana or the feeble intellectual light of Platonic idealism....," he affirmed. However, Merton was soon aware that his criticism on the validity of the religious experience of other religious traditions was inappropriate. A few months after the first edition was sold out, he revised the book and deliberately deleted the statements.²⁶

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ With regard to Merton's biased evaluation on Hindu mysticism in *The Ascent to Truth*, see, for example, pp. 22-23, 111, 243-244.

²⁶ See Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, 81. The revised edition was published in December 1949. This edition contains some other minor changes and a new preface. Merton did an extensive revision of the book in about 1959 and finally published it as *New Seeds of Contemplation* in 1961. This entire new edition will be studied in Chapter Six of this study: Merton's Later View of Contemplation.

Merton was also sharp in his attack on Buddhism in *Exile Ends in Glory*, written in 1947, the hagiography of the Trappistine nun, Mother M. Berchmans. Berchmans lived in Japan and despised the culture. Merton accepted the nun's perspective. In the book, Buddhism, in its Japanese expression, was described as superstitious, pagan, and idolatrous. Statues of Buddha were referred to as "blind, dead, wayside gods of bronze."²⁷ China as a country was depicted as full of "souls crippled by appalling pagan hatreds and lusts and envies and dark superstitions and despairs from which they had no way of freeing themselves."²⁸ Through the eyes of Berchmans, he saw that China was nothing but full of sins. "All their movements, all their attempts only seemed to entangle them more in the great web of sins woven by centuries of paganism and idolatry," he wrote.²⁹

Merton felt sorry for the way he presented the hagiography of Berchmans. Seven years later, when being asked to write a Preface to a French translation of the hagiography, he confessed that it was written and conceived within a somewhat narrow religious framework, and had "not much ecumenical spirit."³⁰ He considered the book a "pious memoir," and hoped that it would remain anonymous.³¹ He rated the hagiography "bad" when he evaluated all his writings in 1967.³²

Merton criticized in a very subtle way the Buddhist doctrine of

²⁷ Thomas Merton, *Exile Ends in Glory: The Life of a Trappistine Mother M. Berchmans* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1949), 116.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Thomas Merton, *Introductions East & West: The Foreign Prefaces of Thomas Merton*, edited by Robert E. Daggy with a Foreword by Harry James Gargas (Greensboro: Unicorn Press, 1981), 10.

³¹ Ibid., 11.

³² Ibid., 126-127.

nothingness. In *The Ascent to Truth*, written in the years 1949 to 1950, he alluded to the differences between the views of St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. John of the Cross, and those of Zen Buddhists, with regard to the concept of "nothingness." "When a Christian mystic speaks of the created world as an illusion and as 'nothingness,'" he wrote, "he is only using a figure of speech; his words are never to be taken literally and they are not ontological."³³ Merton seemed to imply that Zen was world-denying or untouched by reality, if not absolute nihilism. It was not until many years later that Merton began to grasp the real meaning of "nothingness" in Zen and became able to appreciate Zen as a way of living everyday life in its suchness.

Before the end of the 50s, Merton had never expounded the teachings of Zen-Taoism in a positive way. Nor did he seem to have read primary sources on Zen-Taoism since 1939, the year after he completed his master thesis. That was a long period of silence with regard to his study of Zen-Taoism. Until the second half of the 1950s, names or authors of the Zen-Taoist texts were absent in his journals, in which he would frequently note his reaction to what he was reading.

One would expect a Christian monk to set the priority for the learning of Christian spirituality. Indeed, in the early years of his monastic life, Merton acquainted himself with Christian spirituality, first as preparation for his ordination in 1949, and later for the preparation of conferences and classes when he was made Master of Scholastics in 1951 and Master of Choir Novices in 1955.³⁴

³³ Merton, *The Ascent to Truth*, 26.

³⁴ Merton was made Master of Scholastics in 1951. This appointment brought with it considerable work in preparing conferences and classes, as well as

Interestingly, however, although Merton's study agenda in the early years in the monastery was focused on Christian spirituality, he did hear about Zen-Taoism on rare occasions.

His journals indicated that there were few occasions where Merton was somehow attracted to Zen-Taoism. On the visit of Archbishop Paul Yu-Pin of Nanking to Gethsemani about a week after his ordination on May 26, 1949, Merton was made aware of Buddhist monasticism and the contemplative life in China.³⁵ He was impressed by the large number of Buddhist monks and nuns in China and reacted to the reproach that Christians were only good at building hospitals but not at living contemplative life.³⁶ Later in the same year, Merton associated with a volunteer who was helping the monastery with some paint jobs and had been a postulant in a Zen Buddhist monastery in Hawaii.³⁷ The person was asked to share his previous Zen experience to the community.

These incidents indicate the fact that Merton had to some extent maintained contact with Zen-Taoism. But the impact of these incidents on Merton's attitude toward Zen-Taoism should not be exaggerated. Some scholars interpret these incidents as the sign of a positive turn of Merton's interest toward Zen-Taoism. Bonnie Bowman Thurston, for example, suggests that Merton's interest in Zen was "apparently rekindled" after the encounters with Archbishop Paul

giving spiritual direction to the young students in the monastery. In 1955 Merton was appointed Master of Novices, which resulted in even greater responsibilities.

³⁵ Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer. The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 2, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 321.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 373.

Yu-Pin in 1949, and that consequently Merton began to appreciate the wisdom of Zen.³⁸

However, Thurston's contention is questionable, for if Merton's interest in Zen-Taoism was "apparently rekindled" in 1949, there should have been at least some reading notes, names of authors, or titles of books on Zen Buddhism recorded in his journals of the period. But the fact is that names related to Zen-Taoism appeared in his later journals, somewhere in the mid 1950s. We may therefore conclude that the encounters with Archbishop Yu-Pin and the former Zen postulant were not enough to alter Merton's attitude toward Zen-Taoism or to move him to invest his energy and time in the learning of Zen-Taoism. Up until the early 1950s, Merton's basic attitude toward Zen-Taoism remained quite negative and his interest in learning Zen-Taoism was still to be stimulated. The encounters with Archbishop Paul Yu-Pin from China and with the former Zen postulant, however, must have brought back for him some memories of what he had read about Zen-Taoism back in 1937 at Columbia University.

Renewed Interest in Zen-Taoism (1955-1959)

It is evident that Merton resumed reading the writings on Zen and Taoism in the mid 1950s. According to Merton's own account, he began to study the works of D. T. Suzuki in about the year 1955 or 1956.³⁹

³⁸ See Bonnie Bowman Thurston, "Why Merton Looked East," *Living Prayer* 21 (1988): 43; and Bonnie Bowman Thurston, "Zen in the Eye of Thomas Merton's Poetry," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 4 (1984): 104.

³⁹ D. T. Suzuki (1870-1966) was born in Kanazawa, Japan. He taught at leading universities in Japan, Europe, and the United States. His works on Zen Buddhism are numerous.

When he recalled in his journal the short meeting with Suzuki in June 1964, he mentioned that he had been reading Suzuki "for about ten years with great attention."⁴⁰ As a matter of fact, Suzuki's name first appeared in his journal of July 19, 1956.⁴¹ Merton seemed to have read most of Suzuki's works. In his letter to Suzuki, he wrote, "...I read your books - and I have read many of them."⁴²

Merton's journals showed that he had been studying Zen-Taoism vigorously since the mid 50s. The name *I Ching*, a classic of great influence to Chinese minds, was noted in the journals of 1959.⁴³ Finding the book helpful for self-discovery, he introduced it to a schoolteacher in England.⁴⁴ Merton seemed to continue reading the *I Ching* and recording in his journal the insight obtained from the

⁴⁰ Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 5 (San Francisco, HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 116.

⁴¹ Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life. The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 3, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 48.

⁴² Thomas Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience & Social Concerns*, sel. & ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985), 561.

⁴³ Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, 266. The *I Ching* is regarded as having provided a common source for both Confucianism and Taoist philosophy. The word "I" contains three different meanings: 1. ease and simplicity; 2. transformation and change; 3. invariability or constancy. These three meanings are not contradictory, but coherent among themselves. The central theme of the book is the continuous change and transformation underlying all existence. The *I Ching* is in fact a book of life containing within it an explanation of the entire laws of the universe by which everything is governed, and carries explicit directions on how human subjects should conduct themselves so as to remain continually in harmony within these laws. According to the *I Ching*, life goes on vitally, balancing polarity and seasonal change in perfect rhythmic harmony, and if we become out of tune with it, the result is malady and misery.

The text Merton used is a translation by Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes with a Foreward by C. G. Jung. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1950). Merton mentioned in a letter to a friend that "Jung has written a fascinating preface to the *I Ching*, bringing in his archetypes." Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, 389.

⁴⁴ Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 389.

book.⁴⁵ The many scattered references to Zen and classical Chinese thought in his later journals proved that Merton had a renewed and lasting interest in Zen-Taoism from the second half of the 1950s on.

Why did Merton's attitude toward Zen-Taoism change in the mid 50s? What happened in that period of his life that would bring about the renewal of his interest in Zen-Taoism? There were indeed a number of noteworthy incidents taking place in that period of his life that could have altered his negative impression of Zen-Taoism and motivated him to learn from it.

First, at the time when Merton was made Master of Novices in 1955, he had been following up with the new studies of pastoral psychology.⁴⁶ He liked to read the works of C. G. Jung. He had cited Jung's *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* in his book *The Ascent of Truth*.⁴⁷ It seemed likely that Merton was led by Jung to explore Oriental thought, for Jung himself was greatly influenced by the Chinese classics such as *I Ching* and other Taoist texts. Jung's idea of synchronicity, as one aspect of the collective unconscious, and his conception of *animus* and *anima* were believed to have been developed under a strong influence from Chinese thought. Merton noted in his journal that psychology and Zen, although they were "serious human and profane activities," were useful instruments "for the formation of Christ in souls."⁴⁸ At

⁴⁵ Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, 79.

⁴⁶ On June 16, 1956, Merton had written to James Laughlin, the founder and editor of *New Directions*: "Most of the time now I think about psychoanalysis, since it is important to my job (Master of Novices). I am trying to learn how to give the Rorschach test. Such fun. But it takes a lot of time..." The letter is quoted in Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 289.

⁴⁷ Merton, *The Ascent to Truth*, 4.

⁴⁸ Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life, The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 3, ed. Lawrence Cunningham, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 48.

this time, Merton considered the learning of Zen helpful, if not necessary, in his ministry to young contemplatives in Gethsemani.

Second, in the mid 50s Merton was acutely aware of the fact that he had been hiding in a secure cloister and alienating himself from the outside world. With that awareness, he wanted to come out of the secure cloister, not physically, but mentally and spiritually. He felt strongly that he had to catch up with everything that had happened in the world after 1941. He admitted that his own world had stopped turning in 1941, the year of his entrance into Gethsemani.⁴⁹ Among other things, Zen-Taoism at the time was forming the religious climate in America. To catch up with the world, Merton read the works of Suzuki. This time he could appreciate the insights of Zen-Taoism and therefore went deep into it.

Third, Merton was also exploring different Russian studies in about 1956 and 1957. He was particularly moved by the description in the Russian mystics of the personification of Holy Wisdom as Hagia Sophia. Hagia Sophia, he believed, was present in the world from the beginning and always rejoicing before God and in God's inhabited world.⁵⁰ Consequently, his understanding of the Wisdom contributed to his openness toward other religious traditions. Seeing that at the base of reality was the transcendental presence of God's Wisdom, he studied Zen-Taoism with respect and took the teachings of Zen-Taoism as spiritual nourishment from God.

Lastly, that Merton began to feel connected with the Asian Zen

⁴⁹ Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 307.

⁵⁰ Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, 86.

masters and Taoist sages was probably related to a particular incident in his life--"The Vision in Louisville." On March 18, 1958, Merton went to Louisville on an errand. He found himself standing on the corner of Fourth and Walnut streets watching the crowds. Suddenly he felt overwhelmed by a sense of union with humanity:

[I]n Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, I suddenly realized that I loved all the people and that none of them were, or, could be totally alien to me. As if waking from a dream - the dream of separateness, of the "special" vocation to be different. My vocation does not really make me different from the rest of men or put me in a special category except artificially, juridically. I am still a member of the human race - and what more glorious destiny is there for man, since the Word was made flesh and became, too, a member of the Human Race!⁵¹

The experience was significant, both as an epiphany and as the turning point in Merton's life; it transformed his perception of the world and humanity. The experience might also bring home the memory of the Hindu monk Brahmachari, his admirable spirituality and his openness toward people of different faiths. With a transformed vision of humanity, Merton could see that the Asian Buddhists and Taoists were his brothers.

The above incidents indicated that the middle of the 1950s was a period when Merton was expanding his mental horizons in many directions and was moving from finely defined studies in contemplation and monasticism to something wider and, for the moment, controversial. The period was a transition, a normal developmental phase, in which disillusionment was painfully experienced and his new vision of reality was still clouded. It was a time, in Merton's own words, full

⁵¹ Ibid., 181-182.

of "moments of depression and despair."⁵² Merton was ready to have his mind stirred by new ideas and perspectives. He looked for provoking insights from the mystical writings of the Asian religions as well as the ancient Christian contemplatives of the Eastern and Western tradition, so as to live his vocation to the best of his awareness.

While we still hesitate to identify a single reason that caused Merton to turn to Zen-Taoism with a positive regard, we are convinced that the learning of Zen-Taoism in the mid 50s was for Merton a door opening to a world of new experience and understanding.

Extensive Study of Zen-Taoism (1959-1968)

By the end of the 1960s, Merton was ready and eager to write about Zen-Taoist spirituality. He was well aware that Zen was in many ways different from Christianity. But being so much nurtured by it, he decided to expound it and share it with Christians in the Western world. He sought the advice of Suzuki. On March 12, 1959, he sent some extracts from the manuscript *The Wisdom of the Desert* to Suzuki, inviting him to respond to the book and write a Preface to it.⁵³ He told Suzuki that he was a monk "who has tried to write some books about the contemplative life and who, for better or for worse, has a great love of interest in Zen."⁵⁴ Suzuki was willing to accept the invitation and quickly wrote an essay, as a response to his book.

⁵² Thomas Merton, "First and Last Thought," in *A Thomas Merton Reader*, ed. Thomas P. McDonnell (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), 16.

⁵³ Ibid., 267. See also Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 561-562.

⁵⁴ Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 561.

Upon receipt of Suzuki's essay, Merton responded with another lengthy essay. Merton intended to publish Suzuki's and his own essay as a dialogue between East and West in the appendix of *The Wisdom of the Desert*. But the abbot general Dom Gabriel did not favor for the project, which, he thought, would arouse a hot debate among Christians.⁵⁵ The two essays were later published in part two of *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, a collection of essays on Zen.

Shortly after initiating a dialogue with Suzuki in 1959, Merton proceeded to study Chinese thought in a systematic manner. The plan for a systematic study of Chinese thought was related to an important decision made in 1960 by his abbot with regard to Merton's desire for deeper solitude and ecumenical dialogue.

Beginning in early 1960, the abbot had arranged a little cottage for Merton to use as his hermitage and retreat center for the many visitors who came for ecumenical discussions.⁵⁶ Given this special privilege, Merton felt his longing for deeper solitude was fulfilled. In the evening of December 26, 1960, he stayed in the retreat house and wrote his journal by candlelight: "This is my resting place forever...The first time in my life I ever really felt I had come home and that my waiting and looking were ended."⁵⁷ Wanting also to

⁵⁵ See Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Spiritual Direction & Renewal*, sel. & ed. Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990), 128.

⁵⁶ The house was a little cottage in the woods but was less than a mile from the monastery. It was constructed of cement blocks set on the crest of a low knob called Mount Olivet, a view of the valley in front, woods and a spinney at the back. Merton could spend time there, and eventually he was permitted to move there permanently as a hermit in the summer of 1965.

⁵⁷ Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal years, The Journal of Thomas Merton*, vol. 4, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco:

make the retreat place a venue for ecumenical encounters, he planned to dig deep into Zen-Taoism, which he believed was of real and long-lasting interest and benefit, not only to himself but to the entire contemplative community.

The first step Merton wisely took was to seek guidance from Chinese scholars. With the permission of his abbot, in February, 1961 he wrote to Archbishop Yu-Pin, who had visited Gethsemani in 1949. He asked the archbishop for names of Chinese experts who could assist him in his venture. The archbishop referred his case to Father Paul Chan, Secretary General of Sino-American Amity in New York, who in turn wrote to Merton, suggesting names of several Chinese scholars, including Lin Yutang, Richard S. Y. Chi, and John C. H. Wu.⁵⁸

Merton chose John Wu and wrote to him on March 14, 1961.⁵⁹ He made two points.⁶⁰ First, he told Wu that it was necessary for Christians in the West to learn Oriental wisdom, because Oriental philosophy, like Greek philosophy to Christian culture in the formative period of Christianity, could assist contemporary Christians in their self-understanding of Christian faith. Second, he confessed that he

HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 79-80.

⁵⁸ Letter by Father Paul Chan, February 8, 1961; quoted in Lipski, *Thomas Merton and Asia*, 10.

⁵⁹ John C. H. Wu was born in Ningpo, China, in 1899. For 13 years he was a member of the National Legislature of the Republic of China. For 3 years he was Chinese ambassador to the Vatican. He has served as dean of the College of Chinese Culture in Taiwan, and as research professor of Asian studies at Seton Hall University in South Orange, New Jersey. As his letter indicate, Merton had read several of his books: *Beyond East and West* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1952); *The Interior Carmel: The Threefold Way of Love* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1954); *Chinese Humanism and Christian Spirituality* (Jamaica, NY: St. John's University, 1965); and *The Golden Age of Zen: The Classic Work on the Foundation of Zen Philosophy* (1967; reprint, New York: Doubleday Image, 1996). See Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 611-635.

was most attracted by the mysticism of the early Taoists.

Wu was a suitable guide for Merton. He had comprehensive knowledge in Confucianism, Taoism, and Chinese Buddhism. More importantly, Wu shared a similar concern and vision with Merton. Wu had great interest in the mystical journey of one's interior life and was as eager as Merton to bring Christianity and Oriental wisdom closer together. One of his books, *The Interior Carmel*, was the fruit of long meditation upon the mystical teaching of the Christian saints, such as John of the Cross, and the writings of the great Chinese masters.⁶¹ Based on the traditional threefold itinerary of Christian contemplation, he described the process of Christian maturity as undergoing the phases of the budding, the flowering, and the ripening of love. The three phases were in fact one--"the way of love."⁶² The most creative idea of Wu's book, however, lay in his contention that the central teaching of the three major Chinese philosophical traditions resembled the threefold way of Christian mysticism. He wrote,

Taoism, with its doctrine of detachment, Confucianism, with its emphasis on the practice of virtues, and Buddhism, with its universal compassion and its leaning toward contemplation, seem to form a continuous ascent to Truth

in the sphere of natural religion, corresponding roughly to the threefold way of love.⁶³

In another book, *Chinese Humanism and Christian Spirituality*, Wu brought out the similarities between the "little way" of St. Theresa

⁶⁰ Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 611-612.

⁶¹ John C. H. Wu, *The Interior Carmel: The Threefold Way of Love* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1954).

⁶² Ibid., 12.

⁶³ Ibid., 253.

of Lisieux and Lao Tzu's teaching on regaining the spirit of childhood.⁶⁴ As his letters indicate, Merton was deeply impressed by Wu's insightful exposition of the mystical teachings of the Christian mystics and his ability to relate them to the wisdom of the Chinese sages.

Wu was excited to work with a person like Merton. He appreciated the fact that Merton was leading a contemplative life in a Christian monastery and at the same time earnestly seeking the wisdom of the Chinese sages. He also agreed with Merton that Christians in the West needed to learn from the East. He answered Merton,

The way to the re-Christianization of the post-Christian West lies through the East. Not that the East has anything really new to give to the Gospel of Christ; but its natural wisdom is meant to remind Christians of their infinitely richer heritage, which, unfortunately, they are not aware of.⁶⁵

In response to Merton's favorite subject, the mysticism of the early Taoists, Wu suggested that he selected some passages from the book *Chuang Tzu* and re-express them in his own words. After five years of meditation and reflection, Merton made the selections and re-wrote them with his poetic sensibility. The selections were published as *The Way of Chuang Tzu* in the Autumn of 1965.⁶⁶ Upon Receipt of a copy of Merton's *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, Wu wrote,

⁶⁴ See John C. H. Wu, *Humanisme Chinois, Spiritualite Chretienne*, trans. Franz Weyergans (Belgique: Castermans, 1965), 122-160. (Originally published in English as *Chinese Humanism and Christian Spirituality*).

⁶⁵ A letter by John Wu to Thomas Merton, Good Friday, 1961; quoted in Lipski, *Thomas Merton and Asia*, 11.

⁶⁶ *The Way of Chuang Tzu* contains Merton's favorite discourse by Chuang Tzu and is an important source of evidence of Merton's appropriation of the teachings of Classical Taoism. The book will be studied in Chapter 2: Merton's Appropriation of Taoism.

I have come to the conclusion that you and Chuang Tzu are one. It is Chuang Tzu himself who writes his thoughts in the English of Thomas Merton. You are a true man of Tao just as he is. You have met in that eternal place which is no place and you look at each other and laugh together...The spirit of joy is written over all pages.⁶⁷

From Wu, Merton learned more about the historical development and the teachings of Chinese Zen. In 1966, he wrote a long essay "A Christian Look at Zen" as an introduction to Wu's *Golden Age of Zen*. In it he raised several important questions: "[I]n what sense is Zen, as such, religious at all? . . . Yet where do we ever find 'pure Zen' dissociated from a religious and cultural matrix of some sort?"⁶⁸

Merton was a diligent learner. Through Wu's introduction, Merton corresponded with another Chinese scholar, Paul K. T. Sih, who generously sent Merton many volumes of Chinese classics, some of which were even ordered for him from Taiwan.⁶⁹ Merton received the books with great delight and read them immediately. Merton found, among others, the *Platform Sutra*, a record of the life and teachings of the Sixth patriarch Hui-neng, "remarkably interesting."⁷⁰ He had even written a two-page review and sent it to the *Pilot*, a Boston Catholic diocesan paper. But the review article was never published. Merton noted that "it [the review] was too far-out for a Catholic diocesan

⁶⁷ Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 631.

⁶⁸ Thomas Merton, "A Christian Look at Zen," in *The Golden Age of Zen: The Classic Work on the Foundation of Zen Philosophy*, John C. H. Wu (New York: Doubleday Image, 1996), 2.

⁶⁹ See Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 549-556. Paul K. T. Sih, born in Shanghai in 1909, had little religious upbringing in his family. He was professor of history and director of the Center for Asian Studies at St. John's University, New York. He was a good friend of John C. H. Wu, who finally led him to become a Catholic. Sih had published his autobiography in 1952 and done English translation of some Chinese Classics.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 552.

paper."⁷¹

Being captured by the rich meaning of the Chinese language, Merton requested Wu and Sih to teach him to read and write a number of basic Chinese words. "I feel I ought to know about two or three hundred, in order to orient myself in the original text," he said.⁷² But after knowing the ordeal in that attempt, he eventually gave up.

The depth of Merton's interest in learning Zen-Taoism is unfathomable. He had not only devoured almost all the major works on the subjects that were made available to him. He also made connection as much as possible with the prominent figures of the day, both Buddhist writers and Christian scholars on Buddhist and Taoist studies. The number of persons with whom he had contact was numerous, as is indicated in the volumes of his letters and journals.

For example, having read the translation of a piece of work by Zen master Shen Hui,⁷³ he wrote to the Chinese author Richard Chi, a professor of Indiana University, asking for more references on the subject and inviting Chi for a visit at Gethsemani.⁷⁴

Merton would hardly miss the works of Heinrich Dumoulin, a

⁷¹ Ibid., 553.

⁷² Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 550, 619.

⁷³ Shen Hui (670-758) was one of the five immediate disciples of the Sixth Zen patriarch Hui-neng. He was the leader of the Southern School of Zen Buddhism. "It was through his vigorous efforts and struggles that the Southern School of Sudden Enlightenment achieved its great triumph over the Northern School of Gradual Attainment." John C. H. Wu, *The Golden Age of Zen*, 55.

⁷⁴ Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 122-125. Richard S. Y. Chi was born in Peking in 1918. He studied first in China and then in England, where he received a Ph. D from both Oxford and Cambridge. For a short time he lectured at Oxford and Cambridge and served as curator of the Oriental Art Gallery in Bristol. He has written on Oriental logic, art, calligraphy, etc., and was the editor of the journal *Buddhist Philosophy*.

well-known scholar in the field of Buddhist studies.⁷⁵ After reading Dumoulin's books, he dialogued with him on the interpretation of the Zen of Hui Neng. Merton was excited when Dumoulin invited him to stay in Japan for more contacts with Zen students and communities. But the plan was aborted because of his abbot's objection.⁷⁶

Merton also kept regular contact with William Johnston, a young scholar on mysticism and on East-West religious dialogue. He wrote a Foreword for Johnston's first book, *The Mysticism of the Cloud of Unknowing*.⁷⁷ In the Foreword, Merton drew the link between Zen and the mysticism of the Cloud of Unknowing.⁷⁸ Johnston visited Merton at Gethsemani in the summer of 1965, and in return, Johnston and the faculty of Sophia University in Japan were preparing for Merton's visit there as part of his Asian journey in 1968. They were shocked to hear the news of his sudden death in Bangkok.

Merton communicated with the Vietnamese Zen monk Thich Nhat Hanh, one of the leading spokespersons of the Vietnamese Buddhist peace movement. He enjoyed reading his books, and had written a four-page Foreword to one of his book *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire*.⁷⁹

These examples showed the depth and breadth of Merton's learning of Zen-Taoism. But for Merton, learning was not confined to studying the written texts, nor was it enough to meet the authors. He recognized the need to do more than simply study the texts, talk to

⁷⁵ Ibid., 170-171.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 1712-174.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 440-441.

⁷⁸ Thomas Merton, "Foreword," in *The Mysticism of the Cloud of Unknowing: A Modern Interpretation*, William Johnston (New York: Desclée, 1967), xi-xiv.

⁷⁹ Thomas Merton, "Foreword," in *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire*, Thich Nhat Hanh (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967).

expert witnesses, and write descriptive and interpretive essays. He had been hoping to travel, to undertake a pilgrimage to Asia, so that he could make his own observations within the natural habitat of the Asian religious traditions.⁸⁰ Finally in the late 1960s, he was given permission to leave the monastery for several months to attend conferences in different parts of Asia. Merton was overjoyed about the possibility to travel. He saw the trip as a spiritual pilgrimage, a jump into the next stage of his spiritual development. In his remarks prepared for the interfaith meeting held in Calcutta in mid-November, Merton wrote,

I come as a pilgrim who is anxious to obtain not just information, not just 'facts' about other monastic traditions, but to drink from ancient sources of monastic vision and experience. I seek not only to learn more (quantitatively) about religion and about monastic life, but to become a better and more enlightened monk (qualitatively) myself.⁸¹

In preparation for the trip, he immersed himself further in the writings of the Asian religious traditions. He expanded his learning to the spiritual teachings of Tibetan Buddhism as preparation for an intended meeting with the Dalai Lama. By all means he tried to sensitize himself to receive the wisdom of Asian monks.

Sadly, the trip brought an abrupt closure to Merton's venture to the East. He died accidentally in Bangkok on December 10, 1968, exactly 27 years after his entrance to Gethsemani. If Merton had survived the trip, what would he have brought back to Gethsemani and

⁸⁰ Thomas Merton, *Preview of the Asian Journey*, edited with an Introduction by Walter H. Capps (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 20.

⁸¹ Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, ed. Naomi Burton, Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973), 312-313.

to the Western Christian world, and how would his spirituality have developed in the next 10 or 20 years? These questions could never be answered.

Influence of Zen-Taoism on Merton's Life

The above sections review four phases of the development of Merton's interest in learning Zen-Taoism. It is noted that the third phase, from 1955 to 1959, was a critical period with regard to a positive change of Merton's attitude toward Zen-Taoism. During this transition phase, Merton was critically reflecting on his preconceptions of the world, humanity, religious vocation, monasticism, Christian life, and so forth. He was not satisfied with the orthodox studies in contemplation and monasticism. He turned to many so-called "secular" and "non-orthodox" literatures and showed wide interest in various areas of studies. But his commitment to learning Zen-Taoism has proved to be deep and long lasting. He published much more on Zen-Taoism than on Islam, Hinduism, and other schools of thought. Merton prayed that he could "see things Asian in their simplicity and truth."⁸² Toward the end of the 50s, he even appeared to be a proponent and defender for Zen-Taoism. The spirituality of Zen-Taoism was his major concern to the end of his life.

The depth of Merton's commitment to expounding and defending Zen-Taoism naturally correlated with the extent of the benefits he received from it. Enjoying the benefit of his learning, he liked to

⁸² Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 632.

introduce it to Christians in the West. He presented Zen-Taoism as if he was a Zen monk and a Taoist follower because he had taken Zen-Taoism as his own. Indeed Merton was influenced by Zen-Taoism in a very personal way. The subsequent chapters will explore Zen-Taoist influences on Merton's view of contemplation. Here in the rest of this chapter, we underline two areas of Zen-Taoist influence on Merton's personal life.

The first area of Zen-Taoist influence on Merton's personal life was seen in the period where Merton was going through his vocational crisis. To some extent, Zen-Taoism assisted Merton in his struggles through the crisis. The words of the ancient sages penetrated into his heart in times of inner turmoil and directed him to take right action or take the stance of non-action.

The reason Merton chose to enter the monastery of the Lady of Gethsemani had to do with his desire to live a purified and hidden life in God. After his baptism, he wanted to pay full attention to the mystery of God in silence and to be free from the trappings of the world. In the early years of his monastic life, he did enjoy the milieu of the monastery and found it conducive to his spiritual formation. However, as the monastery began to expand and restructure quite drastically in the early 50s, Merton was uncertain if the place was still good for him. His unmet expectation finally grew into a crisis.

Since the second half of the 1950s, Merton was not happy in the monastery. He found it too crowded, too busy, and too successful. He said to himself, "Cistercian life is quite dead...because the

contemplative spirit was out of it."⁸³ He was anxious and disturbed. He wanted deeper solitude or a completely solitary life. He attempted canonical strategies to leave Gethsemani for other places, either in the rural areas of the West, or more likely in Central or Latin America. By 1955 the urge to a life of deeper solitude was so strong that Merton made a formal request for permission to transfer to the Camaldolese monastery at Frascati, Italy. But the request was turned down.⁸⁴ Merton's journals of this period recorded some painful and sometimes uncharitable private criticisms of his superiors. In the peak of the crisis, by reading Zen and Taoism Merton was able to keep himself in balance. When he was in tension with his abbot, he found the words of Zen Masters and the Taoist sages consoling and enlightening and could stay calm and put things into perspective.

He consulted the *I Ching*, hoping to learn more about his deeper moral self and to see more clearly his most hidden motives behind his somewhat aggressive actions.⁸⁵ He also discovered in Zen-Taoism new insights into his internal struggles and his positive energy in responding to the situation. On May 12, 1959, in reading the *I Ching* he was reminded "to flow on like water," to change the things he could as well as to accept reality in peace. He noted,

To proceed 'with a union of strength and friendliness.'

⁸³ Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, 109.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 358-359. Merton's vocational crisis finally came to an end when a letter from Rome arrived on December 17, 1959, urging him to stay where he was. Upon reading the letter, Merton seemed to have accepted very quickly the fact that his appeal for an exclaustation, official permission to leave Gethsemani, was refused. He wrote in his journal that the decision of Rome was somehow expected and what he would do was to devote himself to the search for "solitude outside geography."

⁸⁵ Merton, *Hidden Ground of love*, 266.

No compromise with evil - yet accept ambiguous situation, remaining true to my principles, but not attacking those in authority. Not yielding to temptation to push forward blindly and obstinately at any cost. Not seeking to enforce my own will. Not using force. Be on guard in myself against the faults I have branded in the community, etc. Not fighting my own faults directly, but indirectly, by progress in good...Flowing on like water - Tao.⁸⁶

While the idea of acting according to the way of Tao--that is, "acting as if not acting"--guided him not to strive overly for his own will, the *Zen Mondo* moved him to examine his inner life. On June 13, 1959, being "struck by a *Zen Mondo* in Suzuki," he was awakened to the fact that the power of sincerity was already in him, and that he needed to simply live it out.

This power of non-deceiving is, for me, the all important thing and I lack it. That is, I have the seeds of it but I do not let them grow. I begin to want to assure people of my sincerity, and then I deceive myself. And, of course, I am trying to deceive them--that I am sincere.⁸⁷

During that difficult period of times in Merton's life, Zen-Taoism was serving to foster the growth of the Christian monk. It drew out the goodness of the reflective monk and calmed his outrageous spirit. No doubt Merton, as a Christian monk, did pray for himself. But it is interesting to see in his journals that he was very often nurtured by the wisdom of Zen-Taoism.

Zen-Taoism was one of the rare sources of insight and strength for Merton during the time when he experienced himself as "a monk in love." The romantic story involved a female nurse and started sometimes in April 1966. In the first few months of the romance, Merton was swept away by his love for the woman and her love for him.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 280-281. See also Ibid., 224, 292, 346.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 292. See also Ibid., 224, 346.

He slept very little and was intensely disturbed by the contradictions the romance implied. He tried to maintain the regular rhythm of daily life but was barely successful. He continued to read as usual, but he could not concentrate. However, it is interesting to see that, one day, being somewhat enlightened by a saying of the Buddha, he wrote in his journal:

"In order to untie a knot you must first find out how the knot was tied" (Buddha). This morning for the first time, really since going to the hospital, I have real inner freedom and solitude--I love M. but in a different way, peacefully and without disturbances or inner tension. I feel that once again I am *all here*.⁸⁸

The impact of Zen-Taoism on Merton's life was noteworthy. For Merton, Zen-Taoism was not only good philosophy or religion in conceptual and dogmatic terms, but also a good way of life. Merton valued the fact that the central emphasis of Zen-Taoism was the formation of a particular kind of lifestyle--a life with qualities of attentiveness, spontaneity, freedom, silence, and modesty. Zen-Taoism moved Merton to pursue such a life.

Zen-Taoism influenced the life as well as the personality of Merton. In reading Zen-Taoism Merton was captured by the characters and personalities of the Chinese sages. He identified himself with the Chinese sages and was affirmed that his personality, like that of the Zen-Taoist characters, was disposed to solitary life. In a letter to Wu, Merton wrote that if he had been in previous lives, "more than half of them were Chinese and eremitical."⁸⁹ Elsewhere he expressed

⁸⁸ Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: The Journals of Thomas Merton* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 84.

⁸⁹ Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 618.

a similar sentiment: "I have a deep affinity and respect for Buddhism, and I think that I am as much a Chinese Buddhist in temperament and spirit as I am a Christian."⁹⁰ He emphasized the same point in his dialogue with Suzuki that he and the Buddhist were very much in common. "The fact that you are a Zen Buddhist and I am a Christian monk, far from separating us, makes us most like one another. How many centuries is it going to take for people to discover this fact?" wrote Merton.⁹¹ For him, to enter into the world of Zen-Taoism was like coming home. He saw himself as part of the family of Zen-Taoist community. After he met Suzuki at Columbia University in June 1964, he deeply savored the experience and noted in his journal, "For once in a long time I felt as if I had spent a moment in my own family."⁹²

Merton deeply loved his Chinese name "Mei Teng," meaning silent lamp. He liked the fact that his Chinese name reflected the kind of inner quality he desired. One early morning of December in 1965, Merton was alone in the hermitage, contemplating his Chinese name Mei Teng. He was led into deep solitude and eventually wrote a letter to Wu, saying, "It was moving to be 'baptized' in Chinese with a name I must live up to. After all, a name indicates a divine demand. Hence I must be Mei Teng, a silent lamp, not a sputtering one."⁹³

Merton admired the lifestyle and personality of the Zen-Taoist characters because he saw in them the qualities he wanted to develop for himself. The second reason Merton admired and identified with

⁹⁰ Ibid., 465.

⁹¹ Ibid., 561.

⁹² Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, ed. Patrick Hart, *The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 5 (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 117.

⁹³ Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 632.

the Zen-Taoist characters was that they reflected the life of Jesus. The Chinese sage, liked Jesus, lived a life of simplicity, obscurity, and freedom. Merton wrote,

The "sage" or the man who has discovered the secret of the Tao...is "dim and obscure, "like a babe who has not yet smiled." Though he has in fact "returned to the root," the Tao, he appears to be the "only one who has no home to return to." He is very much like the One who has nowhere to lay His head, even though the foxes may have holes and the birds of the air their nests. He who has found the Tao has no local inhabitation and no name on the earth. He is "bland like the ocean, aimless as the wafting gale." Again we remember the Gospels: "The wind blows where it pleases...even so is every man who is born of the Spirit" (John 3:8).⁹⁴

Merton was attracted to the Zen-Taoist way of life. He believed that such a way of life should be the basic quality of a true contemplative, and that the Christian contemplative and Zen-Taoist sage would meet together in their pursuit for a solitary and obscure life. When Merton was allowed to stay full time at the hermitage in the summer of 1965, he felt he was joining with the many Chinese sages in seeking the way of Tao. Merton had a spiritual sense that the Chinese sages were around him in the hermitage and sharing the joy of his solitude. Joyfully he wrote in his journals, "Here is the reassuring companionship of many silent Tzu's and Fu's; Kung Tzu, Lao Tzu, Meng Tzu, Tu Fu, Hui Neng, and Chao Chu."⁹⁵

The Zen-Taoist characters attracted Merton and they reinforced his desire for deeper solitude and contemplative lifestyle. We may say then, Merton, in studying Zen-Taoism, came to a stronger

⁹⁴ Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1961), 75.

⁹⁵ Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981), 35.

conviction about his spiritual desire and personality disposition. In this sense, Merton's decision to become a hermit was influenced by his learning of Zen-Taoism.

Conclusion

This chapter traces the development of Merton's interest and commitment in studying Zen-Taoism. The development can be captured in four phases.

The first was from 1933 to 1941. Being a voracious reader, Merton had very briefly read a book on Buddhism even in the early years of his life. A more purposeful exploration of Oriental mysticism took place in 1937, when he was studying at Columbia University. Unfortunately, the experience was a negative one.

The second period was from 1941-1955. After Merton entered the monastery in 1941, he brought with him the negative impression of Oriental religions. His early years of monastic formation did not seem to encourage a positive attitude toward other religions. He made negative comments on Zen-Taoism in his writings. At least in the first 15 years of his monastic life, he did not read or write directly on Zen-Taoism.

The third period was from 1955 to 1959. Merton's journal of this period proved that he regained interest in Zen-Taoism in the mid 1950s. A completely positive attitude toward Zen-Taoism was clearly seen in his journals and letters of the late 50s.

The fourth period was from 1959 to 1968. Beginning in 1959, Merton's study of Zen-Taoism was systematic and extensive. He

initiated a dialogue with Suzuki and learned under the guidance of the Chinese scholars, Wu and Sih. He also frequently contacted writers on Zen-Taoism. Altogether he published three books and a considerable number of essays on Zen-Taoism. Merton's extensive and systematic study of Zen-Taoism lasted for about ten years, from 1959 to 1968, the year he died.

The last section of this chapter discusses the reason why Merton's commitment to learning Zen-Taoism was so deep and long lasting, compared to his other interests. It explores the influence of Zen-Taoism on his life and personality. On the one hand, Zen-Taoism influenced the way Merton dealt with his discontentment with the monastic life at Gethsemani. On the other hand, it reinforced Merton's conviction to pursue for a solitary life. The reason Merton became a proponent and defender of Zen-Taoism had to do with the personal benefit he received from Zen-Taoism.

The subsequent chapters will further explore how Zen-Taoism influenced Merton's view of contemplation. To begin, we need to find out Merton's understanding of Zen and Taoism and how he appropriated the teachings into his scheme of thought. This is the goal of the following two chapters.

CHAPTER TWO

MERTON'S UNDERSTANDING OF TAOISM

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to underscore the depth of Merton's understanding of Taoism, particularly the thought of Master Chuang. It begins by reviewing the process of the publication of *The Way of Chuang Tzu*. Merton's authorship of the book is very different from that of his other publications. Merton's *The Way of Chuang Tzu* is a partial rewriting of the standard edition of the *Chuang Tzu*. In order to highlight the characteristics of *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, the second section compares the original standard edition of the *Chuang Tzu* with Merton's selected version in terms of structure and contents. The third section identifies some major themes of the content of *The Way of Chuang Tzu*. By expounding those themes, we come to know the areas of teaching in the *Chuang Tzu* that Merton had deeply assimilated. The last section discusses the influence of *The Way of Chuang Tzu* on Merton's own thought.

Project of Rewriting the *Chuang Tzu*

Although Merton attempted to enter into the world of the Chinese classics while he was studying at Columbia University, he could not really grasp the meaning of the ancient writings. It was not until the mid 1950s that Merton began to capture the central teachings of different schools of Chinese philosophy. His journals of that period

show that he was able to decipher the connection between the *I Ching*, Confucianism, and Taoist philosophy.¹

D. T. Suzuki influenced Merton in his interest in and knowledge of the Chinese classics. Suzuki was erudite in the Chinese language and Chinese religions and philosophy. He had translated two Chinese versions of Buddhist texts into English and had written a book on the history of early Chinese philosophy.² When Merton was reading Suzuki's works in the mid 1950s, he was introduced to many insightful sayings by the Chinese sage, Chuang Tzu.

Merton favored classical Taoism over other schools of Chinese philosophy. "[W]hat really attracts me," he told John Wu, was "the mysticism of the early Taoists."³ He was moved by the simple but profound wisdom of Master Chuang and wished to explore it in greater depth. He invited Wu to "work together on a selection [of the writing of *Chuang Tzu*]."⁴ Coincidentally, Wu was at the time working on an article entitled "The Wisdom of Chuang Tzu: A New Appraisal."⁵ Wu wholeheartedly encouraged Merton to carry out the project.

Upon receipt of Wu's encouragement, Merton had "no more doubts

¹ Thomas Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience & Social Concerns*, sel. & ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985), 612.

² D. T. Suzuki, *A Brief History of Early Chinese Philosophy* (London: Probsthain, 1914); *T'ai-Shang Kan-Ying P'ien: Treatise of the Exalted One on Response and Retribution* (translated from the Chinese version) (La Salle, Ill: Open Court Publishing, 1944); *Asvaghosha's Discourse on the Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana* (translated from the Chinese version) (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms, 1966).

³ Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 612.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 612.

⁵ Wu's article was published as "The Wisdom of Chuang Tzu: A New Appraisal," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 3 (1963): 5-36.

about the project being willed by God."⁶ He began the project with great confidence and delight. He used James Legge's translation, the one he was most familiar with, as the blueprint.⁷ Later he consulted three more translations, as suggested by Wu: a German translation by Richard Wilhelm, a French translation by Leon Wieger, and an English translation by Herbert Giles.⁸

Merton did not intend to make a new translation of the *Chuang Tzu* or simply to polish the English of a standard translation. He wanted to produce a selected version of the *Chuang Tzu*, which would capture the spirit of the original book. Merton began by choosing a number of passages from the standard edition that he found most captivating. He sent his selections to Wu, asking Wu to give his own translation of those passages directly from the original Chinese text. He would then consult Wu's translations and rewrite the chosen passages in a way he believed to be most sensible.

However, shortly after he made a list of passages that appealed to him, he found that Wu was too busy to translate the passages for him. Merton left with two options. Either he aborted the project or continued on his own. Merton chose the second option, even though he

⁶ Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 613.

⁷ The version that Merton used "was reprinted quite recently by the Julian Press with a preface by Dr. Suzuki." Ibid., 614.

⁸ Herbert A. Giles, trans., *Chuang Tzu: Mystic, Moralist, and Social Reformer*, 2d. ed. (Shanghai, Kelly & Walsh, 1926; reprint, New York, AMS Press, 1974).

It should be noted that Merton, as a result of studying Huxley's *Ends and Means*, attempted to read Wieger's text on Taoism in 1937. But he was baffled by the text. About twenty years later when Merton used the text again, he made this comment in one of his letters: "He [Wieger] is breezy." It seemed that Merton could not easily forget his first experience with Wieger's text (*Hidden Ground of Love*, p.619).

knew that without Wu's input the final product might appear to be something of a "merely polishing up the English expression" of Legge's and Giles's translations.⁹ He continued the project simply because he enjoyed doing it and took it as a self-edifying process.¹⁰ The entire work was finally completed and published as *The Way of Chuang Tzu* in 1965. Merton wrote a long introduction to it and commented that it was the most enjoyable book he had ever written.

If the completion of the book itself showed Merton's enduring affection for the thought of Master Chuang, the content of the book indicated the depth of Merton's appropriation of the thought of classical Taoism. As a matter of fact, the only way to know how far Merton understood classical Taoism is by studying *The Way of Chuang Tzu*. The book is the only explicit writing that can testify to the depth of Merton's knowledge of classical Taoism. In the following section, we will analyze the structure and content of the book so as to explore Merton's understanding of classical Taoism in general and the thought of Master Chuang in particular.

Standard Edition of the *Chuang Tzu* and *The Way of Chuang Tzu*

The name *Chuang Tzu* means "Master Chuang." "Chuang" is the surname of the supposed author of this marvelous work and "Tzu" simply implies "master" in the sense of a leading figure in a given school of thought in ancient China. The full name of Master Chuang, the putative author,

⁹ Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 617.

¹⁰ Ibid.

is Chuang Chou, born around the year 369 B.C.E. While such a person as Chuang Chou probably existed, the connection between Chuang Chou and the book *Chuang Tzu* is less obvious. Chuang Chou had perhaps written the core passages of the *Chuang Tzu*; but he did not write all of the *Chuang Tzu*. For the sake of convenience, scholars collectively refer to Master Chuang as the nominal author of the book, and they associate the text with the school of thought which was grouped around that shadowy name.

Contemporary scholars have discovered that the *Chuang Tzu* was not all written by a single thinker. The sheer amount of blatantly contradictory ideological materials put together in the various chapters is proof enough of that. The literary quality of the chapters is also tremendously uneven, some of them being among the finest masterpieces of Chinese writing, brilliantly conceived and expressed, while others are tritely composed and sloppily executed. Nonetheless, there is an essentially inimitable spirit that informs the book as a whole.

The core of the *Chuang Tzu* was probably originally composed in the latter half of the fourth century B.C.E., but the text as a whole was not completed until toward the end of the second century B.C.E. The precise responsibility for the composition of the separate portions of the *Chuang Tzu* is shrouded in mystery. Nor is there definite proof of who first collected them into a single volume.

Since the Middle of the third century C.E., scholars had regarded the *Chuang Tzu* as a composite text. The standard edition from the

fourth century C.E. had thirty-three chapters. It was divided into three parts: the Inner Chapters (1-7), the Outer Chapters (8-22), and the Miscellaneous Chapters (23-33). The first seven chapters, the Inner Chapters, were considered by the majority of scholars to be the truest reflection of the thought of Master Chuang himself. Of the three sections, they were the most often translated and were widely considered to be the most authentic passages.

In Merton's view, the Inner Chapters were also the best reflection of the thought of Master Chuang. In *The Way of Chuang Tzu* Merton had selected all together 62 passages from the standard edition of the *Chuang Tzu*: 25 passages from the Inner Chapters, 22 passages from Outer Chapters, and 15 passages from the Miscellaneous Chapters. It is important that he chose 25 passages out of the seven Inner Chapters, a much higher ratio than from the second and third sections. The Inner Chapters were more appealing to Merton, because he found in them the essential teaching of Master Chuang and a kind of contemplative lifestyle valuable to Christians.

While the identity of the compiler of the *Chuang Tzu* remained unknown, the original core of the *Chuang Tzu* probably consisted of relatively short, vivid parables and fables such as the opening paragraphs of the book. The ensuing paragraphs beginning "Thus" and "Therefore" might be later explanatory additions. This pattern was frequently repeated in the book: a short, graphic tale or parable followed by more abstract expositions of the point that it makes. These two types of materials frequently clashed in mood and in style.

Naturally, it was the concrete narratives that were more memorable than the abstract expositions. Merton keenly discerned this distinct style of the *Chuang Tzu*. In *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, he consistently extracted the short tales and parables from the long and abstract expositions. In so doing, he presented *The Way of Chuang Tzu* as a more reflective, enjoyable, and ordinary piece of work.

The relationship between the *Chuang Tzu* and the *Tao Te Ching* is noteworthy. Of all the philosophers who were active during the Warring States period (475-221 B.C.E.), Master Chuang's closest affinities were with Lao Tzu (the Old Master or Masters—there were probably more than one of them). The Old Master was the originator of the sayings that were compiled as the *Tao Te Ching* around the end of the third century B.C.E. Like the Old Master, Master Chuang held that what can be said of the Tao is not really the Tao. Readers who are familiar with both texts can notice echoes of the *Tao Te Ching* in the pages of the *Chuang Tzu*. Master Chuang frequently quoted from the *Tao Te Ching*. What is intriguing, however, is that the quotations usually were not exact repetition of *Tao Te Ching*. In other instances, sayings attributed to the Old Master were not to be found in the standard edition of the *Tao Te Ching*. This indicates that the *Tao Te Ching* was still probably circulating as oral tradition at the time and had not yet coalesced as a written text.

While the *Tao Te Ching* was extremely terse and open to many different interpretations, the *Chuang Tzu*, on the other hand, was relatively definitive and comprehensive as a repository of early Taoist thought.

The *Tao Te Ching* was addressed to the sage-king; it was basically a handbook for rulers. The *Chuang Tzu*, in contrast, was the earliest surviving Chinese Text to present a philosophy for the individual. The authors of the *Tao Te Ching* were interested in establishing some sort of Taoist rule, while the authors of the *Chuang Tzu* opted out of society, or at least out of power relationships within society. Master Chuang obviously wanted no part of the machinery of government. He compared the state bureaucrat to a splendidly decorated ox being led to sacrifice, and he preferred to think of himself as an unconstrained piglet playing in the mud.

There was further dissimilarity between the thought of Master Chuang and the Old Masters. While the *Tao Te Ching* offered the Tao as a guide for life and propounded non-action as a means to achieve one's purpose in the workaday world, Master Chuang believed that the Tao had supreme value in itself and consequently did not occupy himself with its mundane applications. Rather than paying attention to the governance of human society (the fundamental concern of most early Chinese thinkers), Master Chuang stressed the need for transcendence and the freedom of the individual from such worldly concerns. In spite of all the differences, however, Master Chuang was clearly attracted to the doctrines of the Old Masters, and many of his writings might be thought of as expanded metaphors or meditations on the brief sayings of those early Taoist luminaries.

Not only were there differences between the thought of Master Chuang and the Old Masters, the content of the *Chuang Tzu* itself betrays

major dissimilarities in the philosophical ideas it expresses. The great discrepancies among the various chapters of the *Chuang Tzu* are due to a number of factors. The first factor concerns the doctrinal differences among the Taoist factions that came after Master Chuang and were identified with him. Some of these were undoubtedly affected to a certain degree by other schools and hence would have brought in material from them. The second factor involves the non-Taoist thinkers who recognized the enormous appeal of Master Chuang and wanted to appropriate part of his popularity to advance their own programs. The incorporation of sections by such thinkers in the *Chuang Tzu* further complicates the text. The *Chuang Tzu* is thus a very heterogeneous work that does not speak with a single voice. The number of ways of interpreting the *Chuang Tzu* have been as plentiful as the disparate facets of the text itself.

If the *Chuang Tzu* was a very heterogeneous work that as a result opens the possibility of diverse interpretations of many of the passages, Merton's way of rendering the thought of the *Chuang Tzu* was a justifiable one. Merton's presentation of the *Chuang Tzu* was the unique outcome of his poetic sensibility and contemplative disposition. Merton's *The Way of Chuang Tzu* suggests a stronger sense of coherency as well, for Merton collected shorter stories, dialogues, parables, and provoking idioms according to several major themes. Through Merton's selection and expression, the *Chuang Tzu*, originally a complicated text, now turned into a relatively more direct and coherent piece of work, and was therefore made more comprehensible to modern

minds. In this sense, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* offers a good introduction and compendium to the standard edition of the *Chuang Tzu*.

Themes in *The Way of Chuang Tzu*

As mentioned above, Merton's *The Way of Chuang Tzu* contained only 62 passages of the standard edition of the *Chuang Tzu*. Merton selected those passages because they spoke to and impressed him. To be able to rewrite his chosen passages without misapprehension, Merton must have thoroughly digested and understood them. The 62 chosen passages of the *Chuang Tzu*, then, represented the areas of the Taoist teaching that touched Merton deeply and evoked his serious reflection on contemplative life. In other words, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* represented the scope of Merton's absorption of the thought of Master Chuang and that of the early Taoist luminaries. By sketching the themes from the fairly wide-ranging thoughts contained in the 62 passages, we may be in a better position to determine what areas of the Taoist teachings Merton had integrated into his view of reality and contemplation.

Although the meaning of the majority of the 62 chosen passages is fairly clear, the process of finding the themes of each passage is not as simple as expected. As indicated before, the 62 chosen passages in *The Way of Chuang Tzu* were mainly parables, stories, and dialogues. Most of them were originally part of a wider context. It was Merton who had decidedly taken them out of their context and presented them as independent pieces. Therefore, the process of identifying the theme of each chosen passage requires a thorough reading of the original

version of the *Chuang Tzu*. Basically, the themes of the chosen stories or parables are discernible within the broader context. Only a few cases are uncertain as to what messages Merton had grasped from the short passage. The few vague passages are classified under the category of "Uncertain Themes," of which multiple interpretations are possible.

A typical example of one of the few vague passages is the shortest passages entitled, "When a Hideous Man." It reads:

When a hideous man becomes a father
A son is born to him
In the middle of the night
He trembles and lights a lamp
And runs to look in anguish
On that child's face
To see whom he resembles.¹¹

This story was originally part of a lengthy discussion on the subject concerning the belief that one should not impose one's values or one's ideas on others, no matter how good and necessary one might think they are. But when the story of an ugly father was taken out of its context, it could mean otherwise. Merton did extract it out of its context and make it an individual story. It seemed that Merton was somehow touched by the intriguing story and wanted to convey a message through it. However, we are uncertain about his motivation and intention of doing that.

Except for a few difficult and unclear passages, the themes of most of Merton's chosen passages are explicit. They fall within two major themes: The Man of Tao and the Way of Tao. Under each major theme are

three sub-themes. The following is a full list of the themes of the 62 chosen passages collected in *The Way of Chuang Tzu*. The discerned themes in *The Way of Chuang Tzu* not only constitute the basic teaching of classical Taoism; they also represent Merton's personal assimilation of the Taoist thought.

¹¹ Merton, *The Way of Chuagn Tzu* (New York: New Directions, 1965), 77.

The Man of Tao

The True Man (p.60-61)
 Metamorphosis (p.62-63)
 Man is born in Tao (p.65)
 The Man of Tao (p.91-92)
 Symphony for a Sea Bird (p.103-104)
 Wholeness (p.105-106)

Freedom

When the Shoe Fits (p.112-113)
 The Man with One Foot (p.48-49)
 The Fasting of the Heart (p.50-53)
 Three Friends (p.54-55)
 Lao Tzu's Wake (p.56-57)
 Apologies (p.138)
 Active Life (p.141-142)
 Flight from Benevolence (p.147-149)
 Means and Ends (p.154)
 Chuang Tzu's Funeral (p.156)

Ordinary/Simplicity

The Kingly Man (p.72)
 When Life was Full (p.76)
 The Five Enemies (p.78)
 Autumn Floods (p.84-85)
 The Turtle (p.93-94)
 Owl and Phoenix (p.95-96)
 The Need to Win (p.107)
 Keng Sang Chu (p.126-127)
 The Tower of the Spirit (p.134-135)

Joy

Action and Non-action (p.80)
 The Joy of Fishes (p.97-98)
 Perfect Joy (p.99-101)
 The empty Boat (p.114-115)
 Good Fortune (p.144-146)

The Way of Tao

Great Knowledge (p.40-41)
 The Breath of Nature (p.38-39)
 How Deep is Tao! (p.73)
 In My End Is My Beginning (p.75)
 Duke Hwan and the Wheelwright (p.82-83)
 Where is Tao? (p.123-124)
 Starlight and Non-being (p. 125)
 Tao (p.150-152)

Non-action

Cutting Up an Ox (p.45-47)
 Two Kings and No-Form (p.66)
 Cracking the Safe (p.67-69)
 Leaving Things Alone (p.70-71)
 The Lost Pearl (p.74)
 When Knowledge Went North (p.118-120)
 The Importance of Being Toothless (p.121-122)
 Keng's Disciple (p.128-133)
 Advising the Prince (p.139-140)
 Flight from the Shadow (p.155)
 The Inner Law (p.136-137)

Uselessness

The Flight of Lin Hui (p. 116-117)
 A Hat Salesman and a Capable Ruler (p.37)
 The Useless Tree (p.35)
 Confucius and the Madman (p.59)
 The Useless (p.153)
 Monkey Mountain (p.143)

Complimentarity

Three in the Morning (p.44)
 The Pivot (p.42-43)
 Great and Small (p.87-89)

Uncertain Themes

When a Hideous Man (p.77)
 The Sacrificial Swine (p.108)
 The Fighting Cock (p.109)
 The Woodcarver (p.110-111)

The above listing shows two central themes of Merton's selections: "The Man of Tao" and "The Way of Tao." Under the theme "The Man of Tao" are three sub-themes, namely, freedom, simplicity, and joy. These sub-themes further elaborate the qualities of a person who lives her or his life according to the way of Tao. The way of Tao is the second central theme of Merton's selections. This central theme also consists of three sub-themes, namely, non-action, uselessness, and complementarity. By looking into the three sub-themes, we can understand the way of Tao in more concrete terms. The following is an overview of each of the central and sub-themes in *The Way of Chuang Tzu*.

The Man of Tao

The man of Tao is one who desires to "get lost in Tao." The desire to get lost in Tao is intrinsic, as the fish needs to get lost in water.¹² Those who get lost in Tao simply live according to the flow of Tao and can be called "true men." Their minds are free, thoughts are gone, brows are clear, and their faces are serene. The way they act, think, and relate is as spontaneous as the coming of the four seasons.¹³ They do not drive grimly forward fighting their way through life. They take life gladly as it comes and accept death without anxiety.

The ones in whom Tao freely flows without impediment harm no other being. They take no person as their enemy or rivalry. They do not

¹² Ibid., 65.

¹³ Ibid., 61.

use other people to accomplish their own goals. They do not struggle to make money or to make a virtue of poverty. "Rank and reward make no appeal to him; disgrace and shame do not deter him. He is not always looking for right and wrong."¹⁴

As the sub-themes suggest, the man of Tao is further characterized as free, joyful, and simple or ordinary. First, the man of Tao enjoys freedom through appropriate detachment from things, people, and their own desires. Those who live freely in the way of Tao are not compelled to act. They are freed from compulsion and competition. Unlike the "prisoners in the world of objects," they do not submit to their drives, compulsions, needs, or material attractions.¹⁵ They are neither very intimate with anyone, nor very aloof; with heightened self-awareness, they can maintain balance in human relationships and therefore would not have conflict with others.¹⁶

Second, the man of Tao is filled with joy, the joy of doing all things without concern, not even the concern for enjoyment and happiness. Joy is absent when one is striving to make life fully worth living. Joy cannot be achieved, but found. Only when we stop looking for joy can we really find it, for "joy is free from care."¹⁷ "The greatest happiness consists precisely in doing nothing whatever that is calculated to obtain happiness."¹⁸ The man of Tao understands very

¹⁴ Ibid., 91.

¹⁵ Ibid., 142.

¹⁶ Ibid., 149.

¹⁷ Ibid., 80.

¹⁸ Ibid., 101.

well the paradox of joy and no-joy: "Perfect joy is to be without joy."¹⁹ The joyful man of Tao lives in the present moment and therefore can share "the joy of fishes in the river through his own joy."²⁰

Lastly, the man of Tao leads a very simple and contented lifestyle. "Goods and possessions are no grain in his eyes, he stays far from wealth and honor. Long life is no ground for joy, nor early death for sorrow. Success is not for him to be proud of, failure is no shame."²¹ For those who sincerely embody Tao, "achievement is the beginning of failure, and fame is the beginning of disgrace."²² The simple men of Tao do not enjoy power and reputation. They prefer to act rightly, unseen, in their own solitude, and guard against display. Although others may think that they are stupid, they persist in seeking the original simplicity of humanity.

The Way of Tao

Why is the man of Tao so full of joy, freedom, and simplicity? The reason is simply because the man of Tao lives according to the way of Tao. What is the way of Tao? First of all, "Tao is not the name of 'an existent.' 'Cause' and 'chance' have no bearing in Tao. Tao is a name that indicates without defining. Tao is beyond words and beyond things."²³ Tao is inexpressible.

While the concept of Tao is difficult and almost impossible to grasp

¹⁹ Ibid., 101.

²⁰ Ibid., 98.

²¹ Ibid., 72.

²² Ibid., 115.

²³ Ibid., 152.

and articulate, the reality of Tao is in all things. "Tao is Great in all things, Complete in all, Universal in all, Whole in all."²⁴ Tao can even be perceived in the small material objects such as metal and stone, for when one hits a piece of metal or stone, one hears the ring of the object.²⁵ In everything is Tao.

The way of Tao is contradictory to our common understanding of realities. It betrays our intellectuality and logical reasoning, and therefore challenges us to see and respond to realities from a totally different perspective. The way of Tao is not a way in its common sense; it is incomparable to a logical and sequential pattern. It can be said that the way of Tao is the Tao of no-way, for it is a way not of achieving, doing, and discriminating, but of letting go, non-doing, and embracing. How is it to follow the way of Tao, then? To follow the way of Tao is to live according to the principle of "uselessness," "non-action," and "complementarity."

First, the way of Tao goes against pragmatism; it refers to uselessness. While pragmatism tends to consider the value of things by their usefulness, the way of Tao views usefulness from the standpoint of uselessness. If one cannot appreciate what is useless, one cannot begin to talk about what is useful.²⁶ "Every man knows how useful it is to be useful. No one seems to know how useful it is to be useless."²⁷ One who follows the way of the Tao can appreciate one's usefulness in uselessness. And in abiding by the useless way of the Tao, one

²⁴ Ibid., 123.

²⁵ Ibid., 73.

chooses to let go of the pragmatic view of usefulness. The way of Tao turns "uselessness" into "usefulness" and vice versa.²⁸

Second, the way of Tao is a way of non-action. Non-action is not "no action." It is not as simple as the opposite of activism. Non-action is action without action. Those who follow this way of non-action leave no trace of their actions. They know how to do nothing.²⁹ They are honest and righteous without realizing that they are doing their duty. They love others, but do not know that this is called the love of neighbor. They deceive no one, yet they never think that they are someone deserving of honor and trust. They give and share, but are unaware that they are generous. For this reason, their actions are non-actions and will not be narrated in the book of who is who. Their names are simply absent in history and no one will remember the "great things" they have done.³⁰ To follow the way of non-action is not to concern oneself with methods, achievements, aggression, and self-assertion; but simply to respond to realities as they are by resting in one's original nature.

Lastly, the way of Tao is a way of complementarity. It considers both sides of an issue or question without partiality and sees them both in the light of Tao.³¹ The way of complementarity in fact reflects the reality of life. It perceives that opposites produce each other, depend on each other, and complement each other, such as life followed

²⁶ Ibid., 153.

²⁷ Ibid., 59.

²⁸ Ibid., 35-36.

²⁹ Ibid., 71.

³⁰ Ibid., 76

by death, and death followed by life. It believes that the possible will become impossible and the impossible possible. Right will turn into wrong and wrong into right. The flow of life alters circumstances and thus things themselves are altered in their run.³²

Seeing the reality from a complementary point of view, one sees that nothing is best, nothing is worst. Each thing, seen in its own light, stands out in its own way. When seen in terms of the whole, no one thing stands out as "better." All things have different uses as much as all creatures have gifts of their own.³³ According to the way of complementarity, it is impossible to have right without wrong or order without disorder, for to know one is to know the other, and to refuse one is to refuse both. This is called following two courses at once.³⁴

Influence of *The Way of Chuang Tzu* on Merton

As Merton himself admitted, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* was not a scholarly translation or a commentary. It was only a rewriting of some passages of the standard edition of the *Chuang Tzu*. Merton's authorship of the book was to be understood differently. Merton claimed no originality of the chosen passages. His contribution was his "personal and spiritual interpretation" of the chosen passages.³⁵ But although the book was only interpretative readings of the original work, it was

³¹ Ibid., 44.

³² Ibid., 42.

³³ Ibid., 88.

³⁴ Ibid., 44.

³⁵ Ibid., 9.

important in a number of ways.

First, the book was the fruit of Merton's deep and prolonged meditation and reflection over a period of five years.³⁶ The long period of reflection and meditation allowed Merton to adequately absorb the teachings of Master Chuang into his view of reality. The book therefore reflected the depth of Taoist influence on Merton. Second, the book was a collection of 62 selected passages. These passages were chosen out of personal interest. They reflected how Merton attempted to grasp "the mysterious 'way' described by a Master writing in Asia nearly twenty-five hundred years ago."³⁷

The publication of *The Way of Chuang Tzu* in a sense announced the fact that Merton had entered the spiritual geography of Asia. As Wu commended, Merton was one of few Christians who could bring alive the spirit of Master Chuang. Having studied and meditated through and through the wisdom of Master Chuang, Merton was convinced that Christian monastic life must somehow follow "the way of Tao" and the Christian contemplative must live up to "the man of Tao." In a letter to Wu, he said, "I think he [Master Chuang] has in him an element which is essential to all true contemplation, and which is often lacking in Western 'contemplatives'."³⁸ A subsequent letter showed that Merton was comparing the current monastic life at Gethsemani with Master Chuang's teaching on "the way of Tao" and "the man of Tao." He was disappointed about Christian monastic life.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

The wisdom of Chuang Tzu delights and shames me. There is so much in him that we ought to be knowing and practicing at the monastery. Alas, we are all trying to be 'superior Men' and we are 'standing on tiptoe' and 'limping about' with out virtuousness.³⁹

Merton wrote the letter in 1961 where his "battle" with his abbot was more or less settled down. It showed that Merton had no doubt that both his personal request for deeper solitude and his open argument for a simple lifestyle in the monastery was right and valid, although the way he made his claim could be modified. His insistence on a reform of monastic life seemed to be enforced by what he absorbed from the teaching of Master Chuang.

Merton was particularly impressed by two Taoist ideas. The first was the idea of "the man of Tao." He appreciated the fact "the man of Tao does not make the mistake of giving up self-conscious virtuousness in order to immerse himself in an even more self-conscious contemplative recollection."⁴⁰ A contemplative life was not a life focusing only on the interior. A life of interior cultivation, he said, was cut off from the mysterious but indispensable contact with Tao, the hidden Mother of all life and truth.⁴¹

Merton was also influenced by the Taoist concept of uselessness. He deliberately chose the passage "The Useless Tree" as the first story of *The Way of Chuang Tzu*. According to the standard editions of the *Chuang Tzu*, the passage "The Useless Tree" should come after the passage

³⁸ Ibid., 613.

³⁹ Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 615.

⁴⁰ Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, 26.

⁴¹ Ibid.

"A Hat Salesman and a Capable Ruler."⁴² While both passages referred to the idea of "uselessness," "The Useless Tree" was a dialogical and paradoxical story, and would be more impressive than the "Hat Salesman and a Capable Ruler." The reason Merton reversed the order and made "The Useless Tree" an opening story of his *The Way of Chuang Tzu* was clear. He wanted to highlight the idea of uselessness.

The story of "The Useless Tree" was to show that a useless object was in fact very useful.⁴³ It said that Master Hui cynically compared the teaching of Master Chuang to a "big and useless" tree. In reply, Master Chuang first alluded to the fact that the dexterity or "usefulness" of a wildcat could not save itself from being trapped. Then he pointed out the usefulness of a "useless tree." The so-called useless tree ultimately avoided the destiny of being cut down and its shadow could provide passengers with a comfortable resting place, whereas the "useful trees" were all being cut and "used" for pragmatic purposes. Merton was inspired by this paradoxical idea of uselessness and adopted it in his writings about monastic reform. For example, in describing the vocation of the monk, he said that the monk was "supposed to be 'useless.'"⁴⁴

While the Taoist ideas of "the man of Tao" and "uselessness" had explicitly influenced Merton's view of Christian contemplative life, other Taoist teachings also formed the backdrop of Merton's later writings on contemplation. We shall discuss in more detail the extent

⁴² See *Ibid.*, 35-37.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 35-36.

of Taoist influence on Merton's view of contemplation in subsequent chapters.

Conclusion

This chapter studies Merton's *The Way of Chuang Tzu*. After reviewing the process of the publication of the book and comparing it to the standard edition of the *Chuang Tzu*, it expounds the content of the book. The purpose is to identify the areas of Taoist teachings that Merton had appropriated.

The Way of Chuang Tzu contains 62 selected passages. They can be categorized into two related themes. These two related themes give a clearer perspective into the wide-ranging ideas of the chosen passages. The two themes are "The Man of Tao" and "The Way of Tao." The two themes are closely related in that "The Man of Tao" is a person who lives according to the "The Way of Tao." Under each theme, there are three sub-themes. "The Man of Tao" is seen in her/his simplicity, joy, and freedom. To be simple, joyful, and free, one has to follow the principle of "uselessness," "non-action," and "complementarity," which belongs to "The Way of Tao."

This chapter also highlights briefly the fact that the wisdom of Master Chuang had influenced Merton's view of contemplative life. In studying the *Chuang Tzu*, he contented that a true contemplative should be like "the man of Tao," living a life of simplicity, freedom, and

⁴⁴ Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 7.

obscurity. He also referred to the concept of "uselessness" in defining the vocation of a monk. In chapter seven of this thesis, we will further elaborate how Merton's view of contemplation or contemplative life was influenced by his assimilation of Taoist ideas.

CHAPTER THREE

MERTON'S UNDERSTANDING OF ZEN

Introduction

Zen is one of the forms of "Chinese Buddhism." Chinese Buddhism is Buddhism evolved from the interaction of the original Buddhist ideas and Chinese philosophical tradition.¹ "Buddhism in China," on the other hand, refers to the types of Buddhism which were introduced to China but remained unaffected by the indigenous Chinese philosophy.² Zen Buddhism, being a form of Chinese Buddhism, embraces both the fundamental teaching of the Buddha--that is, the Four Noble Truths--and the essence of Chinese philosophy, particularly Taoism. Among the varieties of the early Chinese Buddhism, Zen Buddhism has the greatest influence in China and Japan and the widest popularity in the West.

Originating in China as a branch of Chinese Buddhism, Zen later developed to be fairly pluralistic in both teaching and practice. Beginning in the ninth century, there was a clear distinction between the Southern and the Northern school of Zen in China. After the ninth century, Zen Buddhism spread to Japan and appeared as Rinzai and Soto schools. At the time when Merton came to know Zen, he was exposed to the two schools of Zen. But he favored Rinzai to Soto. The first section of this chapter is to identify the school of Zen that Merton

¹ "Chinese Buddhism" includes the Pure Land School, the Middle Path School, the Hua Yen School, and Zen.

² "Buddhism in China," such as the Wei-shi school (Mere Ideation), had a

appropriated. The second section will study his interpretation of that school of Zen. The third section will explore why for Merton Zen was more attractive than other religious thoughts.

The school of Zen that Merton Appropriated

Back in the late 1950s, Merton was one of the few contemplative monks who could so well understand and appreciate Zen. He did not learn and write about Zen, he made it his own.³ As Silvio Fittipaldi aptly puts, Merton was "a person who attempted to write what he lived and to live what he wrote."⁴

Merton had never been to Japan or China and never experienced Zen-life and Zen-discipline in a Zen monastery, even though he wished he could have. Nor had he learned under the authority of a Zen Master. He only briefly met Suzuki and Nhat Hanh a few years before he died. Most of his knowledge of Zen came from reading Zen literature. But with his gifted intuitiveness and penetrating understanding, he could pierce right into the heart of Zen. He articulated Zen so eloquently and enthusiastically that his many readers have not hesitated to affirm him as a real Zen monk.

Merton was interested in various aspects of Zen. He had written some delightful and penetrating essays on Buddhist monasticism, the art of tea, the enlightenment of the Buddha, and the comparisons

very small following and virtually died out in China.

³ Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1961), ix.

⁴ Silvio E. Fittipaldi, "Preying Birds: An Examination of Thomas Merton's Zen," *Horizons* 9 (1982); 38.

between Zen and Christianity. The main sources of his reference were the works of Suzuki. Merton admitted that he had read almost every piece of Suzuki's work on Zen. Although he did at times refer to other Zen writers such as Shin'ichi Hisamatsu, K. Nishitani, Nhat Hanh, and John Wu, he would always return to Suzuki. In fact, it was Suzuki who encouraged him to write and publish essays on Zen.⁵

Merton's early essays on Zen, published before 1961, were collected together with other essays on Christian mysticism in *Mystics and Zen Masters*. The total sixteen essays as a whole constituted an attempt at promoting a Western monastic examination of Eastern religious thought. Another book, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* was one of Merton's most significant works, and the last published before his death. It was Merton's further attempt to make Zen Buddhism understandable for Western Christian readers and to promote dialogue between the two religious traditions. The first part of *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, consisted primarily of essays published between 1964-1967. The second part of the book, "Dialogue on Wisdom in Emptiness," was co-written with Suzuki in 1959.

Merton took Suzuki, "the chief authority on Zen Buddhism," as his mentor.⁶ Indeed, he came to know Zen through Suzuki. As he told a group of contemplative sisters gathering at Gethsemani for a retreat in May 1968, "In a certain sense, he is my Zen master; he authenticated

⁵ Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, ix.

⁶ Ibid., 207.

my understanding of Zen so that I could speak about it with a certain confidence."⁷

Suzuki's father was a medical doctor who was a Confucian scholar and an adherent of Rinzai Zen, and his mother was a follower of a sectarian form of Shinshu (True Pure Land Buddhism, founded by Shinran [1173-1262]) called *hijihomon*.⁸ Partly influenced by the spirituality of his parents, Suzuki became a celebrated apologist for the Rinzai school of Zen. Merton, being a faithful reader of Suzuki, also appropriated the Rinzai school of Zen. Merton half-jokingly said to Suzuki, "I think the Rinzai school is probably more my line at the present stage, but I must say I don't like the looks of some of their masters and I would take good care to keep out of the way of their *hossu*."⁹

Rinzai Zen belonged to the Southern school of Zen in China. Rinzai was the Japanese name of the ninth-century Chinese Zen Master Lin-chi.¹⁰ Lin-chi embodied the Zen of Hui-neng, the sixth patriarch who was regarded as the founder of the Southern school of Zen. Rinzai Zen was characterized by its outrageous teaching methods and its

⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Gethsemani* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria, 1992), 140.

⁸ Roger Corless, "In Search of a Context for the Merton-Suzuki Dialogue," in *Merton Annual*, vol. 6., ed. George A. Kilcourse (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1993), 81.

⁹ Thomas Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience & Social Concerns*, sel. & ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985), 618.

¹⁰ To understand more about of the style of Lin-chi's Zen, see Burton Watson, trans. *The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-Chi: A Translation of the Lin-Chi Lu* (Boston, Shambhala: 1993).

emphasis on seeking "metaphysical intuition of being by non-seeing and emptiness, through struggle with the koan."¹¹

To dig deep into the roots of the Rinzai and the Southern school of Zen, Merton read Hui-neng's *Platform Sutra* and consulted Suzuki's commentary. In his essays Merton showed greater appreciation of the Zen of Hui-neng than all the others. For him, the Zen of Hui-neng was pure Zen. He regarded Hui-neng as one of "the purest and most original exemplars of the Zen spirit."¹² He was dissatisfied with Heinrich Dumoulin's interpretation of the Zen of Hui-neng in *A History of Zen Buddhism*. He commented that "the language in which Father Dumoulin describes the Zen of Hui-neng does not clearly distinguish it from the 'mirror wiping' of Shen-hsiu."¹³ The Zen of Shen-hsiu put emphasis on meditation, asceticism, and method.¹⁴ This emphasis was called Soto school of Zen in Japan.

The distinction between the Zen of Hui-neng and that of Shen-hsiu was seen in their poems composed to show their Zen insight before their Master Hung-jen. Shen-hsiu's poem went like this:

The body is the Bodhi-tree.
The Mind is like a clear mirror standing.
Take care to wipe it all the time,
Allow no grain of dust to cling to it.¹⁵

Hui-neng was said to be an illiterate oblate working in the kitchen of the monastery. He reacted against the inadequacy of the verse of Shen-hsiu, and posted another poem of his own.

¹¹ Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, 36.

¹² *Ibid.*, 38.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 33, 36.

The Bodhi is not like a tree,
 The clear mirror is nowhere standing.
 Fundamentally not one thing exists:
 Where then is a grain of dust to cling?¹⁶

Merton preferred the Zen of Hui-neng to that of Shen-hsiu. He rejected seeing Zen insight being "described as a subjective experience 'attainable' by some kind of process of mental purification."¹⁷ He argued that the mind was not like a mirror to be kept clean by ascetic discipline. Such a view was doomed to error and absurdity because Zen enlightenment was not the mechanical product of Zen meditation. For him, "Zen is NOT zazen."¹⁸

Merton's writings clearly demonstrated that he was deeply immersed in the Rinzai branch of the Southern school of Zen, which was founded by Hui-neng and was introduced to the West by Suzuki. In the following we shall study Merton's own writings on Zen and try to find out how he understood and expounded Zen in the light of the works of Suzuki and Hui-neng.

Zen as Expounded by Merton

Merton knew very well that to talk about Zen is like telling a joke. One does not want to "explain" a joke, but hopes that the listeners will get the point and laugh. Every student of Zen is expected to think things out for herself. Merton warned his readers that Zen could not be defined. He said, "The real way to study Zen

¹⁵ Ibid., 19.

¹⁶ Ibid., 19.

¹⁷ Ibid., 20.

¹⁸ Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 624.

is to penetrate the outer shell and taste the inner kernel which cannot be defined. Then one realizes in oneself the reality which is being talked about."¹⁹ But on the other hand, Merton, with great enthusiasm for assisting Western readers to grasp Zen, repeatedly explained or illustrated what Zen was all about. The Zen he attempted to present was that of the Southern school represented by Hui-neng and the Rinzai school presented by Suzuki.

Zen is not Religion

Merton noted that the word "Zen" is the Japanese counterpart of the Chinese word "Ch'an," which came from the Sanskrit *dhyana*, meaning meditation that led to enlightenment. From a historical point of view, he said, Zen was an outgrowth of the encounter of "speculative Indian Buddhism with practical Chinese Taoism and even Confucianism."²⁰ Merton was also aware of the fact that Zen was culturally and historically a sect or school of Buddhism. But he preferred not to see Zen as "having a special kind of structure with basic demands that are structural demands and therefore open to scientific investigation."²¹ He repeatedly stated that Zen in essence was separable from any particular structure, system, or religious tradition, including Buddhism, and that it would be a grave

¹⁹ Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (Boston, Mass.:Shambhala Publications, 1993), 13.

²⁰ Ibid., 2.

²¹ Ibid., 1.

misunderstanding to define Zen merely and exclusively in terms of a religious system or structure.²² He wrote,

Zen is not something which is grasped by being set within distinct limits or given a characteristic outline or easily recognizable features so that, when we see these distinct and particular forms, we say: "There it is!"²³

Together with Suzuki, Merton asserted that Zen was not easily categorized as "religion," nor as a theology, for it made no claim to deal with theological truth in any form whatever.²⁴ Zen even sounded outrageously irreligious. Unlike any religious system, Merton said, "Zen is not a systematic explanation of life, not an ideology, not a world view, not a theology of revelation and salvation, not a mystique, not a way of ascetic perfection."²⁵ Since Zen fit no convenient category, labels usually given to Zen, such as "pantheism," "quietism," "illuminism," or "Pelagianism," were completely incongruous.²⁶ These attempts to tag Zen, Merton said, proceeded from a wrong assumption that Zen had a concern with God in the way Christianity did. The irreligious aspect of Zen, however, should by no means be undervalued, for it made a direct attack on religious formalism and warned that conventional religious practice could be a hindrance to mature spiritual development.²⁷

To sum up, Merton regarded Zen outside and separable from any religious or cultural system or structure. Zen did not oppose or deny,

²² Ibid., 2.

²³ Ibid., 3.

²⁴ Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, ix.

²⁵ Ibid., 35.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 34.

nor support or affirm any particular structure and form. By virtue of its irreligious nature, it flourished easily in the soil either of non-Buddhist religions or no religion at all.²⁸ "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," Merton wrote.²⁹

Zen is Awakening

If Zen does not belong to any religious structure and form, and is thereby almost unidentifiable, what can still be said about Zen then? To answer this question, Merton referred to the Zen of Hui-neng and said that Zen was a "trans-cultural, trans-religious, transformed consciousness."³⁰ This "consciousness" was beyond formulations and systems, as well as verbal formulas and linguistic preconceptions.³¹ Zen was a "metaphysical intuition," or in other words, "pure awareness." It was "to just see, to wake up, to become aware. . . . in the simplest and purest way possible," as the Buddha had successfully done.³²

While Zen consciousness was not constrained by verbal formulas and linguistic preconceptions, Merton said, it was, however, found in the very midst of concepts.³³ This implied that Zen affirmed and yet transcended concepts. Zen was "a concrete and lived ontology

²⁸ Ibid., 45.

²⁹ Ibid., 4.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 44.

³² Ibid., 43.

which explains itself not in theoretical propositions but in acts emerging out of a certain quality of consciousness and of awareness."³⁴

Merton further underlined that the concrete and lived ontology expressed in acts of awareness was "direct awareness."³⁵ It was "pure unarticulated and unexplained ground of experience."³⁶ Such a view of Zen was a reflection of one of the famous statements of Bodhidharma, the first patriarch of Zen Buddhism:

A special transmission outside the scriptures;
No dependence upon words and letters;
Pointing directly pointing to the human Mind.
Seeing into one's nature and attaining Buddhahood.³⁷

The statements of Bodhidharma constituted the basic belief of Zen Buddhism, which Hui-neng later embraced and developed. Suzuki advocated the belief of a direct realization of one's nature in modern terms. Suzuki wrote, "Zen is taught to be something in direct contact with our daily life."³⁸ Merton's other good friend John Wu once tried to elaborate what direct experience of Zen awakening was all about. Wu wrote,

(Buddhism) has taught me the importance of direct personal experience in the matter of spiritual life. As Frank Sheed puts it, 'If you want to know how wet the rain is, do not judge by someone who went out into it with an umbrella.' He

³³ Ibid., 33.

³⁴ Ibid., ix.

³⁵ Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 625.

³⁶ Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, 36.

³⁷ Bodhidharma was the 28th patriarch of a Buddhist sect in India which stressed that nirvana is within reach of everyone and that everyone must find it for oneself. He came to Canton, China in 475 C.E. and became the first patriarch of Zen in China. The essence of his teachings are said to be contained in the four precepts. See *ibid.*, 15.

³⁸ D. T. Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D. T. Suzuki*, ed. W. Barrett (NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1956), 219.

advises us to go stripped into the shower of truth and life. The spirit of Zen is nothing else but this.³⁹

Likewise, Merton understood Zen awakening as a direct encounter with life "without gloves" or "without filter." In his own words, "Zen was just a way of life, a way of confronting life without putting veils between ourselves and life itself."⁴⁰ As direct realization, Zen awakening was an experience not being filtered or softened by some concepts or reasoning that somehow took the bite or sting out of what actually was. For Merton, Zen awakening was directly seeing to the heart of things.

If Zen awakening or enlightenment is a direct experience of awareness, what is the awareness that Merton and Hui-neng spoke of? In the *Platform Sutra*, Hui-neng stated that Zen enlightenment is *Chen-hsing*, meaning "seeing the heart."⁴¹ Following this insight of Hui-neng, Merton said that Zen enlightenment was an "awareness of the ontological ground of our own being here and now, right in the midst of the world."⁴² His interpretation resembled what Suzuki had once written: "Zen in its essence is the art of seeing into one's nature of one's own being."⁴³

The statements of Hui-neng, Suzuki, and Merton on the essence of Zen are too brief for students of Zen. Their brief explanations arouse more questions than answers. For example, how can one attain

³⁹ John C. H. Wu, *Beyond East and West* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1952), 185.

⁴⁰ Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation*, 140.

⁴¹ Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, 36.

⁴² Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, 47.

⁴³ Daisetz T. Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D. T. Suzuki*, ed. W. Barrett (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1956), 3.

the awareness of one's ground of being? Is the attainment of the awareness of or the seeing into one's ground of being the goal of Zen discipline? Is one's ground of being the object of one's awareness? Again, by referring to the teaching of Hui-neng and Suzuki, Merton went on to unpack the deeper meaning of his brief statement: Zen enlightenment was the awareness of the ontological ground of one's being here and now, in the context of daily life. From that statement he expounded ideas concerning the ground of being as void, meditation as a way to enlightenment, and ordinariness as the context for enlightenment.

Zen and Emptiness

As mentioned above, Merton followed the insight of the Southern and Rinzai schools in his presentation of Zen. He interpreted *Chen-h'sin* (seeing the heart), the Chinese word for enlightenment as the "awareness of the ontological ground of one's being." The awareness of which Merton spoke was "not reflexive, not self-conscious." Zen consciousness, he said, was pure consciousness, not "consciousness of."⁴⁴ Zen consciousness, then, was not centered on the thinking and self-aware ego; it was not the awareness of an object by a subject. Merton explained that it was "an ontological awareness of pure being beyond subject and object, an immediate grasp of being in its 'suchness' and 'thusness.'"⁴⁵ In other words, the enlightened person was not aware of himself, in a self-conscious manner, as the

⁴⁴ Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, 252.

one who was enlightened. There was no separation between the subject who was aware and the object of the awareness in Zen enlightenment. The enlightened Zen master did not return to himself, for he had never gone out of himself.

Merton emphasized that Zen awareness was direct and immediate and therefore in contrast with the idea of Descartes. Descartes was wrong, he said, for he had introduced the dualistic split of the subject from the object, and had overly encouraged self-consciousness of the objective world. Such a practice denied the reality of Pure Consciousness. He sharply criticized the fact that Descartes had made a fetish out of the mirror, while Zen shattered it. Zen awareness was not "awareness of" an object, he said, it is "Being's awareness of itself 'in us' or, better we are 'in it.'"

In speaking of enlightenment as "Being's awareness of itself in us," Merton seemed to see that "the ground of being" was as much the 'ultimate' to the Zen Buddhist as God to the Christian. Indeed at some point he understood the ground of one's "being" as the capital Being in Christian philosophy. But at the same time he spoke of the Being as Void, the total emptiness or nothingness.⁴⁵

On the one hand, Merton did speak of being as the ultimate reality in Christian terms. For example, in *Mystics and Zen Masters* he wrote that at the core of meditation was the ultimate reality, the pure

⁴⁵ Ibid., 14.

⁴⁶ Fittipaldi, "Preying Birds," 46. I am thankful for Fittipaldi's helpful observation.

being and pure awareness referred to *h'sin* (the heart).⁴⁷ However at the end of the same essay Merton began to speak of the Void of Being. "The ground of all Being is Void," he wrote.⁴⁸ Merton was careful not to impose Christian ideas on the language of Zen and therefore tried to understand Zen in its own terms. He admitted that Zen was *sunyata*, Void or emptiness, and enlightenment was "an intuition of the metaphysical ground of all being and knowledge as void."⁴⁹

In speaking of Zen as emptiness or Void, Merton did not mean it negatively. He said that emptiness or Void was not a mere negation of a particular being, nor was it the negation of the whole being. Emptiness in the language of Zen was not the "conjectural nothingness," as in a person's imagination that a friend who is present is really absent.⁵⁰ Merton presented the emptiness of Zen in positive terms. He wrote that emptiness was "a pure affirmation of the fullness of positive being."⁵¹ Paradoxically, emptiness was non-being as well as fullness of being.

Toward the end of his life, Merton penetrated into the depth of the paradoxical wisdom of Zen. The essays that were published in *Zen and the Birds of Appetites* in 1968 recorded his last published word on Zen. In the book he described Zen as total nothingness which appeared only in the eyes of the enlightened:

⁴⁷ Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, 24.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 40.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 39.

⁵⁰ Silvio E. Fittipaldi, "Preying Birds: An Examination of Thomas Merton's Zen," *Horizons* 9 (1982): 44.

Zen enriches no one. There is no body to be found. The birds come and circle for a while 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.⁵²

At this point in time, Merton developed a strong sensibility in Zen. The fact that he could employ the imagery of the birds looking for prey to describe Zen indicated that he was mature in his learning in Zen. The imagery was indeed very rich. It suggested that on the one hand, Zen was seeing into one's ground of being or one's original face before one was born, and on the other hand, the seeing was seeing into nothingness, or better, seeing that there was no seeing. In the same book, Merton put in different and yet similarly profound wordings about the paradox of Zen. He pointed out that Zen enlightenment was all about the realization of one's Buddha nature, but the realization was, at the end, realization of the Buddha who was Void.

And in Zen enlightenment, the discovery of the "original face before you were born" is the discovery not that one sees Buddha but that one is Buddha and that Buddha is not what the images in the temple had led one to expect: for there is no longer any image, and consequently nothing to see, no one to see it, and a Void in which no image is even conceivable. "The true seeing," said Shen-hui, "is when there is no seeing."⁵³

Zen and Meditation

In addressing the common question concerning the way toward Zen enlightenment, Merton drew on the teaching of Hui-neng as usual. He

⁵¹ Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, 27.

⁵² "The Author's note" prefacing *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* is assumed to be his last published word on Zen. p. ix.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 5.

said that Hui-neng revolutionized Buddhist spirituality by integrating the practice of meditation and the attainment of enlightenment. Following Hui-neng's instruction, Merton resisted the misconception that Zen enlightenment involved spiritual states, which one should strive to reach by meditation. One should liberate one's mind from servitude to imagine spiritual states as "objects." He warned that the objective spiritual state could easily become "hypostatized" and turned into idols that obsessed and deluded the seeker.⁵⁴ Anyone who aimed at the attainment of the imagined spiritual states by engaging in prolonged meditation and ascetic discipline lived in illusion, an illusion of being supremely spiritual. But the Zen of Hui-neng, Merton added, was "a deadly weapon against pious illusion."⁵⁵

Merton cautioned that the role of Zen meditation or *Zazen* could be easily mistaken. Instead of integrating it into one's way of life, Merton said, one might narrow Zen meditation down into progressive steps leading ultimately to enlightenment. To hold such a view was to take meditation and its corresponding ecstatic experience as proofs of one's spiritual maturity. Merton strongly rejected the rationale of evaluating the depth of spirituality by the depth of meditation. Zen enlightenment, he repeated, was not a "definite objective, a specific state of mind" to be attained by withdrawing oneself from the ordinary life and engaging in serious meditative discipline.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Ibid., 33-34.

⁵⁵ Thomas Merton, "Zen: Sense and Sensibility," *America* 108 (May 1963): 753.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 31.

Merton saw that meditation served another kind of purpose, which was well illustrated in the following dialogue between the Zen master and his disciple.

"Is there anything I can do to make myself Enlightened?"
 "As little as you can do to make the sun rise in the morning."
 "Then of what use are the spiritual exercises you prescribe?"
 "To make sure you are not asleep when the sun begins to rise."⁵⁷

Merton would fully agree with the Zen master that the practice of Zen meditation simply kept one awake so that one could see the reality as it is. He expressed the true purpose of Zen meditation in similar terms. He wrote,

Buddhist meditation, but above all that of Zen, seeks not to explain but to pay attention, to become aware, to be mindful, in other words to develop a certain kind of consciousness that is above and beyond deception by verbal formulas--or by emotional excitement.⁵⁸

In Merton's view, Zen meditation was not spiritual achievement. Nor was it a "method" to reach enlightenment. Zen meditation was analogous to "the finger pointing to the moon." Meditation only served to show the direction toward enlightenment. It was the means but not the end. To focus on the finger--that is, meditation itself--was to lose sight of the moon. And to cling to meditation was to commit a big error. Merton asserted that Zen meditation itself was an obstacle to insensible students, as a well-known Zen story indicated.

A Master saw a disciple who was very zealous in meditation. The Master said: "Virtuous one, what is your aim in practicing Zazen (meditation)?"

⁵⁷ Anthony de Mello, *One Minute Wisdom* (New York: Doubleday Image, 1988), 11.

⁵⁸ Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, 38.

The disciple said: "My aim is to become a Buddha."
 Then the Master picked up a tile and began to polish it on a stone in front of the hermitage.
 The disciple said: "What is the Master doing?"
 The Master said: "I am polishing this tile to make it a mirror."
 The disciple said: "How can you make a mirror by polishing a tile?"
 The Master replied: "How can you make a Buddha by practicing Zazen?"⁵⁹

Merton would not deny the fact that meditation was a fundamental discipline for the Zen student and that the Zen student should be desirous and even "ambitious" for enlightenment. But he would be quick to add that "the highest ambition lies beyond ambition, in the renunciation of that 'self' which seeks its own aggrandizement in one way or another."⁶⁰ Merton's attitude toward Zen meditation could be summarized in the following statement: "Zen is not 'attained' by mirror-wiping meditation, but by self-forgetfulness in the existential present of life here and now."⁶¹

Zen and Ordinarity

In clarifying the role of meditation in Zen religiosity, Merton also stressed that enlightenment was neither something spiritual in the sense of non-physical or extraordinary nor an ecstatic state. Enlightenment was to happen in the context of ordinary life. He was delighted to quote that Hui-neng refused to separate meditation as a means (*dhyana*) from enlightenment as an end (*prajna*).⁶² He

⁵⁹ Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, 20.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, ix.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁶² Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, 21.

appreciated the fact that Hui-neng taught his students "to realize the wholeness and unity of meditation and enlightenment in all one's acts, however external, however commonplace, however trivial."⁶³ In Merton's own words, "all life was Zen."⁶⁴ Zen could not be found merely by turning away from the ordinary life to doing meditation in solitude. "Zen is the very awareness of the dynamism of life living itself in us--and aware of itself, in us, as being the one life that lives in all," he wrote.⁶⁵ In his view, ordinariness is the context for Zen enlightenment.

Merton reminded Western readers that Zen should by no means be seen as a kind of world-denying introversion. He stressed that Zen did not contradict everyday activities. In fact, Zen enlightenment, or *Nirvana*, he said, "is found in the midst of the world around us, the truth is not *somewhere else*."⁶⁶ Zen was found in action, though not necessarily in activity, still less in activism.⁶⁷ The true enlightenment was a state of mind, which was a "purity" underlying one's ordinary thought or a primal consciousness awakened through emptying the mind of concepts. Merton argued that "the Western stereotype of Buddhism" as "the world-denying religion par excellence" was a serious distortion.⁶⁸

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 22.

⁶⁶ Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, 87.

⁶⁷ Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, 222.

⁶⁸ Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, 81. Merton regarded Nhat Hanh's work for peace as a manifestation of the world-affirming spirit of Zen. He wrote, "He (Nhat Hanh) has come among us as many others have, from time to time, bearing witness to the spirit of Zen. More than any other he has shown

Merton particularly liked the way Hui-neng reminded his disciples of the importance of pursuing enlightenment in the ordinary conduct of everyday life. He was delighted with the idea that "one's ordinary mind is the Tao."⁶⁹ Works and external concern should in no way be regarded as obstacles to Zen. To quote an old Chinese monk, he said that Zen was the "everyday mind," and that Zen could be manifested anywhere, including eating and sleeping.⁷⁰ Merton stood at the side of the Zen masters and pointed out sharply that that if one could not reach enlightenment in everyday activities, it was a waste of time to look any further.

Why Zen Appealed to Merton

The reasons for Merton's commitment in learning Zen are discussed in the first chapter of this thesis. The chapter also points out the evidence that Merton's mind was in some ways enlightened during the dark period of his vocational crisis. But the motivations for his interest in Zen are more profound than that. His motivations are mixed. They are related to his disgust with technological and materialistic America. They have to do with his belief that Westerners had lost "interiority" in their religious lives, and that Zen provided insight to the revitalization of Christian monastic life.

us that Zen is not an esoteric and world-denying cult of inner illumination, but that it has its rare and unique sense of responsibility in the modern world." Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 107-108.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 33, 42.

We attempt to address these mixed motivations in this section.

First of all, from the way Merton presented Zen in his writings, we observe that he was attracted to some particular aspects of Zen. The primary aspects of Zen which appealed to Merton were its experiential and generally irreverent nature, its emphasis on interiority as well as on the concrete and tangible, and its realization in the ordinary life and activities. Merton found these aspects of Zen helpful to Christians in West in their search for a viable Christian spirituality. His interest in Zen was therefore personal and religious. He was not satisfied just to do academic research on Zen Buddhism. He was looking for spiritual nourishment from Zen, not only for his own spiritual journey, but also for Christians in the West.

Merton contended that Christians could find in Zen Buddhism what was lost in Western religious traditions. Western religious traditions, he said, had lost the belief that spiritual maturity and not "acquisition" should be the goal of human life. In 1968 he wrote in a circular letter to friends, "Our real journey in life is interior: it is a matter of growth, deepening, and of an ever greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts."⁷¹ Western society was for him too materialistic and was badly in need of recovering the loss of interiority. He believed that Zen could offer some help in that. Merton's attraction to Zen was an extension of his repulsion to materialistic and machine-dominated life.

⁷¹ Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journals of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions,

Merton saw in Zen the antithesis of the Western technology and materialism he so distrusted. He was unhappy with the turn his own monastery took in its cottage industries. He complained that the monastery had given up its contemplative spirit. In his satirical poetry he expressed his reaction to the growth of technology and materialism. He wrote that the West had lost its cultural and contemplative roots and had become an empty shell of technology, scientific vanities, and urban compositions of impersonal persons. In "Cables to the Ace," for example, he depicted modern business as a "drag race through darkest Esquire" and was run by "ambitious men who have captured sheer fascination."⁷² He also warned that religion in modern society was badly misused, that God had become a computer hero, and that services in the Church were no more than programmed visits to the idol.⁷³ In a techno-commercial society, "monks are often considered useless," he said.⁷⁴

On the other hand, Merton appreciated the religious traditions of the East. He believed that Zen, with its focus on interiority provided an alternative to the technological, commercial West, and could stimulate the revitalization of the monastic tradition in the West. By reaching out to Zen Buddhism, he said, Christians in the West could learn more about the potentiality of their own traditions.⁷⁵ He urged that if Christian monasticism was to continue to play a

1973), 296.

⁷² Thomas Merton, *Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1977), 406.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 400, 422.

⁷⁴ Merton, *Asian Journal*, 66.

⁷⁵ Merton, *Asian Journal*, 343.

significant role in the modern society, it must present itself as a "cultural alternative."

Zen provided Merton with a new way to approach that goal and with a new language to express it. He was certain that meditation, solitude, simplicity, and discipline were the ancient and yet fundamental elements of monastic life. In the last ten years of his life, he persistently advocated what he himself had been trying to put in practice. The Dalai Lama rightly observed that Merton "was a Christian monk who practiced and adopted Buddhist technique into Christian practice."⁷⁶ By learning and practicing Zen, Merton was able to recover the ancient traditions of interiority in Christianity. Zen appealed to Merton in a very special way, for it gave him insight into his own interior growth as well as the growth of monasticism in the West.

Conclusion

Merton followed Hui-neng and Suzuki in their understanding and articulation of Zen. In his essays he often referred to the works of Hui-neng, Suzuki, and other Chinese Zen masters of the Southern school. Merton could rightly be called the disciple of Hui-neng, Rinzai, and Suzuki.

Zen for Merton was, above all, a way of being in the world. In his writings he highlighted that characteristic of Zen over and over

⁷⁶ Paul Wilkes, ed., *Merton by Those Who Knew Him Best* (San Francisco: Harper

again with different nuances. First, he stressed that Zen had a unique non-doctrinal nature. Second, Zen, he said, was awareness of pure being beyond subject and object. Third, by Zen, he meant the quest for direct and pure experience on a metaphysical level. Fourth, he stressed that Zen enlightenment was realized in the very context of everyday life.

Having studied Zen in great depth, Merton wrote eloquently on it. His interest in Zen, together with classical Taoism, persisted until the very end of his life. For multiple reasons Merton dedicated more time and energy to learning Zen-Taoism than other religious traditions. His persistent interest in Zen had to do with his concern for the technological and materialistic trend of the Western society, the lack of interiority in Western religious traditions, and the need for monastic revival. From Zen he absorbed new ways toward spiritual growth on both a personal and a community level.

This chapter and chapter two together have shown how well Merton had digested Zen-Taoism and presented it as if it was his own. The two chapters also point out that Zen-Taoism had some important influences on Merton's life and thinking. But they do not yet allow us to address adequately the question of Zen-Taoist influence on Merton's view of contemplation. To answer the question, we must compare Merton's early and later writings on contemplation so as to see if new elements in later writings are related to Zen-Taoism.

Before we proceed with the comparison, it is necessary to trace the foundation of Merton's contemplative ideas.

CHAPTER FOUR

FOUNDATION OF MERTON'S VIEW OF CONTEMPLATION

Introduction

Merton read much. He read widely and retained much of what he had read. With his unfailing interest in books and his talent for mastering language, Merton assiduously explored unfamiliar areas of thought. Books were of incomparable value in his life. Books that he read had influenced his conversion to Catholicism. The number of books mentioned in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, the biography of his pre-conversion life, was copious.

It is difficult to list the names of all the books that Merton had read in his lifetime, let alone to detect the impact of each book on his thought. This chapter focuses only on those authors who were relatively more explicit in shaping Merton's understanding and practice of contemplation. Etienne Gilson, Jacques Maritain, Thomas Aquinas, Augustine of Hippo, John of the Cross, and Gregory of Nyssa were believed to be some of the most significant influences regarding Merton's contemplative life. Merton had incorporated their ideas and insights into his writings on contemplation. The influence of these ancient and modern writers appears particularly in his early writings.

We hope that by being aware of the implicit factors operative in the development of Merton's contemplative ideas we can better grasp the full meaning of what he wrote. This chapter is divided into four sections. Each section addresses the influence of the author or authors on Merton. The first section concerns Gilson and Maritain.

The second focuses on Aquinas. The third centers on Augustine. The last section discusses John of the Cross and the apophatic tradition.

Gilson and Maritain

To trace the roots of Merton's devotion to contemplative life, we must begin with the modern scholastics. Only after Merton read the works of the modern scholastics during the years at Columbia University did he begin to perceive the reality of God and discover himself being drawn to contemplative life.

It was Mark Van Doren, a professor at Columbia University, who introduced Merton to the world of scholastic philosophy. Van Doren "was remotely preparing my mind to receive the good seed of scholastic philosophy," Merton said.¹ Van Doren's "sober and sincere intellect," plus his manner of treating his teaching subject with "perfect honesty and objectivity" deeply impressed Merton.² Merton was delighted to share Van Doren's interest in the writings of the modern scholastic thinkers. He read with particular interest the works of Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain.

Seeking the truth at the time, Merton found the scholastic approach to the reality of things helpful in enabling him to perceive the existence of God. The scholastics, he wrote, "looked directly for the quiddities of things, and sought being and substance under the covering of accidents and appearance."³ This insight of

¹ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1948), 140.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

separating the essence from the appearance changed his preconceived notion of God. For many years Merton had been identifying God with religious institutions. The inevitable result of that was that Merton came to espouse a total rejection of God, as he learned, by himself or through others, that religious institutions were in many ways disappointing. He admitted that he grew up with very negative sentiments toward various denominations:

My grandparents gave money to the Episcopal Church, but never attended it. My father was a just, devout and prayerful man, but he did not like the Protestant cenacles in France... The school I went to in England was Anglican, but I protested against the liberal teaching in religion we received there... I proudly assumed that this was the case with all religions, and obstinately set my face against all churches. Thus from the time of my leaving Okham School until 1938, I gradually passed from being anti-clerical and became a complete unbeliever.⁴

With the aid of the scholastic philosophy, however, Merton began to see that the reality of God transcends human conception and institutional religion. He found much about the unique characteristic of God in reading Gilson's *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*. He was particularly touched by the concept of *aseitas*. After knowing the concept of *aseitas*, he said, "His whole life was revolutionized"⁵:

Aseitas - the English equivalent is a transliteration: *aseity* - simply means the power of a being to exist absolutely in virtue of itself, not as caused by itself, but as requiring no cause, no other justification for its existence except that its very nature is to exist. There can be only one such Being: that is God. And to say that God exists *a se*, of and by reason of Himself, it is merely

⁴ Thomas Merton, *School of Charity: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Spiritual Direction & Renewal*, sel. & ed. Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990), 5.

⁵ Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 172.

to say that God is Being Itself. *Ego sum qui sum*. And this means that God must enjoy "complete independence not only as regards everything outside but also as regards everything within Himself."⁶

Obviously, Merton gained a new perception of God in reading Gilson's book. He began to perceive God as One who is self-sufficient and completely independent. Gilson's book was significant to Merton, because, as Merton himself wrote, from it he "learned a healthy respect for Catholicism."⁷

If Gilson led Merton to respect Catholicism, Maritain, another modern Thomist, motivated Merton to open himself totally to God. Merton said, "As a result of studies and reading which familiarized me with the works of Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain...I began going to Mass at Corpus Christi Church...and was happily baptized on November 16, 1938."⁸ Merton read Maritain's works while he was working on his master's thesis, *Nature and Art in William Blake: An Essay in Interpretation*.⁹ In March, 1939, through Daniel Walsh,

⁶ Ibid., 172-173.

⁷ Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation, The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 1, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 455.

⁸ Merton, *The School of Charity*, 6. About two years after his entrance to Gethsemani, Merton wrote to Gilson, expressing his gratitude for the insights Gilson and Maritain had given him during the period of searching for truth. He wrote: "I want to do what I should have done long ago--write you a line to assure you of my recognition of a spiritual debt to you... To you and to Jacques Maritain, among others, I owe the Catholic faith. That is to say I owe my life. This is no small debt." Ibid., 30-31.

⁹ There are some interesting studies on the connection between Merton and William Blake. Michael Higgins, for example, studies Blake's influence on Merton. He attempts "to establish Blake as the formative influence on Merton's poetic vision." Michael Higgins, "A Study of the Influence of William Blake on Thomas Merton," *American Benedictine Review* XXV (1974): 378. He also uses Blake's poetic imaginative concept of the world (the Four Zoas: Urizen, Urthona, Luvah, and Tharmas) as the framework for studying the life and poetry of Merton. Michael Higgins, *Heretic Blood: The Spiritual Geography of Thomas Merton* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1998).

Merton met Maritain; and the long friendship between the two began.¹⁰

Merton regarded Maritain as one of the most important contemporary interpreters of the thought of Thomas Aquinas and made extensive use of Maritain's *Art and Scholasticism* in the second part of his thesis.¹¹

What struck Merton was Maritain's definition of 'virtues' as "the powers by which one can come to acquire happiness."¹² According to Maritain, virtues constitute everlasting peace in those who pursue them, for virtues were the fruits of "the unity of our nature with itself and with God."¹³ Merton was at the time looking for this virtuous life. He said, "I began to desire it...I began to do so efficaciously: I began to want to take the necessary means to achieve this union, this peace."¹⁴ Merton seemed to have developed a yearning for a peaceful union with God even before he received baptism.

Merton was also touched by Maritain's view of art. For Maritain, art was the action of humans' highest faculties, which found its ultimate purpose and fulfillment in God. Maritain's view confirmed what Merton's father taught him about the spiritual value of art. His father told him that "it was almost blasphemy to regard the function of art as to reproduce some kind of sensible pleasure or,

¹⁰ Merton corresponded with Jacques Maritain regularly. They shared lecture notes and ideas of books. In October 6, 1966 Jacques Maritain paid a visit to Merton's hermitage. This turned out to be the final meeting of the two old friends. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 148.

¹¹ See Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart (New York: A New Directions, 1981), 387-453. The thesis was an attempt to understand Blake through the categories of Thomistic aesthetics as they were interpreted by Jacques Maritain.

¹² Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 204.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

at least, to stir up the emotions to a transitory thrill."¹⁵ Later in his biography Merton noted that artistic experience does not belong to the natural order but is "actually a natural analogue of mystical experience."¹⁶ In studying Maritain's thought, Merton seemed to be able to trust that his wounded past would soon be healed and a hopeful future was to unfold. He wrote:

I, who had always been anti-naturalistic in art, had been a pure naturalist in the moral order. No wonder my soul was sick and torn apart: but now the bleeding wound was drawn together by the notion of Christian virtue, ordered to the union of the soul with God.¹⁷

In September 1938, when Merton began the actual writing of his thesis, "the groundwork of [his] conversion was more or less complete." At this point in time, he considered union with God as the goal or direction of the rest of his life.¹⁸ He was thinking of dedicating his life to God and "was already dreaming of mystical union."¹⁹ Perhaps the idea was somewhat immature, as he himself admitted; but he "was convinced of the reality of the goal, and confident that it could be achieved."²⁰ He was ready to do whatever God wanted him to do to bring him closer to God. Three years later, in 1941, Merton acted according to his desire; he entered Gethsemani and pursued his contemplative ideal.²¹

¹⁵ Ibid., 202.

¹⁶ Ibid., 202.

¹⁷ Ibid., 203.

¹⁸ Ibid., 204.

¹⁹ Ibid., 204.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ In fact, a few months after his Baptism at Corpus Christi Church on May 25, 1939, Merton told Dan Walsh, his professor at Columbia, that he wanted to be a priest. He was accepted into the Franciscan novitiate and would enter in August 1940. But in the summer of 1940, he began to question whether his past, especially the event of fathering a child while studying at Cambridge University, would make him ineligible for the priesthood. In an

Scholastic philosophy was certainly an important influence on Merton from the days he was writing his master's thesis to his early years at the monastery. As seen in his early writings, he tended to articulate contemplation in terms of the speculative premises of scholastic theology. For example, in *The Ascent to Truth* Merton acknowledged the fact that the second part of *The Degrees of Knowledge*, along with *Prayer and Intelligence* by Maritain and his wife Raissa, form the "necessary groundwork" of his own book.²²

The influence of Jacques and Raissa Maritain on Merton's thought is noteworthy. First, regarding Jacques Maritain's influence on Merton, Anne E. Carr suggests that Merton had adapted Maritain's clear metaphysical contrast of the individual and the person into his discussions of the false and true selves in the *Seeds of Contemplation*. She also believes that Merton used this aspect of Maritain's thought as his philosophical basis to reflect on educational, social, and political issues of the 1960s, such as violence, racism, technology, consumerism, and peace.²³

agony of doubt he went to see Father Edmund and told him everything he did in the past, including his sexual relationships with women. Father Edmund then suggested that he should not enter the Franciscan novitiate at the present time. Feeling totally crushed, Merton went to a nearby Church and wept. It was not until November 1941 that Merton regained confidence in embracing the vocation and wrote to the monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani. Upon receiving a letter of welcome from Gethsemani, he destroyed or gave to friends most of his writings and sent other belongings to Friendship House. He brought only one suitcase of his possessions and entered Gethsemani on December 10, 1941. See Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain*, 40, 58, 101, 455; and Shannon, *Silent Lamp*, 99, 102.

²² Thomas Merton, *The Ascent to Truth* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1951), x.

²³ See Anne E. Carr, *A Search for Wisdom and Spirit: Thomas Merton's Theology of the Self* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Ave Maria Press, 1988), especially pp. 27-33.

Second, it is more difficult to evaluate the exact influence of Maritain's wife, Raissa on Merton. Raissa Maritain was a poet. She died on November 4, 1960. It is very well possible that Merton had read most of Raissa's poetry and journals. He once said that he was "deeply touched by Raissa Maritain's poetry."²⁴

Thomas Aquinas

Twentieth century Thomism and scholasticism successfully appealed to Merton, because for the first time in his life he was exposed to what he saw to be clear thinking, the ideas not only logical and well thought out but totally oriented toward God. Being attracted to modern Thomism, Merton naturally wanted to penetrate into the thought of Thomas Aquinas. Consequently, the way Merton described contemplation in his early writings was influenced significantly by the thought of Aquinas.

Merton came to appreciate the thought of Thomas Aquinas through Daniel Walsh, a professor from the faculty of the Sacred Heart College at Manhattanville, who came to Columbia University twice a week to lecture on Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus.²⁵ Merton attended Walsh's class and found himself captured by "the solid and powerful mind of St. Thomas."²⁶ During the period of 1939-1941, Merton read and meditated upon the *Summa Theologica*, one of the major works of Thomas

²⁴ Thomas Merton, *Turning toward the World: The Pivotal Years* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco: 1996), 287.

²⁵ Walsh and Merton became close friend, a friendship that continued throughout their lives. Walsh was the first person to mention the monastery of Gethsemani to Merton. Years later, upon his retirement, Walsh followed Merton to Gethsemani, and lived in the Guest House.

Aquinas.²⁷ He could spend the whole morning enjoying the reading of the *Summa Theologica*, very likely the Latin text, "and here and there making notes on the goodness, the all-presence, the wisdom, the power, the love of God."²⁸ Because he was at the time seeking confirmation for his religious vocation, he said *Concede mihi*, the prayer of Aquinas, as a way to express his willingness to serve God wholeheartedly.

Grant me, O merciful God, to desire eagerly, to investigate prudently, to acknowledge sincerely, and to fulfill perfectly those things that are pleasing to You, to the praise and glory of Your holy Name.²⁹

Merton was impressed by Aquinas' ability to systematically present the Christian truth with apparent facility. He considered Aquinas a theologian as well as a mystic, saying, "Saint Thomas...as well as the great Fathers of the Church...were also mystics and even 'mystical theologians.'"³⁰ Aquinas's mysticism, he added, was "not merely centered in the question of the *Summa* devoted to the contemplative life but in all his discussions of the relations of men with their God."³¹ He even believed that Aquinas's mystical theology had the shade of apophatism.

The power of Saint Thomas's speculative thought should not make us forget that he was also a mystic. His mystical theology fits into the apophatic tradition (for Saint Thomas commented on the works of Pseudo-Dionysius) but is not confined to it. Nor is his mystical doctrine formally separated from his dogma and moral theology.³²

²⁶ Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 219.

²⁷ See Merton, *Run to the mountain*, 59-60, 83-86, 212-122, 268-269, 328-329.

²⁸ Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 290.

²⁹ Merton, *Run to the Mountain*, 59.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 323.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Merton, *The Ascent to Truth*, 323.

The writings of Aquinas had encouraged Merton to become a monk. While he was struggling whether to act on his deep desire to enter the monastery, he was moved by Aquinas's contention that union with God was the highest state to which humans could attain.

After entering the monastery, Merton continued to enjoy the thought of Aquinas. In formation classes in which Christian theology and philosophy were taught, he was once again introduced to the writings of Aquinas. The monastic journals of 1942-1946 have been lost; therefore, it is impossible to formulate a critical assessment of Merton's study of Aquinas. However, the fact that Merton frequently quoted Aquinas in his early writings on contemplation indicates his continuous interest in the "Angelic Doctor." *The Ascent to Truth*, which was published in 1951, is a noticeable example. In the book, Merton attempted to forge the link between the scholastic theology of Thomas Aquinas and the mysticism of John of the Cross. His was indeed a very aggressive attempt, for Aquinas' scholastic theology seemed to have very little to do with the mysticism of John of the Cross. Merton himself was aware of the challenge in blending Thomist intellectualism into a work focusing on the mystical theology of John of the Cross. But for three reasons he insisted on doing it.

First, Merton disagreed with the "too-prevalent opinion that mysticism and dogma fall into watertight compartments and that 'the mystics' and 'the theologians' are essentially different beings with a totally different outlook on life."³³ In his view, Thomas Aquinas

³³ Ibid., 121.

was a true mystic and "John of the Cross was a true Thomist."³⁴ He considered Aquinas' emphasis on the intellect a safeguard against extremism and as a protection of true mysticism, for he always cautioned against a false mysticism of emotionalism, fanaticism, and the occult.³⁵

Second, Merton found no discrepancy between the mystical teachings of John and the theological ideas of Aquinas, particularly in the six opening questions of the *Prima Secundae* of the *Summa Theologica*, where Aquinas outlined the meaning of happiness and located the ultimate end of happiness in the supreme contemplation. Although Aquinas and John of the Cross spoke from different perspectives, one theological and the other contemplative, Merton argued, they both declared that happiness is not to be found on the level of creation but by getting in touch with "the uncreated essence of God."³⁶ "God, and God alone, is our beatitude."³⁷

Third, Merton believed that the apophatic experience described by John of the Cross was reverberated in what Aquinas wrote in *De Potentia* and *Boetium de Trinitate*:

The final attainment of man's knowledge of God consists in knowing that we do not know Him, in so far as we realize that He transcends everything that we understand concerning Him. Having arrived at the term of our knowledge we know God as unknown.³⁸

³⁴ Ibid., 132, 283.

³⁵ See, for example, *ibid.*, 60, 62, 66, 72, 86. Also see Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), 194-202.

³⁶ Ibid., 134.

³⁷ Ibid., 134-135.

³⁸ Merton, *The Ascent to Truth*, 100-101.

Merton did not only adopt Aquinas' intellectualism to describe contemplation in his early writings; he also accepted Aquinas' distinction of active and contemplative life. He repeated Aquinas' view in his biography that "The contemplative life in itself, by its very nature, is superior to the active life."³⁹ In *What is Contemplation?*, he expressed the similar idea that contemplative life was more excellent than active life because "it directly and immediately occupied itself with the love of God." For Merton, there was no act more perfect or more meritorious than contemplation of God.⁴⁰

However, this strict distinction between active and contemplative life was toned down significantly in Merton's later writings. In his later writings, Merton perceived the two modes of Christian life from a different perspective, as we shall see in the next chapter.

Aquinas's influence on Merton's early view of contemplation could hardly be exaggerated. On January 26, 1949, he wrote in his journal, "I cannot do better than base everything I write ultimately on St. Thomas."⁴¹ The reasons why Merton widely adopted Aquinas's ideas in his early writings are easy to understand. On the one hand, it was out of Merton's personal devotion to Aquinas' scheme of thought. But on the other hand, it was the result of the widespread influences of the neo-Thomist tradition in the Catholic Church, with which Merton,

³⁹ "Vita contemplativa simpliciter est melior quam activa." Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 414.

⁴⁰ Ibid. See also Thomas Merton, *What is contemplation?* (Springfield, Illinois: Templegate Publishers, 1996), 30-35.

⁴¹ Merton, *Run to the Mountain*, 270.

the new convert, complied. As Lawrence J. Altepeter rightly observes, in Merton's days, neo-Thomism was essentially the only one philosophical method open to the Roman Catholic writers.⁴² The revival of Thomism was an effect of the publication of Leo XIII's encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879), which strongly promoted a return to the teachings of Aquinas. Situated in a time where Aquinas was highly honored, Merton simply followed the current trend and based his discussion of contemplative life on the thought of Aquinas:

In compliance to the Neo-Thomist tradition within which he found himself, Merton felt obligated not only to bring Thomas into the discussion but also to make him an underlying foundation, after the words of Jesus.⁴³

Merton himself admitted that he had observed closely the instruction of the Church and the general position of most of the Catholic writers of the time. He wrote in *The Ascent to Truth*,

The *Summa* of Saint Thomas, whose influence had shaped the chapters and definitions of the Council of Trent, now for the first time assumed its place as the standard text of Catholic philosophy and theology. The *Summa* has maintained this position ever since; and though it has never seriously been threatened by any rival, the mere anticipation of such threat has moved the Holy See to confirm with all its authority the unquestioned pre-eminence of the Angelic Doctor.... The Church has demanded that her teachers follow the basic principles of the *Summa* because she wants their theology to be, above all, systematic, orderly, and clear.⁴⁴

Merton as a young monk showed great enthusiasm in defending the doctrine of the Church. His early understanding and expression of contemplation was in harmony with the fundamental theology of the

⁴² Lawrence J. Altepeter, "Thomas Merton and the Ascetical/Mystical Tradition," *Cistercian Studies* 32 (1997): 526.

⁴³ Ibid., 521.

⁴⁴ Merton, *The Ascent to Truth*, 129.

Church. However, as he gradually matured, he became more critical in his view of the Church and in his understanding of Christian spirituality.

Augustine of Hippo

While Merton was learning modern scholastic philosophy at Columbia University, he was at the same time reading about mysticism and other related subjects. The Hindu monk Bramachari encouraged him to explore the many beautiful mystical books of the Christian tradition. Eventually, Merton found himself in love with Augustine's spiritual writings.⁴⁵ He did not only meditate on the *Confessions*, but also read Augustine's *City of God*. Augustine's writings made an enormous impression on the young convert.

Merton perceived the difference between Augustine and Aquinas in their styles and approaches to Christian truth. "Where Saint Augustine takes Christian truth and expounds it, Saint Thomas takes Christian truth, and systematizes it for the purpose of theology and philosophy," Merton noted in his journal of November 2, 1939.⁴⁶ In Merton's view, Augustine and Aquinas were further different in their view of human nature and the grace of God.

While Aquinas was relatively optimistic and considered grace as fulfilling the nature of the human person, Augustine was more pessimistic and saw the human person as fallen from grace. According to Augustine, the human person in her or his original state of paradise

⁴⁵ Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 198.

⁴⁶ Merton, *Run to the Mountain*, 84.

was able to will and do good, and at the same time was sustained by the general assistance of divine grace. However, as a result of the fall, the human person found her or himself unable to attain spiritual union with God without being given a special grace from God. This theological doctrine had direct implications for the spiritual life, and in this respect Augustine made a new contribution to Christian thought, especially in his concept of love. No wonder some praise Augustine as "the Prince of Mystics," who could unite in himself "the most penetrating intellectual vision into things divine," and embody "a love of God that was a consuming passion."⁴⁷

Augustine realized that the human person cannot ascend to God on her or his own, because the ability to attain union with God had been lost in the fall. The human person could, however, ascend to God when given God's grace to do so. The grace of God was *agape*. Contemplation, for Augustine, was a gift from God, a special gift necessary for the total love of God.

Like Augustine, Merton perceived that contemplation was a real gift of God which allowed the human person to either accept or reject the *agape* of God. As Merton wrote in *What Is Contemplation?*, if one chose to refuse the grace of God and remain attached to the world of the finite, one would never transcend beyond the mundane existence of everyday life.⁴⁸

One of the strongly addressed themes in the *Confessions* was about human desire. Augustine claimed that desire was basic to every human

⁴⁷ Dom Cuthbert Butler, *Western Mysticism: The Teaching of Augustine, Gregory and Bernard on Contemplation and the Contemplative Life*, 3rd ed. (London: Constable & Co., 1967), 20.

⁴⁸ Merton, *What is Contemplation?*, 11-12, 23-24.

life and that desire could only find its fulfillment in God. Merton expressed a similar idea in *What Is Contemplation?*, saying that if one failed to desire God, one was failing to realize "the magnificent dignity of one's vocation to sanctity."⁴⁹ One's desire for God, Merton said, was proportionate to one's detachment from the created world. In other words, the desire for God was actualized in detachment from pleasure-giving objects of the world. To desire for God, Merton wrote, one "must withdraw his desires from all the satisfactions and interests this world has to offer."⁵⁰ In another early work, *Seeds of Contemplation*, he elaborated on the idea of detachment.

Nothing that we know and nothing that we can enjoy and desire with our natural faculties can be anything but an obstacle to the pure possession of Him as He is in Himself and therefore if we can still be satisfied with any of these things we will remain infinitely far away from Him. That is why we must be detached and delivered from them all in order to come to Him.⁵¹

Merton understood the importance of detachment from his own experience. At the time that he was discerning whether to put an application to an Order, he was often consoled and encouraged by the most moving thought in Augustine's *Confessions*--"yearning for God alone." The decision to join the Trappists was for Merton an actualization of the yearning for God alone. In his biography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he wrote more or less like Augustine:

That is the only reason why I desire solitude--to be lost to all created things, to die to them and to the knowledge of them, for they remind me of my distance from You. They tell me something about You: that You are far from them, even

⁴⁹ Ibid., 7.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 20.

⁵¹ Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1952), 123.

though You are in them. You have made them and Your presence sustains their being, and they hide You from me. And I would live alone, and out of them. *O beata solitudo!*⁵²

Interestingly, while the Augustinian theme of yearning for God alone was often repeated in Merton's early writings on contemplation, it was expressed with dissimilar emphasis in his later writings. As Merton revised *Seeds of Contemplation* and transformed it into *New Seeds of Contemplation*, he deleted the above quotation from *Seeds of Contemplation*, which stressed the necessity in being detached and delivered from the created world in order to come to God. In *New Seeds of Contemplation* he presented the same idea from a more life-affirming approach. He wrote,

To enter into the realm of contemplation one must in a certain sense die: but this death is in fact the entrance into a higher life. It is a death for the sake of life, which leaves behind all that we can know or treasure as life, as thought, as experience, as joy, as being.⁵³

John of the Cross and the Apophatic Tradition

After his Baptism on November 16, 1938, Merton did whatever he could to try to catch up with his spiritual life. On one occasion after meeting with his friends, he compared himself with them and questioned, "They understood God better than I. What was I doing? Why was I so slow, so mixed up, still, so uncertain in my directions and so insecure?"⁵⁴ Then he bought at great cost the first volume of the *Works of St. John of the Cross* and studied it. He underlined places here and there with a pencil, trying to grasp the spiritual

⁵² Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 421.

⁵³ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 3.

⁵⁴ Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 238.

teachings of John of the Cross. But he was disappointed with himself, saying,

But it turned out that it would take more than that to make me a saint: because these words I underlined, although they amazed and dazzled me with their import, were all too simple for me to understand. They were too naked, too stripped of all duplicity and compromise for my complexity, perverted by many appetites.⁵⁵

However, Merton did not give up reading John of the Cross. After entering the monastery, he often read the works of John, particular in retreats during which longer reading time was allowed. But the more he read, the less certain he was about his ability to grasp the teachings of John of the Cross. Ten years after he first read the first volume of John's work, he remarked in his journal that he was still unable to comprehend most of John's basic teachings. "Over and over again I have read St. John of the Cross and seemed to understand him and yet the most elementary notions he teaches have failed to sink into my life,"⁵⁶ he wrote.

In order to understand John of the Cross, Merton worked very hard. His effort was never in vain. He himself was aware of the fact that John of the Cross had a great influence on his mystical thought, so great an influence in fact, that he wrote an entire book, *The Ascent to Truth*, his only strictly theological work. The book, Merton stated, "is chiefly concerned with the doctrine of the Carmelite theologian,

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk & Writer. The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 2, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 210.

Saint John of the Cross."⁵⁷ In the book, Merton considered John of the Cross, together with Gregory of Nyssa and Pseudo-Dionysius, "theologians of darkness."⁵⁸

The influence of Gregory of Nyssa, the founder of the apophatic tradition of Christian mysticism, was quite pronounced in *The Ascent to Truth*. Although Gregory was not a desert father, he agreed with the desert fathers that one must be free from attachment. While the desert fathers retreated to the physical desert to wipe out illusory attachment, Gregory and those belonging to the apophatic school withdrew into the inner desert to discern the ultimate reality of God.

Merton regarded John of the Cross as the most pronounced writer of the apophatic tradition. He believed that John was "a true Thomist," who quoted word for word from Saint Thomas to build his doctrine of complete detachment for union with God.⁵⁹ Merton even argued that "practically the whole of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* can be reduced to these pages of the Angelic Doctor's dealing with beatitude in his *prima secundae*."⁶⁰ For Merton, the teachings of Aquinas and John were so close that the difference between the two was more a difference in form than in substance. While Aquinas took a theological approach to contemplation, John of the cross was more mystical. Merton perceived that it was the mystical and experiential

⁵⁷ Merton, *The Ascent to Truth*, ix.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 25-26.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 132.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

emphasis that made the spirituality of John of the Cross so unique and vibrant.

In his early writings Merton often referred to three related areas of John's teachings: renouncement of desire, renouncement of extraordinary experiences, and renouncement of conceptual knowledge of God. These three related areas were one, which John used to call the "dark night."

The first concerned asceticism. Merton perceived John's famous motto "Todo y Nada" as the summary of John's asceticism.

Todo--all--is God, Who contains in Himself eminently the perfections of all things. For Him we are made. In Him we possess all things. But in order to possess Him Who is all, we must renounce the possession of anything that is less than God. But everything that can be seen, known, enjoyed, possessed in a finite manner, is less than God. Every desire for knowledge, possession, being, that falls short of God must be blacked out. *Nada!*⁶¹

The nada of Saint John of the Cross was simply a drastically literal application of the Gospel: "If anyone of you renounce not all that he possesses, he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:33)⁶² For this reason, John's teaching, said Merton, was "difficult," and his asceticism was "a terror and a scandal to many Christians."⁶³ But John's teaching on asceticism, Merton added, was not that fearful, for the key word in John's rules for entering into the ascetic night was "desire." To grasp this key word was to understand John's asceticism.

He does not say: "In order to arrive at the knowledge of everything, know nothing," but "desire to know nothing." It is not pleasure, knowledge, possession or being as such that

⁶¹ Ibid., 53.

⁶² Ibid., 55.

⁶³ Ibid., 330.

must be "darkened" or "mortified," but only the passion of desire for these things."⁶⁴

"Desire considered as a passion, is by necessity directed to a finite object. Therefore all desire imposes a *limit* to our knowledge, possession, existence," Merton explained.⁶⁵ The secret of ascetic liberation was therefore "the darkening of all desire."⁶⁶

Second, Merton also assimilated in his early writings John's advice on the renouncement of extraordinary experience. In *The Ascent to Truth*, for example, he reminded the readers that "[u]nder every circumstance we must turn away from genuine visions, revelations, raptures, locutions, and so on in order to rest in 'pure faith,' which is the only proximate means of union with God."⁶⁷ Like John, Merton believed that mystical experience could be falsified. Mystical experience was judged to be false when "there is inordinate appetite for these experiences and an undue emphasis upon them."⁶⁸

Merton made a list of the signs of false mysticism. First, he said, while it was not false mysticism to have visions, it was false to perceive mysticism as consisting essentially in visions or supernatural experiences. Second, if one attributed greater importance to visions, locutions, and private revelations than to the truths revealed by God to the Church, one was in danger of falling into false mysticism. Third, if one followed a path that led to spectacular experience rather than to obscure union with God, as if spiritual perfection consisted in having such experiences, and as

⁶⁴ Ibid., 53.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 54.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 250.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 72.

if no one could become a saint without them, one's mystical path was false.⁶⁹

Lastly, Merton was deeply influenced by the apophatic way of John of the Cross. He always introduced John's apophatism in his writings on contemplation. Merton wrote, "True contemplation is a 'loving knowledge of God.'"⁷⁰ This "loving knowledge of God" could not be achieved by any operation of the senses, or even by any act of intellect that had its starting point in sense perception. According to the apophatic tradition, God was totally beyond human understanding. As Merton said, "God was beyond all that we could signify by intelligence; God was beyond all that we could signify by love or mercy; God was beyond all that we can call power."⁷¹ While the concepts, such as "intelligence," "love," and "power," did point to the tremendous reality of God, they were simply "small matches" lit in the dark. But God, Merton added, was like "a dark storm," which would ultimately blow out all the flames of the matches of concepts.⁷²

Merton valued John's idea that "Mystical knowledge of God is above concepts."⁷³ The mystical knowledge registered itself in the person praying passively *without an idea*. It was in the deepest spiritual darkness, in the most profound night of unknowing, and in the purity of naked faith that God united the human person to Godself in mystical union.⁷⁴ The apophatic way was therefore an uneasy way, which demanded a willingness to "carry the cross of Jesus." But "the

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 162.

⁷¹ Ibid., 106.

⁷² Ibid., 106.

⁷³ Ibid., 83.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 257.

cross is the only way to mystical prayer," Merton wrote. He summed up, "Christian contemplation is precipitated by crisis within crisis and anguish within anguish."⁷⁵

Conclusion

This chapter shows that Merton's foundational knowledge of contemplation was informed by the writings of various writers, both ancient and modern. Gilson and Maritain opened Merton's eyes to the reality of God and his own potential of entering into deep relationship with God. Thomas Aquinas' scholastic theology led Merton to admire contemplative union with God and provided him with a philosophical framework to articulate contemplation. Augustine persuaded Merton to further detach from the created world to seek real contentment and ultimate meaning of life in God alone. Finally, John of the Cross mapped out for Merton a path toward union with God, not a path of achievement but a path of renouncement: the renouncement of desire for created objects, of spectacular experiences, and of all conceptual understandings of God.

The three aspects of John's teaching and other authors' insights were important to Merton's understanding and practice of contemplation. They were the grounding elements of Merton's view of contemplation. In other words, the writings of Aquinas, Augustine, and John of the Cross had an enormous influence on Merton's early view of contemplation. As we shall see in next chapter, Merton basically

⁷⁵ Ibid., 107.

constructed his own view of contemplation according to what he learned from these authors.

CHAPTER FIVE

MERTON'S EARLY VIEW OF CONTEMPLATION

Introduction

Merton was a prolific writer. While he wrote on a wide range of topics, all his works seem to center on a specific theme, although at times it was too implicit to be noticed. On the occasion of the opening of the Thomas Merton Studies Centre at Bellarmine College in 1963, Merton announced to the audience,

Whatever I may have written, I think it all can be reduced in the end to this one root truth: that God calls human persons to union with Himself and with one another in Christ, in the Church which is His Mystical Body.¹

If all Merton's writings are based on the "root truth" of union with God, some of his works explicitly address the theme, such as *What is Contemplation?*, *Seeds of Contemplation*, *The Ascent to Truth*, *Inner Experience*, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, and *Contemplative Prayer*. This chapter explores three pieces of Merton's early works: *What Is Contemplation?*, *Seeds of Contemplation*, and *The Ascent to Truth*. This group of Merton's writings will show Merton's early view of the goal and way of contemplation.

What is Contemplation?

In 1948, about seven years after his entrance into the Abbey of Gethsemani, Merton wrote a small booklet called *What is*

¹ Thomas Merton, "Concerning the Collection in the Bellarmine College Library," in *Thomas Merton Studies Centre*, Thomas Merton and others (Santa Barbara: Unicorn Press, 1971), 14.

Contemplation? at the request of a student at St. Mary's School of Sacred Theology, Notre Dame.² The small piece of work represented Merton's first attempt to put into writing what he read, studied, and practiced about contemplation in his early years as a monk. He drew materials from the Scriptures, the Fathers of the Church, Thomas Aquinas, and writers on the mystical life, especially of John of the Cross, to explain the nature of contemplation and suggest practical guidelines for contemplative prayer. The work showed more of Merton's absorption of the Western Christian view of contemplation than his own insight on the subject.

Merton made very clear in the booklet the distinction between infused or pure contemplation and active contemplation. In its strict and correct sense, he said, only infused or pure contemplation can be called contemplation, because it involves experience God as God is in Godself. The so-called active contemplation deserves the name of contemplation only by way of analogy; it is a transition to or a preparation for infused contemplation.³ In differentiating infused contemplation from active contemplation, Merton seemed to suggest that infused contemplation is the final goal of Christian life, and that active contemplation serves as the transition or means toward pure and true contemplation.

² This small piece of work was later extensively rewritten as *The Inner Experience* in 1959. *Inner Experience* is therefore treated as a separate piece of work written in the later period.

³ *Ibid.*, 21.

Infused Contemplation: A Pure Gift of God

Merton described infused contemplation or pure contemplation from various angles. First of all, he said, infused contemplation "is a pure gift of God."⁴ Infused contemplation cannot be achieved by the effort of the praying person. "God is the principal agent Who infuses it into the soul and who, by this means, takes possession of the soul's faculties and moves them directly according to His will."⁵ Infused contemplation is always an unexpected grace.

However, "the gift of contemplation" should not be seen as "something essentially strange and esoteric reserved for a small class of almost unnatural beings."⁶ Contemplation does not consist necessarily of extraordinary phenomena, such as ecstasy, rapture, stigmata and so on.⁷ There is no way for the praying person to attach to consoling feelings and imagine them to be the great graces of prayer.⁸ Infused contemplation is the Light of God shining directly on the praying person and affects the soul the way the light of the sun affects a diseased eye. It causes pain. The brightness of God's infused Light denies and defeats all the images, ideas, or feelings of self and God that inadequately represent God.⁹

Thus, "infused contemplation sooner or later brings with it a terrible revolution," Merton said.¹⁰ The sweetness of prayer is gone and meditation becomes impossible, even hateful. The ray of

⁴ Thomas Merton, *What Is Contemplation?* (Springfield, Illinois: Templegate Publishers, 1996), 25.

⁵ Ibid., 25.

⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁷ Ibid., 8.

⁸ Ibid., 42.

⁹ Ibid., 26.

¹⁰ Ibid.

God's infused light becomes, for a time at least, "a ray of darkness." The praying person experiences the deep meaning of the words: "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not comprehend it (John 1:5)."¹¹

On an experiential level, the contemplative, in receiving the gift of infused light, feels desolate, dry, and dark. This is painful, for the experience contradicts what is expected.¹² In order to appreciate the pure gift of contemplation, the praying person at this moment needs to let go of the tendency to "seize God any longer by clear, definite concepts."¹³ By patiently staying in the darkness and trusting "that joy and peace and fulfillment are only to be found somewhere in this night of aridity and faith," one may ultimately be illuminated, as what is called entering the illuminative way.¹⁴ Being illuminated, one is drawn to receive the grace of union with God as God is in Godself.

Infused Contemplation: A Unitive Experience in Love

Infused contemplation as a religious experience, Merton said, involves a direct contact with God as God is in Godself. "It is deep and intimate knowledge of God by a union of love."¹⁵ To make direct and intimate contact with God is to empty oneself of every created love and to be filled with the pure love of God. The pure love of God in turn empties the praying person of all affection

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 59.

¹⁴ Ibid., 52.

¹⁵ Ibid., 11.

for things that are not God. The pure love of God desires no reward, not even of contemplation. The reward of pure love is simply the ability to love.¹⁶ The disinterested love of God brings peace and strength to the praying person. But it is a mistake to think that infused contemplation goes with sweetness, consolation, and joy.¹⁷ There are times when the peace it brings is almost buried under pain, darkness, and aridity.

Furthermore, the experience of union with God in infused contemplation is not self-annihilation or mercenary. The true contemplative is not a quietist who "seeks to empty himself of all love and all knowledge and remain inert in a kind of spiritual vacuum," said Merton. Having received God's infused love, the true contemplative "seeks for the perfection of love."¹⁸ Merton wrote,

God desires to bring us to this perfect union with Him in order that our minds and wills, perfectly united and absorbed in Him, may act in perfect harmony and coordination with Him, as free instruments of His love and mercy.¹⁹

The fundamental difference between Christian contemplation and quietism is that "Christian contemplation is the perfection of love and quietism is the exclusion of all love."²⁰ Christian contemplation is not self-absorption or enjoyment of ecstasy. The contemplative does not "enclose himself in his own shell and [keep] himself in a torpor in order to shut out all the painful realities

¹⁶ Ibid., 25.

¹⁷ Ibid., 59.

¹⁸ Ibid., 72.

¹⁹ Ibid., 70.

²⁰ Ibid., 72.

of life which Christ would have us overcome by love and faith and Christian virtue," Merton concluded.²¹

From Active to Infused Contemplation

While infused contemplation is a pure gift of God that cannot be reached by the effort of the praying person, active contemplation can be achieved by cooperating with God's ordinary grace. According to Merton, active contemplation involves traditional means and practices of interior life. It includes the use of reason, imagination, and the affections of the will. It draws on the resources of theology, philosophy, art, and music. It may involve a vocal prayer, meditation, or affective prayer. The highest expression of active contemplation, Merton said, is in the liturgy, which, with its rich content of scripture, theology, music, art, and poetry, "tends to bring the soul to passive or infused contemplation."²²

The function of active contemplation "is to awaken and prepare the mind, to turn the heart toward God, to arouse a desire to know God better and to rest in Him."²³ It introduces one to the joys of the interior life and shows one how to seek God in God's will and how to be attentive to God's presence. It teaches one to think about God instead of the world, to desire to please God rather than to enjoy the satisfactions of the world.²⁴ Understood as such, active contemplation is the transition to infused contemplation.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 29.

²³ Ibid., 26.

²⁴ Ibid.

Merton called those who practice active contemplation "quasi-contemplatives," because "they live for God and for His love alone."²⁵ Their love for God is not inferior to that of the infused contemplatives.²⁶ They enjoy a kind of "masked" union with God in the liturgy of the Church or in the activities of their lives.²⁷

Seeds of Contemplation

Merton completed *Seeds of Contemplation* in July 1948 and published it in March 1949.²⁸ The book was out of print shortly after its publication. A revised edition was published in December 1949.²⁹ In it Merton made "few minor corrections" and added a preface. This revised edition should be distinguished from *New Seeds of Contemplation*, which was published in 1962 and represented a far more extensive revision than that of December 1949.³⁰

Seeds of Contemplation is not a systematic study of contemplative spirituality. In Merton's own words, it is "a collection of unconnected and rather compressed reflections on the spiritual life."³¹ The book is written "from the point of view of experience rather than in the concise terms of dogmatic theology or of metaphysics."³² It has a strong autobiographical tone:

²⁵ Ibid., 35.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 32.

²⁸ Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk & Writer, The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 2, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco, HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 232, 287.

²⁹ Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1952), 6.

³⁰ It is for this reason that *New Seeds of Contemplation* is considered a piece of later work.

³¹ Ibid., 9.

³² Ibid., 7.

My chief care should not be to find pleasure or success, health or life or money or rest or even things like virtue and wisdom - still less their opposites, pain, failure, sickness, death. But in all that happens, my one desire and my one joy should be to know: "Here is the thing that God has willed for me. In this His love is found, and in accepting this I can give back His love to Him and give myself with it to Him, and grow up in His will to contemplation, which is life everlasting."³³

Seeds of Contemplation therefore shows the freshness and creativity even in its discourse on the teachings of John of the Cross and other spiritual writers. It is a very different book from *What Is Contemplation?*, although the two were completed in the same year. *What Is Contemplation?* seems to be coming from the pen of one who studies contemplation and describes to the readers about what is said about contemplation, whereas *Seeds of Contemplation* seems to be written by one who has tasted the joys of contemplation.³⁴ We may say that *What Is Contemplation?* is an objective discourse on contemplation, but *Seeds of Contemplation* is a reflection on personal experience.

The title *Seeds of Contemplation* is probably chosen from a passage in *What Is Contemplation?*: "The seeds of perfect life are planted in every Christian soul in Baptism...The seeds of contemplation and sanctity have been planted in those souls..."³⁵ *Seeds of Contemplation* addresses itself to a wider public and invites every Christian to bring the seeds of contemplation to fruition and harvest. It includes 28 short essays; each addresses a specific and yet related

³³ Ibid., 13.

³⁴ William H. Shannon, *Thomas Merton's Dark Path* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1981), 36.

³⁵ Merton, *What Is Contemplation*, 17.

theme. As far as the purpose of this study is concerned, we pay particular attention to Merton's view of the goal and way of contemplation.

Finding the True Self: A Way to Contemplation

The book contains a number of new ideas unfound in the earlier work *What Is Contemplation?*. The theme of "finding the true self" is a prominent one. For Merton, discovering one's true identity is the gateway to contemplation. As he wrote, mystical life involves the entering into the deepest center of oneself and then passing through that center into God.³⁶ To enter into one's deepest center is to discover one's true self. In discovering one's true self, one discovers God. "If I find Him, I will find myself and if I find my true self I will find him," he wrote.³⁷

One can only find one's true self by identifying totally with God in Whom is hidden the reason and fulfillment of one's existence.³⁸ "God alone possesses the secret of my identity. He alone can make me who I am or rather, He alone can make me who I will be when I at last fully begin to be," he said.³⁹ It is by losing oneself in God that one will discover one's true identity.⁴⁰ Ultimately our discovery of God is God's discovery of us.⁴¹ Merton thus wrote,

³⁶ Ibid., 41. See also Ibid., 26.

³⁷ Ibid., 23.

³⁸ Ibid., 23.

³⁹ Ibid., 21. The secret of our identity is Love. Merton writes, "Love is my true identity. Selflessness is my true self. Love is my true character. Love is my name." Ibid., 40.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 40.

⁴¹ Ibid., 26.

We only know Him in so far as we are known by Him, and our contemplation of Him is a participation of His contemplation of Himself. We become contemplatives when God discovers Himself in us.⁴²

While contemplation is a pure gift of God's discovering Godself in us, its seed are planted in our liberty at every moment. It is up to us to choose whether to contact God by entering into our deepest center, our true self hidden in God. To refuse the invitation is to refuse everything: "it is the refusal of my own existence and being: of my identity, my very self."⁴³ If we choose to become who we are meant to be, Merton said, we must first recognize that we are "shadowed by an illusory person, a false self."⁴⁴

The false self is an imaginary self, an illusion; it is not the self that we are at our center. The false self wants to exist outside the radius of God's will and God's love, outside of reality and outside of life. Being an unreality, the false self begets sins. "All sin starts from the assumption that my false self, the self that exists only in my own egocentric desires, is the fundamental reality of life to which everything else in the universe is ordered," he testified.⁴⁵ To drop the mask, to be awakened from the illusion of our false self and live according to our true identity in God, is to seek a contemplative way of life, for "true contemplation means the complete destruction of all selfishness and the most pure poverty and cleanness of heart."⁴⁶

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 22.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 22.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 28.

Detachment: A Way to Contemplation

As mentioned in chapter 4, Augustine's *Confessions* had influenced Merton in his conversion to Catholicism and his decision to become a monk. In reading *Confessions*, Merton was moved to desire for God alone. He wrote in *What Is Contemplation?*, "Desire is the most important thing in the contemplative life."⁴⁷

The theme of desire is also strongly emphasized in *Seeds of Contemplation*. "We experience God in proportion as we are stripped and emptied of attachment to His creatures," he added.⁴⁸ To successfully withdraw one's desire from all the satisfactions and interests this world has to offer and turn to God alone, one needs to practice solitude and detachment. "Physical solitude, exterior silence and real recollection are all morally necessary for anyone who wants to lead a contemplative life," Merton wrote.⁴⁹ It is necessary to take concrete actions to "escape" from the influence and domination of the world. Merton suggested,

Do everything you can to avoid the amusements and the noise and the business of men. Keep as far away as you can from the places where they gather to cheat and insult one another, to exploit one another. . . . Be glad if you can keep beyond the reach of their radios. Do not bother with their unearthly songs or their intolerable concerns for the way their bodies look and feel. Do not smoke cigarettes or drink the things they drink or share their preoccupation with different kinds of food. Do not complicate your life by looking at the pictures in their magazines. Keep your eyes clean and your ears quiet and your mind serene. Breathe God's air. Work, if you can, under His sky.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Merton, *What Is Contemplation?*, 20.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 54.

The mechanism of finding solitude and silence with God always relates "to actual space, to geography, to physical isolation from the towns and the cities of men."⁵¹ The way to contemplation requires physical retirement from the world and setting oneself free, loosing all fine strings and strands of binding tension. But solitude and exterior silence, like everything else in creation, "are nothing more than means to an end, and if we do not understand the end we will make a wrong use of the means."⁵² The purpose of solitude and detachment is to grow in love for God and in love for other persons. One does not go into the desert to escape people but to learn how to find them.

While detachment is a necessary way to contemplation, it is not an excuse to avoid people or things that we are afraid of or dislike. "The truest solitude," Merton said, "is not something outside you, not an absence of men or of sound around you: it is an abyss opening up in the center of your own soul."⁵³ Simply the act of hiding oneself in solitude cannot foster the desire for God. In leaving the physical city, one may bring the city with her or him into solitude. One should discern correctly what is the "world" that one decides to leave behind.⁵⁴

The world is the unquiet city of those who live for themselves and are therefore divided against one another in a struggle that cannot end, for it will go on eternally in hell. It is the city of those who are fighting for possession of

⁵¹ Ibid., 52.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 51.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 50

limited things and for the monopoly of goods and pleasures that cannot be shared by all.⁵⁵

Detachment or flight from the world is certainly a way to contemplation, but it is the interior solitude that really counts. "The flight from the world is nothing else but the flight from selfishness," Merton said.⁵⁶ Solitude out of selfishness can be dangerous, for anyone "who locks himself up in private with his own selfishness has put himself into a position where the evil within him will either possess him like a devil or drive him out of his head."⁵⁷

Contemplation is an experience in solitude, but not an experience of isolation. Merton said, "If we experience God in contemplation, we experience Him not for ourselves alone but also for others."⁵⁸ Deep solitude is the realization of solidarity.⁵⁹ Solitude is not only to find God but also to find other people in God. Merton wrote,

Go into the desert not to escape other men but in order to find them in God. There is no true solitude except interior solitude. And interior solitude is not possible for anyone who does not accept his true place in relation to other men.⁶⁰

Faith: A Way to Contemplation

The theme of faith is also highlighted in *Seeds of Contemplation*. "It is faith, not imagination, that leads us to contemplation," Merton said. "The normal way to contemplation is by a belief in Christ that is born of thoughtful consideration of His life and His teaching,"

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 50.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 50.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 174.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 36.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

he further explicated.⁶¹ Faith in Christ is the foundation of the Christian life and the source of all contemplation.⁶²

Imagination can be helpful in contemplative prayer as long as it reminds oneself of the Christ in whom one believes. But the use of imagination is only "an easy beginning of prayer" and may "fill one's head with problems and disturbances that make prayer impossible."⁶³ The images of Christ that come up in one's imagination can be the projection of one's own aspirations, desires, and ideals. One tends to see in oneself what one wants to see.⁶⁴ For this reason, one should not take the image of Jesus obtained through imagination as Jesus Himself.

Since imagination can be misused in contemplative prayer, it is wise to exercise one's faith in God without the concern for always conjuring up some images of God. Without relying on imagination, "your faith will be simpler and purer," Merton said.⁶⁵ It is better to simply say the name of Jesus or maintain "indistinct, unanalyzed notion of Christ" in prayer. It is important only to stay in a simple and loving awareness of God present in us.⁶⁶

The real reason why one meditates and reflects on the images of Jesus is to "prepare for this intimate contact with Him by love." "Therefore," Merton said, "when His love begins to burn within us, there is surely no strict necessity for using our imaginations any

⁶¹ Ibid., 85.

⁶² Ibid., 86

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 87.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 86.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

more."⁶⁷ One must learn to "enter into the darkness of interior renunciation, to strip [our] soul of images," and to relate to God by grace and faith.⁶⁸ Sooner or later one discovers that the meditative attempts are not helpful but frustrating. But by staying "quiet in the muteness of naked faith" and "resting in a simple and open-eyed awareness," one can experience "a subtle and indefinable peace." Faith, as an intrinsic strength graced by God, carries the contemplative through the night of the senses.

Mental Prayer: A Way to Contemplation

According to Merton, contemplation in its strict sense is the direct intervention of God into the mind and will of the praying person by an act of pure love. Contemplation is likely to occur when one has prepared oneself "by deepening one's knowledge and love of God in meditation and active forms of prayer."⁶⁹ Meditation and mental prayer, then, are "the way to contemplation."⁷⁰

Meditation has a twofold function. First, it gives one "sufficient control over the mind and memory and will enable one to recollect oneself and withdraw from exterior things and the business and activities and thoughts and concerns of temporal existence."⁷¹ Second, it teaches one "how to become aware of the presence of God, bringing one to a state of almost constant loving attention to God, and dependence on Him."⁷² The success of meditation is not measured

⁶⁷ Ibid., 87.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 89.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 126.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., 129.

⁷² Ibid.

by the brilliant ideas one gets, or the great resolutions one makes, or the feelings and emotions that are produced in one's interior senses. The real purpose of meditation is to lead one into a conscious and loving contact with God.

One who meditates actively may end up in great bafflement and darkness in one's realization of God. At this stage, one may conclude that one's meditation has failed. But "this bafflement, this darkness, this anguish of helpless desire is the true fulfillment of meditation."⁷³ Meditation does not aim at producing images and ideas and affections that one can understand and appreciate, but at establishing a vital contact of love with the living God. When meditation gets beyond the level of one's understanding and imagination, it is really bringing one closer to God, by introducing one into the darkness where one can no longer think of God, and is consequently forced to reach out for God by blind faith and hope and love.⁷⁴

One should not easily give up mental prayer totally. It is wise to keep at it in spite of the difficulty and dryness and pain one feels. "Eventually," Merton said, "your own suffering and the secret work of grace will teach you what to do."⁷⁵ There are two options. One may be led into a completely simple form of affective prayer in which, with few words or none, one reaches into the darkness where God is hidden, with a kind of mute and seemingly hopeless and yet confident desire of knowing and loving God. Or, one may choose to

⁷³ Ibid., 130.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 131.

relax in a simple contemplative gaze that keeps one's attention peacefully aware of God hidden somewhere in the deep cloud into which one feels drawn to enter.⁷⁶

In any case, one should not be anxious to leave the darkness or to be overly conscious of the progress in one's prayer life. "The ordinary way to contemplation," Merton explained, "lies through a desert without trees and without beauty and without water."⁷⁷ Spiritual desolation is always rejected because it feels God is moving away from us. But contemplation is to be found in desolation, where the activity of the imagination and intellect are found to be fruitless or even burdensome. Blessed are those who "trust in God alone," for they "will be brought to deep and peaceful union with Him."⁷⁸ In Merton's own words,

The man who is not afraid to abandon all his spiritual progress into the hands of God, to put prayer, virtue, merit, grace, and all gifts in the keeping of Him from Whom they all must come, will quickly be led to peace in union with Him.⁷⁹

Love Loving in Freedom: The Fullness of Contemplation

The fullness of contemplation is poetically described in *Seeds of Contemplation*. The fullness of contemplation has "three possible beginnings," Merton said.⁸⁰ "The best of these kinds of beginnings is a sudden emptying of the soul in which images vanish and concepts

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 146.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 149.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 180.

and words are silent," and eventually one's whole being "embraces the depth and the obviousness and yet the emptiness and unfathomable incomprehensibility of God."⁸¹ But this beginning of contemplation rarely occurs. The other two beginnings can be habitual states.

The second entrance to contemplation is more usual. It is through a desert of aridity, in which one is drawn and held in the darkness and dryness because it is the only place one can find real stability and peace.⁸² The more one learns to rest in the arid quietude, the more one realizes that it is God's purifying light that causes pain to one's faculties and desires.

The third entrance is "a tranquility full of savor and rest and unction" in which, although one is dry in the use of imagination and the intellect, "one's will rests in a deep, luminous and absorbing experience of love."⁸³ In this case, the praying person identifies the cloud of dryness and darkness as a secret way of being with God and of receiving the love of God.

There are a few similarities in the three entrances. In each entrance, God, for the praying person, is somewhat hidden in a cloud. As the praying person's contact with God deepens and becomes more pure, the cloud thins. Yet, since it is God who directly enters into the consciousness of the praying person without any other intermediary, the experience is more than purely subjective and does tell the person something about God that cannot be known in any other way.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., 181.

⁸³ Ibid.

However, in all these experiences one still remains very far from God, much farther than one realizes. "And there are always two of you. There is yourself and there is God making Himself known to you by these effects," said Merton.⁸⁴ The sense of separation between the praying person and God denotes an incomplete fullness of contemplation. Merton wrote, "As long as there is this sense of separation, this awareness of distance and difference between ourselves and God, we have not yet entered into the fullness of contemplation."⁸⁵

How can one enter into the fullness of contemplation? "There is nothing we can do about entering in. We cannot force our way over the edge, although there is no barrier," Merton answered. The praying person therefore should not entertain the idea that "the next step will be a plunge and you will find yourself flying in interstellar space."⁸⁶ One never knows when the next step comes. One has no step to take and no way to go. "The next step is not a step," Merton said.⁸⁷ The fullness of contemplation arrives without being noticed by the prayer. What exactly happens then when the fullness of contemplation arrives? Merton said,

What happens is that the separate entity that is *you* apparently disappears and nothing seems to be left but a pure freedom indistinguishable from infinite Freedom, love identified with Love. Not two loves, one waiting for the other, striving for the other, seeking for the other, but Love Loving in Freedom.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Ibid., 183.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 184.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 184-185.

While the fullness of contemplation is a very profound experience, one would never think and speak of oneself as the subject of an experience. Nor does it seem appropriate even to speak of it as something that happens.⁸⁹ It is because, Merton explained,

things that happen have to happen to some subject, and experiences have to be experienced by someone. But here the subject of any divided or limited or creature experience seems to have vanished. You are not you, you are fruition. If you like, you do not have an experience, you become Experience.⁹⁰

When contemplation becomes what it is really meant to be, it is no longer something poured out of God into a created subject. It is not so much as God living in God. It is God who identifies with created life, so that there is nothing left of any experimental significance but God living in God. The praying person no longer exists in a way that can reflect on or see herself as one who is having an experience, or judge exactly what is going on. Words fail. Everything one says about the "experience" is misleading, unless one lists every possible experience and says: "*That is not what it is.*" "*That is not what I am talking about.*"⁹¹ Furthermore, Merton added, it makes very little sense to speak of the "experience" as the high point of a series of degrees, and as something great by comparison with other experiences which are less great.⁹²

⁸⁹ Ibid., 185.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid., 186.

The Ascent to Truth

As indicated in chapter four, Merton's obvious interest was in the writings of Thomas Aquinas and John of the Cross. Although he had made many references to the teachings of Thomas Aquinas and John of the Cross in the earlier work *What is contemplation?*, he still found the booklet too brief to allow for any detailed study of the works of the two important figures. He finally wrote a book called *The Ascent to Truth* to combine the scholasticism of Aquinas with the mystical doctrine of John of the Cross, whom he called the "safest" of mystical theologians.

Merton's journal indicates that he began to work on the book as early as in December 1948, when he had completed both *What Is Contemplation?* and *Seeds of Contemplation*.⁹³ The original title of the book was *The Cloud and the Fire*. But he seemed to have encountered more than ordinary difficulty in writing it.⁹⁴ A few months later he changed the title of the book and called it *The School of the Spirit*.⁹⁵ Yet he still failed to complete the *School of the Spirit* in 1949. He finally split it into two. The content of the two

⁹³ Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 278.

⁹⁴ He wrote in his journal of February 9, 1949, "I have a huge mass of half-digested notes, all mixed up, and I can't find my way around in them. My ideas are not fixed and clear. . . .when I rewrite anything, I entirely revolutionize it, sometimes with no improvement at all, because I only lose the freshness of the original and am just as prolix over again, but in a different and duller way. It is hopeless for me to write without the heart of some new ideas." About two weeks later, he wrote, "I had been worrying and bothering for two months about being unable to get anywhere with this new book, *The Cloud and the Fire*. There were some forty pages of it, written mostly in blood, since the end of the retreat. And they were terrible. Great confusion. Too long-winded, involved, badly written, badly thought out and with great torture, too. . . .I had been thinking of tearing up *The Cloud and the Fire* for a long time." Ibid., 278-279; 282..

⁹⁵ Ibid., 304.

typescripts with the same title seems to be totally different.⁹⁶

The first part of the original book, which retained the title *The School of the Spirit*, is something of a mystery. The second part of it was finally published in 1951 under the title *The Ascent to Truth*.

The Ascent to Truth is one of Merton's few attempts at writing systematic theology.⁹⁷ But the book somehow reflects the struggles that Merton went through as he tried to put his thoughts together. It lacks the smoothness and the lucid simplicity of *Seeds of Contemplation*. At times it is overly speculative and repetitious. Although it has a kind of development, a number of the chapters appear to be almost separate essays that could be read on their own. The book also reveals the young monk's attitude toward the Church.

Both the tone and rationale of the book are different from *Seeds of Contemplation*. Unlike *Seeds of Contemplation*, which is written from a personal and experiential perspective, *The Ascent to Truth* seems to speak for the Church, defending her authority and orthodoxy. Merton wrote in his journal that he has intended to present "an objective mysticism," which deals less with subjective and individual experience than with the dogmatic essentials of mystical theology based on the intellectual heritage of the Church, Scripture, liturgy, and revelation.⁹⁸

The function of *The Ascent to Truth* is threefold. It is, Merton said, "to define the nature of the contemplative experience, to show something of the necessary interior asceticism which leads up to it,

⁹⁶ Shannon, *Merton's Dark Path*, 153.

⁹⁷ Others may include the *Living Bread* (1956) and *The New Man* (1961).

⁹⁸ Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 283.

and to give a brief sketch of mature contemplation."⁹⁹ It also aims at clarifying that "traditional Christian mysticism....is neither anti-rational nor anti-intellectualistic."¹⁰⁰

The major thesis of the book is to build the logical link between the mystical insight of John of the Cross and the scholastic theology of Thomas Aquinas. It iterates the insights of the two theologians and tries to prove that mystical life is consistent with rational development and to verify the intellectual sufficiency of the experience of the inconceivable.

Unlike *Seeds of Contemplation*, the book provides very little of Merton's personal view and experience of contemplation. Yet it reveals Merton's concern about the role of reason and understanding in contemplative prayer. The book contains three parts. The second part, entitled "Reason and Mysticism in Saint John of the Cross," is the heart of the book.

The Role of Reason in Asceticism

The idea that contemplation is a pure gift of God is restated in the book.¹⁰¹ It stresses that union with God is accomplished by "the mystical 'dark night' of the spirit, not by the active night of asceticism."¹⁰² Asceticism is also seen as indispensable in contemplative life. As Merton said, "Asceticism is the ordinary and normal preparation for the graces of mystical prayer and for passive

⁹⁹ Merton, *The Ascent to Truth* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1951), 12.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 14.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 158.

¹⁰² Ibid.

purification."¹⁰³ "Without asceticism, the mystical life is practically out of the question," he added.¹⁰⁴

Asceticism is "the active self-purification" achieved by manifold human endeavor.¹⁰⁵ It involves "a constant discipline of recollection, meditation, prayer, study, mortification of the desires, and at least some measure of solitude and retirement."¹⁰⁶ It is the preconditioning necessary for mystical experience, for it involves the process of concentrating one's energies and attention on God.¹⁰⁷ The purpose of ascetic discipline is "directing all the strength of the soul to God."¹⁰⁸ When all of one's strength is directed by the will to God, one has reached that relative and limited perfection which disposes one for mystical prayer.

But the will itself is blind. One cannot direct one's passions and desire to God by the will alone. "The will itself must be brought into line with *reason* in all its movements of desire," Merton claimed.¹⁰⁹ Grace builds on nature. God freely gives us a natural participation in the Divine light of God, which is our human reason. Without making use of reason we cannot attain sanctity or reach deep interior life. In Merton's understanding, this is the basic teaching of John of the Cross:

Mystical prayer is a gift of God to a soul purified by ascetic discipline. This is only achieved when all the passions and faculties are controlled by reason. Mystical prayer depends, *per accidens*, on the right ordering of the soul by reason.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 159.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 5.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 160-161.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 160.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 161.

In this sense, therefore, reason is the key to the mystical life!¹¹⁰

There are many examples to show how the exercise of reason is necessary in ascetic discipline. Ascetic discipline involves fasting and abstinence, but "we are not permitted, for the sake of self-denial, wantonly to destroy the health of the body," affirmed Merton.¹¹¹ Reason brings decency and order in ascetic works.¹¹² It clarifies means and ends in acts of mortification or prayer. One who fails to make rational use of means to an end is like a person "who takes medicine not because he is ill but because he has a sort of compulsion complex about medicine is a hypochondriac."¹¹³ Spiritual hypochondriacs take many medicines they do not need while at the same time avoiding the penance that would really do them good. A self-willed gluttony for exterior penance is a kind of sensuality in reverse and indeed harmful. "No healthy mind takes pleasure in pain as such." To do this, Merton said, is what John of the Cross sharply criticized as "the penance of beasts."¹¹⁴

Discretion through the exercise of reason is indispensable in Christian asceticism. With discretion, one can recognize the difference between impulsion of pride and the inspiration of divine grace. The role of reason in spiritual life is, analogously speaking, "to tune the strings." God does not waste time tuning the instrument; God simply plays the instrument. Reason must judge the right measure of self-denial that will keep all of one's faculties responsive to

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 172.

¹¹² Ibid., 171.

¹¹³ Ibid., 172.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 173.

the keys when struck by God. One who is mature in Christian asceticism is like the well-trained ear of a musician, sensitive to the slightest modulations of pitch in a voice or instrument.¹¹⁵ "All this is just another way of saying what has been said before: that reason disposes the soul for passive union with God by the active work of discretion," Merton concluded.¹¹⁶

The Role of Reason in Mature Contemplation

The fact that God initiates mature, full, or infused contemplation is often repeated in *The Ascent to Turth*. Contemplation is a transcendent foray into the human spirit. Human involvement in contemplation is reduced to cooperation, to the elimination of impediments. The initiative and the actual operation in contemplation are transcendent interventions. Mystical experience therefore results from the direct intervention of God. "It is first of all a supernatural experience of God as He is in Himself."¹¹⁷ Merton wrote,

The highest peak of contemplation is a mystical union with God in which the soul and its faculties are said to be "transformed" in God, and enter into a full conscious participation in the hidden life of the Trinity of Persons in Unity of Nature.¹¹⁸

The true nature of mystical contemplation should be distinguished from false mysticism. In false mysticism the role of human reason and intellectuality is often either misused or unused. False

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 182.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 183.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 16.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 14.

mysticism ascribes to human nature the power and the right to acquire supernatural illuminations by the effort of human intelligence. At the same time, "false mysticism darkens the intelligence altogether in a formal rejection of truth in order to seek Divine Union in an ecstasy of blind love which takes no account of the intelligence."¹¹⁹ False mysticism is therefore "viciously anti-intellectual," Merton said.¹²⁰ The Church condemned quietism in the 17th century because of its belief that "supernatural contemplation can be 'acquired' by the mere cessation of mental activity."¹²¹

Reason plays an important role in deciding whether one is receiving graces of passive or infused contemplation. It is true that when one reaches the state of infused contemplation, one's activity of the faculties is at least to some extent impeded by the action of God. But to discern infused contemplation, one needs the help of reason. John of the Cross' three signs of God's calling to contemplative prayer should be consulted: "the inability to meditate," "a lack of interest in particular objects of thought," and "a positive attraction for solitary contemplative prayer."¹²² Merton wrote that

Everything that Saint John of the Cross has written about this state of prayer forces us to conclude that reason has an important function in it: that which we have described as the discernment of spirits. It would be useless for the Saint to tell contemplatives how to conduct themselves in this kind of prayer if they could not understand his instructions and use their minds and wills to put them into effect. And, as we have seen, the first thing the reason must

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 16.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 60.

¹²¹ Ibid., 66.

¹²² Ibid., 232-233.

do is to resist an impulse to analyze its condition discursively and make long speeches about it.¹²³

Lastly, human reason and intellectuality is not totally denied even in the mystical experience. Mature contemplation is the "experience of God as He is in Himself" and thereby betrays human categories. "Kataphatic" concepts are inadequate for expressing the "darkness" of contemplation. Yet, kataphatic language does serve an important purpose. Conceptual knowledge gives humanity some sort of rudimentary grasp of what God is like. It is wrong to say "that none of our conceptual knowledge of God is objectively capable of making sense" Merton warned.¹²⁴ The way of affirmation and the way of denial are two paths of ascent up the one same mountain of truth. An analogy of the flight taking-off can illustrate the correlation between the kataphatic and apophatic approaches to God:

I think the way of affirmation and the way of denial can be understood if we compare them to the take-off and the flight of a plane. We start out with a concept of God, and we affirm it of Him: "God exists." . . . this is an affirmation. The plane is rolling along the ground. That is to say, we are using the term "exists" as if it applied to God in the same way as it applies to you or to me, for we know that we "exist." But now we have to begin denying. The existence of God is not the same as the existence of man. The plane (that is, our thought) is relinquishing its contact with the level on which our concept of existence is acceptable to us as positive. In proportion as we deny, we correct our concepts of God by stating what they cannot mean when they are applied to them.¹²⁵

The plane cannot fly unless it "renounces" its contact with the ground. Likewise, the theologian cannot reach God in his concepts until he renounces their limits and their "definitions." But just as Christian asceticism does not destroy the body, apophatic theology

¹²³ Ibid., 234.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 97.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 94.

cannot go so far in its denial as to deny everything that is positive in human perception of God. We take off from the affirmation such as "God is Justice" and ascend into the sky of the denials by refusing to admit that any concept of justice can delimit the divine Justice which is God's own Being.¹²⁶

There are two dangers to be avoided. "First, we must not take our conceptual knowledge of God for what it is not. Second, we must at least take it for what it is. It must neither be underestimated nor overestimated," said Merton.¹²⁷ In the end, the two ways of knowing God converge.

The two ways end in the same affirmation of the negative knowledge of God. It is an affirmation, because it declares that we actually *know* God. We know Him in all the positive concepts we have of Him and, besides, we know He is infinitely above all these concepts. And in this respect, our "way of negation" *adds* to our positive knowledge of God. We only deny what we know about Him in order to find out something more.¹²⁸

The Ascent to Truth is for Merton an attempt to integrate mysticism and scholasticism. It was written in the context where neo-Thomism was highly regarded in the Church. Merton wrote the book to advocate "an objective mysticism." However, as he reviewed his own writings in 1963, he rated the book "Fair." He was not satisfied with the way he presented mystical experience. We shall see in next chapter how Merton delineated contemplation from a different approach.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 95.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 96.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 101.

Conclusion

Merton's early view of contemplation, that is, from the period of about 1949 to 1958, is expressed in the three books studied above. The three major works of Merton show that Merton's early view of contemplation is informed particularly by the writings of Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, and John of the Cross. In these writings Merton elaborated on the central theme of Augustine's *Confessions*: desiring for God alone. He also expounded John of the Cross' dark path toward infused contemplation with many nuances. And as a young monk, seeing no reason not to follow the vogue of modern scholasticism, he tried to bring out the good of Aquinas' teaching.

Merton's understanding of contemplation as represented in the writings of the first period is in line with the orthodox teaching of the Church. Merton reiterated the insight of the theologians and spiritual writers of the past centuries. For example, he differentiated active contemplation from infused contemplation, as John and Aquinas did. In a strict sense, he said, active contemplation is not contemplation. True contemplation is infused contemplation or what he called full contemplation. Active contemplation as a transitory state or stance has very little value of its own if it does not help the praying person to reach a higher plane of spiritual union with God.

Merton also accepted the traditional teaching on spiritual itinerary. The spiritual journey of the praying person moves from ascetic life to contemplative life or from asceticism to mysticism. Ascetic life is a way to contemplative life. Full contemplation, in

Merton's view, is the fruit of asceticism. God responds according to the desire of the praying person whose yearning is expressed by observing various spiritual disciplines, such as withdrawal from the world, doing mental prayer, fasting, keeping one's faith in the presence of God, and so on.

Furthermore, Merton was strongly convinced that contemplation is primarily the gracious act of God on the praying person. It is God who begins and fulfills the contemplative desire of the praying person. Contemplation does not result from the effort of the praying person; it is God's intervention in the human spirit. In both active and infused contemplation, or in the journey from asceticism to mysticism, God is the center of focus. The experience of the praying person is always attributed to the sheer grace of God. In a word, Christian contemplation is God-centered.

Lastly, agreeing on the standpoint of the Church, Merton pointed out the danger of false mysticism in the life of contemplation. Christian contemplation, he said, is not quietism. Christian contemplation is receiving the love of God, whereas false mysticism is the exclusion of all love. False mysticism can be avoided by observing the teaching of the Church, by not clinging to supernatural experiences, and by not ignoring the role of reason. Christian contemplative experience is as "reasonable" as it is ineffable.

Although the framework of Merton's early view of contemplation belongs to that of the traditional model, the way it is expressed is not totally a direct repetition of the ancient writers. It is true that *What Is Contemplation?* and *The Ascent to Truth* are more or less

the description and analysis of the works of John of the Cross and Thomas Aquinas. But his *Seeds of Contemplation* is written from a personal and experiential perspective, which contains some new ideas and expressions. In the book Merton saw contemplation as a way of finding one's identity in God, or put the other way round, finding one's true self is finding God. He seemed to suggest a psychological approach to contemplation, in addition to the theological. In the book Merton also showed a more or less humanistic approach to contemplative life by advocating a balanced and healthy view toward ascetic practices such as detachment, solitude, and penance. Lastly, Merton articulated the profound experience of full contemplation in poetic language. The unitive experience, he said, is "Love loving in Freedom" or "*God living in God.*"

Merton followed the main stream of the spiritual tradition of the Church in formulating his early view of contemplation. But with his gifted sensibility in spiritual experience he had the potential to enter into the spiritual world of the Zen masters and Taoist sages, where he had traveled too briefly in his youth. In the following chapters we will examine what happened to Merton's basic understanding of contemplation in the later period of his life and how it was gradually transformed into something akin to that of the Zen-Taoist perspective.

CHAPTER SIX

MERTON'S LATER VIEW OF CONTEMPLATION

Introduction

Toward the end of the 1950s, Merton became a very different monk in his own eyes as well as for others. Some of his preconceived ideas of Christian life in general and Christian contemplation in particular were changed. This chapter tries to capture Merton's later view of contemplation as expressed in his three major works written since 1959: *The Inner Experience*, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, and *Contemplative Prayer*. It is believed that Merton's later view of contemplation is fashioned by his new learning in Zen-Taoism.

Inner Experience

Merton had attempted at different times to write a systematic study of the meaning of contemplation. First he wrote *What Is Contemplation?* in 1948, but that was no more than an introduction to contemplation. Then he completed *The Ascent to Truth* in 1951, but it was less than satisfactory, as he admitted in retrospection. A third attempt came in the summer of 1959 in a book called *The Inner Experience*.

The Inner Experience was initially intended to be a revision of *What is Contemplation?*. Merton probably began to do the rewriting in the summer of 1959. On July 12, he wrote in his journal that the new book will be at least three times longer than *What Is*

Contemplation?.¹ The book was nearly completed in September; by then, he wrote in his journal, it had become "a respectable book."² The reason for revising *What Is Contemplation?* is that Merton regretted his immature thinking about contemplative life. "How poor," he reflected, "were all my oversimplified ideas--and how mistaken I was to make contemplation only *part* of a man's life. For a contemplative his whole life is contemplation."³

Although *The Inner Experience* was completed in the fall of 1959, it was not published contiguously, because Merton wanted to revise it again.⁴ Perhaps he was for some reasons still unsatisfied with it.⁵ Whether Merton had come up with a satisfactory version or not remains to be a mystery. But in 1967 he made it clear to the Trustees of the Merton Legacy Trust that the manuscript "should not be published as a book, but could be shown to scholars."⁶ *The Inner Experience* was eventually published in *Cistercian Studies* serially over a period of two years (1983-1984).

The manuscript of *The Inner Experience* contains eight chapters. Although the work is intended to be a revision of *What Is Contemplation?*, only a small portion of the materials recognized in *What Is Contemplation?* is dispersed in chapter four, five, and six. Many of those retained materials are expanded and even reinterpreted.

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid., 327.

³ Ibid., 303.

⁴ Ibid., 332.

⁵ William Shannon suggests a possibility that Merton was dissatisfied with the fact that the materials in *What Is Contemplation?* were not fully integrated with the new ideas. See Shannon, *Thomas Merton's Dark Path*, 75.

⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, *The Journal of Thomas Merton*,

The Inner Experience is therefore a new composition in itself.

The work naturally reflects Merton's concerns at the time. It discloses Merton's negative reactions toward the monastic institution and his preference for a solitary life.⁷ There is "something of a gap between the ideal and the real," he said.⁸

The work shows as well Merton's deeper knowledge in the contemplative tradition and wider exposure to non-Christian literature. Many names unseen in the early writings appear frequently in the text, such as John Ruysbroeck, the Cloud of Unknowing, Meister Eckhart, and so on. Terminology in Freudian psychoanalysis and Hindu spirituality are cited. As expected, sayings in Zen are expounded and expressions in Taoist literature are assimilated in the text.

The work also indicates Merton's growing sensitivity toward the sad reality of "wars, genocide, slave labor, mass exile, poverty, and degradation,"⁹ as well as toward the movements of his time: "Marxism, existentialism, psychoanalysis, eirenism."¹⁰ In *The Inner Experience* Merton discusses how the contemplative should relate to the world and complained how the American culture had negatively

vol. 7, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), xvi.

⁷ Thomas Merton, "Inner Experience: Infused Contemplation (V)," *Cistercian Studies* 19 (1984): 66-68.

⁸ Thomas Merton, "Inner Experience: Problems of the Contemplative Life (VII)," *Cistercian Studies* 19 (1984): 268.

⁹ Thomas Merton, "Inner Experience: Prospects and Conclusions (VIII)," *Cistercian Studies* 19 (1984): 345.

¹⁰ Thomas Merton, "Inner Experience: Kinds of Contemplation (IV)," *Cistercian Studies* 18 (1983): 290. See also "Inner Experience: Christian Contemplation (III)," *Cistercian Studies* 18 (1983): 212; and "Inner Experience: Some Dangers in Contemplation (VI)," *Cistercian Studies* 19 (1984): 141.

formed the young novices in Gethsemani.¹¹

Directly relevant to this thesis is Merton's understanding of contemplation. It shows new elements unfound in his early view of contemplation. The new elements can be categorized under three themes: contemplation and Satori, contemplation and solidarity, and contemplation in action.

Contemplation and Satori

The book begins with a long discourse on the significance of "discovering and awakening one's inner self."¹² The theme extends to three chapters and remains as the leitmotif of the entire work. Some new ideas about the theme are highlighted. First, it gives a holistic view of the self, which is absent in the early works. The inner self is "not a part of our being" and not like "a motor in a car."¹³ "It is our entire substantial reality itself, on its highest and most personal and most existential level. It is like life, and it is life: it is our spiritual life when it is most alive," said Merton.¹⁴

Second, Christian contemplation is comparable to Zen enlightenment. Such an idea is definitely not found in the early writings. It is said that the interior self-realization in the experience of Satori is "an almost 'clinically perfect' test case"

¹¹ Merton, "Inner Experience: Problems of the Contemplative Life (VII)," 269; see also Merton, "Inner Experience: Christian Contemplation (III)," 211-216.

¹² Thomas Merton, "Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation (I)," *Cistercian Studies* 18 (1983): 3-15.

¹³ Ibid., 3.

for the discovering of the true self in Christian contemplation.¹⁵

The apparent difference between Zen enlightenment and Christian experience is that the former is "natural" and "purely psychological" whereas the latter is "supernatural."¹⁶ Zen enlightenment is simply the realization of the self. But Christian contemplation goes beyond to the realization of God. "In Christianity, the inner self is simply a stepping stone to an awareness of God," said Merton.¹⁷ "If we enter into ourselves, find our true self, and then pass 'beyond' the inner 'I', we sail forth into the immense darkness in which we confront the 'I am' of the Almighty," Merton added.¹⁸ But the Zen mystic may have also experienced "the presence of God when he speaks of knowing the inmost Self."¹⁹ He wrote,

There is always a possibility that what an Eastern mystic describes as Self is what the Western mystic will describe as God because we shall see presently that the mystical union between the soul and God renders them in some sense "undivided" (though metaphysically distinct) in spiritual experience.²⁰

Contemplation and Solidarity

The theme of solitude and solidarity is further elaborated. Merton addresses this theme in terms of self-realization. Self-realization is not an awareness of one's isolated existence; a genuine self-discovery is arrived only when one has "first become aware of

¹⁴ Ibid., 5.

¹⁵ Ibid., 8.

¹⁶ Ibid., 7.

¹⁷ Ibid., 9.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 11.

²⁰ Ibid.

himself as a member of a group."²¹ It is by loving others as well as loving God that one can awaken one's inmost self where God is. Christian self-realization is not individualistic affirmation of one's isolated personality. Nor is it a mere withdrawal without returning to freedom in loving action. In Merton's own words, "The Christian is not merely 'alone with the Alone' in the neo-platonic sense, but he is One with all his 'brothers in Christ.'"²²

The true contemplative is not only concerned with oneself and the so-called spiritual realities. "The true contemplative is not less interested than others in normal life, not less concerned with what goes on in the world, but more interested, more concerned," Merton wrote.²³ The fact that one is a contemplative makes one capable of a greater interest and a deeper concern with humanity. With suitable detachment and the gift of a pure heart, the contemplative "can enter more directly into the pure actuality of human life" and is sensitive to its pain and joy.²⁴

In stressing the importance of solidarity with humanity, a positive attitude toward the world is expressed in the text. The so-called "worldly society" is put in right perspective. "The universe is not evil but good."²⁵ What is bad about the "world" is its secular view of life. It is the false view of life that constitutes the negative aspects of the world. A secular world is "a life of vain hopes, imprisoned in the illusion of newness and change" and "tends

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 124.

²³ Merton, "Inner Experience: Prospects and Conclusions (VIII)," 340.

²⁴ Ibid., 341.

to demand satisfaction in pursuits that are unjust, evil, or even criminal," said Merton.²⁶ The purpose of withdrawal from the "secular world" is not so much to detach from the material world and the people in it as to maintain a clear vision of life.

Contemplation in Action

In *Inner Experience*, a different approach is taken to distinguish infused contemplation from active contemplation. Although the idea that active contemplation or "masked contemplation" serves as a kind of preparation for the grace of infused contemplation is retained, it is qualified with positive regards. Masked contemplation is said to have advantages and should therefore be highly appreciated.

Merton wrote,

Since contemplation is communion with a hidden God in His own hiddenness, it tends to be pure in proportion as it is itself hidden. . . .The "masked contemplative" is one whose contemplation is hidden from no one so much as from himself. This may seem like a contradiction in terms. Yet it is a strange and deep truth that the grace of contemplation is most secure and most efficacious when it is no longer sought, or cherished, or desired. It is in a sense most pure when it is barely known.²⁷

Not only is the hiddenness of the masked contemplative an advantage, the vocation of an active life is a blessing in itself. It is true that the vocation of an active life "does not allow the Christians to find the solitude and silence and leisure in which to lose themselves in God alone."²⁸ But with purity of intention,

²⁵ Merton, "Inner Experience: Christian Contemplation (III)," 212.

²⁶ Ibid., 212.

²⁷ Merton, "Inner Experience: Kinds of Contemplation (IV)," 295.

²⁸ Ibid., 294.

the masked contemplatives may achieve "a kind of holy indifference," seeking only to keep in touch with the realities of the present moment.²⁹ The life of contemplation in action can be a life of great simplicity and inner liberty:

One is not seeking anything special or demanding any particular satisfaction. One is content with what is. One does what is to be done, and the more concrete it is, the better. One is not worried about the results of what is done. One is content to have good motives and not too anxious about making mistakes. In this way one can swim with the living stream of life and remain at every moment in contact with God, in the hiddenness and ordinariness of the present moment with its obvious task.³⁰

The personal qualities of a masked contemplative are similar to that of "the man of Tao" in *The Way of Chuang Tzu*. "The man of Tao" is a person who seeks the way of Tao and lives a life of simplicity and freedom. It seems likely that when Merton portrayed the life of a masked contemplative, he had the qualities of a "man of Tao" in mind. In fact, the long quotation from *The Inner Experience* can be identified as a piece of excerpt from Merton's *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, especially when the word "God" is substituted with the word "reality," which Merton also frequently used in the text. Elsewhere in the same text, the Christian contemplative is explicitly described as the "man of Tao." "He [the contemplative] is the one who is in harmony with the Tao," said Merton.³¹

Indeed, many Zen-like expressions are used in *The Inner Experience*. For example, Merton wrote that a contemplative is one who "enters into contact with reality by an immediacy that forgets

²⁹ Ibid., 298.

³⁰ Ibid., 296.

the division between the subject and object."³² It is "by losing himself, and by forgetting himself as an object of reflection" that the contemplative "finds himself and all other reality together."³³

Seeing the advantage of contemplation in action (very likely in the light of Zen-Taoism), Merton is very much concerned with the healthy growth of lay spirituality.³⁴ Lay people are encouraged "to keep up an interior life 'in the world,'" although they are "without the support of any institutional structure and without any defense against pressures and distractions of secular life."³⁵ "Groups of lay people interested in the spiritual life should be formed in order to protect and foster something of an elementary contemplative spirituality."³⁶ For the married Christian, Merton remarked, "their sharing of married sexual love enters into their contemplation" and they "should beware of letting [themselves] be influenced too much by a virginal or priestly spirituality that has nothing to do with [their] state and only blinds [them] to its essential dignity."³⁷

New Seeds of Contemplation

³¹ Ibid., 341.

³² Thomas, "Inner Experience: Prospects and Conclusions (VIII)," 343.

³³ Ibid., 344.

³⁴ Merton, "Inner Experience: Problems of the Contemplative Life (VII)," 276-282. Kenneth C. Russell comments that Merton is "a real guide to lay contemplatives," and that he made significant contribution toward the structuring of a lay-contemplative lifestyle. See Kenneth C. Russell, "Merton on the Lay Contemplative: Explicit Statements and Refracted Light," in *Thomas Merton: Pilgrim in Process*, ed. Donald Grayston and Michael W. Higgins (Toronto, Griffin House, 1983), 121-130.

³⁵ Ibid., 276.

³⁶ Ibid., 278.

³⁷ Ibid., 281-282.

New Seeds of Contemplation is the second revised edition of the earlier work *Seeds of Contemplation*. After the sixth printing of the original work, Merton briefly revised it in July 1949.³⁸ In 1962 Merton revised it again. The content of the second revision is expanded and its outlook is significantly altered.³⁹ It is called *New Seeds of Contemplation*, because "it is in many ways a completely new book," Merton said.⁴⁰

The second revision represents a major period of growth. In 12 years following the publication of *Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton grew in compassion for people and began to confront "the needs and problems of other men."⁴¹ He consciously abandoned the scholastic approach in writing about contemplation and moved toward a theology that is less dogmatic and more pluralistic. He had wider contacts with people, both Christian and non-Christian, inside and outside the monastery.⁴² He also grew in respect for the mystical elements of the religions of Asia and in close affinity with members of other faiths. In the preface of *New Seeds of Contemplation* he wrote, "I feel myself a debtor to them (people without religious affiliations)

³⁸ Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk & Writer, The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 2, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 332-333.

³⁹ Donald Grayston has compared the original edition and the other two revised editions. He comments, "*Seeds* and *Seeds Revised* share a common framework, but differ in tone; *Seeds Revised* and *New Seeds* share a common tone but differ in framework; . . . *Seeds* and *New Seeds* differ in both tone and framework." Donald Grayston, "The Making of a Spiritual Classic: Thomas Merton's *Seeds of Contemplation* and *New Seeds of Contemplation*," *Sciences Religieuses/Studies in Religion* 3 (1973-74), 339.

⁴⁰ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), ix.

⁴¹ Ibid., ix.

⁴² Ibid., 147.

more than to the others."⁴³ *New Seeds of Contemplation* is written out of the need to "say many new things that could profitably be added to the old [edition]."⁴⁴

There are many "new things" in *New Seeds of Contemplation*. Besides minor corrections and numerous additions throughout the original text, almost every chapter is considerably expanded and three completely new chapters (1, 2, and 39) are added.⁴⁵ The new materials reveal Merton's transformed vision of contemplative life. In the new book solitude is described as a spiritual discipline aiming to search not only the depth of one's own heart, but also the deepest realities of the heart of the world. Faith must not be reduced to an assent to statements about God. "[F]aith terminates not in a statement, not in a formula of words, but in God," said Merton.⁴⁶ However, the most remarkable change is in Merton's description of the nature of contemplation.

The three completely new chapters abound in statements descriptive of the contemplative experience. From chapters 1, 2, and 39, the newly added chapters, we can see how different is Merton's later view of contemplation as compared to his early perspective. Two completely new chapters are entitled "What Is Contemplation?" and "What Contemplation Is Not." These chapters, however, do not give an adequate definition of contemplation. The purpose of these

⁴³ Ibid., xi.

⁴⁴ Ibid., xi.

⁴⁵ For an exhaustive analysis of the content of the three editions, see Donald Grayston, *Thomas Merton: The Development of a Spiritual Theologian* (New York: E. Mellen Press, 1985). In his thesis Grayston studies carefully every change made in the first and second revisions.

chapters is different from that of his earliest writing, *What Is Contemplation?*, published in 1948. In that early work, contemplation is finely defined according to the Roman Catholic tradition as expressed in any standard manual of spiritual or mystical theology. But in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, a clear definition as such is confused by many Zen-Taoist expressions. Zen-Taoist vocabularies and concepts are used to articulate the nature of contemplation. A typical example is seen in the beginning of the newly added chapter.

Contemplation is the highest expression of man's intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for life, for awareness and for being. It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant Source. Contemplation is, above all, awareness of the reality of that Source. It *knows* the Source, obscurely, inexplicably, but with a certitude that goes both beyond reason and beyond simple faith...⁴⁷

These statements evoke interesting observations. First, in seeing contemplation as "the highest expression of man's intellectual and spiritual life," Merton suggested that contemplative experience is not the monopoly of Catholics and Christians. Second, in highlighting contemplation as "awareness," Merton accentuated more the heightened consciousness of the person than the intervention of God in contemplative prayer. Third, Merton proposed three interrelated dimensions of awareness. According to him, contemplation flows from "fully aware," to "awe at the sacredness of life, of being," to finally "realization of the fact that life

⁴⁶ Ibid., 129.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 1.

and being in us proceed from an invisible. . . .Source." The "realization of the Source" comes at the end and contemplation first begins with full awakening, not awareness of something or of God. Lastly, Merton did not quickly jump to the theological conclusion that the "Source" is God. He did not even mention the word "God" until in the middle of the chapter.

These observations lead us to believe that Merton attempted to see contemplation through the eyes of Zen and the *Chuang Tzu*. Indeed, the language he used in the above excerpt is easily recognized as Zen. More Zen-like expressions can be found in the second chapter where he said what contemplation is not. For example, contemplation is said to be indefinable as Zen.

The only way to get rid of misconceptions about *contemplation* is to experience it. One who does not actually know, in his own life, the nature of this breakthrough and this awakening to a new level of reality cannot help being misled by most of the things that are said about it. For *contemplation* cannot be taught. It cannot even be clearly explained. It can only be hinted at, suggested, pointed to, symbolized. The more objectively and scientifically one tries to analyze it, the more he empties it of its real content, for this experience is beyond the reach of verbalization and of rationalization...⁴⁸

If the italic word "contemplation" in this quotation is read as "enlightenment," the whole paragraph will sound like a teaching from a Zen master. It seems that Merton was entering into the world of Zen while he was describing Christian contemplation. The suspicion that Merton had come under the influence of Zen in his writing of contemplation is verified at the last chapter of the book, entitled "The General Dance," another completely new chapter added to the

original text. In it Merton explicitly referred to the story of the Japanese poet Basho, who was awakened upon hearing "an old frog land in a quiet pond with a solitary splash."⁴⁹

Contemplative Prayer

The original title of the book under discussion was *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* published by the Cistercian Publications. A new title, *Contemplative Prayer*, was given by the Herder and Herder publication. Both editions were published in 1969. The reason for adopting a new title was to open the book to a wider readership.

Contemplative Prayer was originally an article first written in 1964, which a year later was enlarged into a booklet of about 50 pages. Some time after October 1965, Merton expanded the booklet into the size of a book. According to Shannon's credible analysis, the book is in fact made up of two sources. Merton had inserted part of his unpublished manuscript written in about 1963, entitled *Prayer as Worship and Experience*, into the booklet of 1965 to form the book of more than 100 pages.⁵⁰ The final composition of the book contained 19 chapters of which nine chapters are materials from *Prayer as Worship and Experience*.

"What is written about prayer in these pages is written primarily for monks," said Merton about *Contemplative Prayer*.⁵¹ It discusses

⁴⁸ Ibid., 6. Italics are added by me.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 297.

⁵⁰ William H. Shannon, *Thomas Merton's Dark Path* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1981), 165.

⁵¹ Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Image, 1996), 19.

in five chapters (chapters six to ten) the conflict between "public" and "private" prayer or "active" and "contemplative" life from a historical point of view, reviewing the teachings of the important figures in the monastic tradition from St. Benedict to the Counter-Reformation and after. However, the book is also for all Christians as well. Merton said, "A practical non-academic study of monastic prayer should be of interest to all Christians, since every Christian is bound to be in some sense a man of prayer."⁵²

Similar to other later writings, *Contemplative Prayer* reflects Merton's increasing concern for the integrity of humanity. The word "injustice" appears many times in the text. It concerns those "who barely obtain their daily bread, and are deprived of most of the advantages of a decent life on earth by the injustice and thoughtlessness of the privileged."⁵³ The question of action and contemplation is also addressed, as in almost every piece of Merton's writings on contemplation. Five out of 19 chapters are devoted to review the historical development of the idea. The factor of individual differences in choosing active and contemplative life is emphasized. The active and contemplative life constitutes "a full and many-sided life of prayer," although "the emphasis will tend to differ in different persons, and in different individual vocations," said Merton.⁵⁴ Both active life and contemplative life are good in themselves. They are good for those who freely and enjoyably choose it. In fact there is only one life, for both the active life and the

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 113.

contemplative life are grounded by the love of God and the others in Christ.⁵⁵

The book also revealed Merton's clearer perception of the purpose of prayer. "Our prayer should be summed up in St. Augustine's words: *Noverim te, noverim me* (May I know you, may I know myself)," said Merton.⁵⁶ In the book, the idea of knowing the true self and knowing God, although it recurs in both the early and later writings, is most clearly articulated as the purpose of the Christian prayer. Prayer, Merton wrote, "begins with a return to the heart, finding one's deepest center, awakening the profound depths of our being in the presence of God who is the source of our being and our life."⁵⁷

The most outstanding characteristics of the book, however, consist in Merton's non-technical description of the word "contemplation" and his non-dualistic view of Christian prayer. These two aspects of his thought are recognized as significant contributions to the advancement of Christian spirituality.

A Non-Technical Description of "Contemplation"

Surprisingly, the technical term "contemplation," understood in mystical theology as the state of the mystical life uncommon to the ordinary Christians, is rarely used in *Contemplative Prayer*.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Ibid., 66.

⁵⁵ Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 115.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 67.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 30.

⁵⁸ There is only one occasion where Merton used the term in its technical sense. In chapter five when he elaborated on the development of prayer life, he, as always, referred to John of the Cross' teachings on the distinction and transition of meditation and contemplation. Then he wrote that

"The term 'contemplation' is both insufficient and ambiguous when it is applied to the highest forms of Christian prayer," said Merton.⁵⁹ Such a comment on the meaning of the word "contemplation" is never seen in his early writings.

What is emphasized in the book is the ordinary understanding of contemplation. "Contemplation" refers not only to the prayer life of the proficient or "a high degree of prayer." It is wrong to "elevate the contemplative above the ordinary Christian by initiating him into a realm of esoteric knowledge and experience, . . . as if he were almost angel, untouched by matter and passion," said Merton.⁶⁰ The division between proficient and beginner is doubtful. "We do not want to be beginners. But let us be convinced of the fact that we will never be anything else but beginners, all our life!" Merton remarked.⁶¹

The purpose of "demystifying" the term "contemplation" is easily understood. It is an encouragement to the ordinary Christian that contemplation is accessible to everyone. The Christian should not worry whether "everyone can be a 'contemplative,'" for what really matters is "the *contemplative orientation* of the whole life of prayer," Merton said.⁶²

"Contemplative orientation" refers to the attitude of contemplative life, such as the thirst for God, the silence, the emptiness, the purity of heart, and the sense of "uselessness" (a

contemplation is a deeper and simpler intuitive form of receptivity of the supernatural light of God with passive and loving attention. See Ibid., 44.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 23.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 37.

⁶² Ibid., 114.

concept borrowed from the *Chuang Tzu*).⁶³ These elements are not designated as the "state" but the "orientation" or "spirit" of contemplation. They point to a way of praying and living rather than a spiritual status. The attitude or the spirit of contemplation must penetrate and enliven not only every department of the life of an individual Christian but also all the teaching and the mission works of the Church. Contemplation, in Merton's later view, concerns not only the "spiritual part" of an individual; it decides the health and growth of a community and society.

Without the spirit of contemplation in all our worship, the liturgy will not nourish a really Christian apostolate. . . .Without this contemplative orientation we are building churches not to praise him but to establish more firmly the social structures, values and benefits that we presently enjoy. Without this contemplative basis to our preaching, our apostolate is no apostolate at all, but mere proselytizing to insure universal conformity with our own national way of life. Without contemplation and interior prayer the Church cannot fulfill her mission to transform and save mankind. Without contemplation, she will be reduced to being the servant of cynical and worldly powers, no matter how hard her faithful may protest that they are fighting for the Kingdom of God. Without true, deep contemplative aspirations, without a total love for God and an uncompromising thirst for his truth, religion tends in the end to become an opiate.⁶⁴

Evidently, the meaning of the term "contemplation" is broadened in the later writings. In *The Inner Experience*, while the difference between active and infused contemplation is maintained, the value of contemplation in action is accentuated. It says that a genuine mystical life is lived in the condition of an active life.⁶⁵ In *New Seeds of Contemplation*, contemplation is described with Zen-Taoist

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 115-116.

expressions. Here in *Contemplative Prayer*, the "spirit" or "orientation," rather than the "state" of contemplation, is emphasized. The implication of this shift of focus is two-fold. First, it avoids the danger of elitism in Christian spirituality. Second, it widens the horizon of contemplative life and orients all aspects of life in the spirit of contemplation.

A Non-Dualistic View of Christian Prayer

In *Contemplative Prayer*, a holistic view of Christian prayer is presented. While a general sense of disillusionment with the dualistic thinking underlined in the practice and perception of Christian prayer is detected in Merton's later writings, it is in *Contemplative Prayer* that he makes a determined effort to eliminate any dualistic element in Christian spirituality.

First of all, the duality of mental prayer and vocal prayer is questioned. Prayer, Merton said, "involves the whole man, and proceeds from the 'center' of man's being."⁶⁵ The term "mental prayer" should not suggest prayer "in the mind" as opposed to "vocal prayer." If one is convinced that the conflicts exist, "a kind of spiritual dislocation does result."⁶⁷ One should learn from the monks in the early monastic tradition, whose lives are "a harmonious unity in which various forms of prayer have their proper time and place."⁶⁸ Prayer supposes "a conscious awareness of and dependence on God," and "the

⁶⁵ Ibid., 298.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 30.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 31.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

forms taken by this 'awareness' are not defined or prescribed," Merton wrote.⁶⁹

From a holistic perspective, the experience of aridity and desolation in prayer life may not necessarily be the sign of the "night of the senses." It could instead be the result of one's self-created isolation. In perceiving "inner life" dualistically, "one cultivates neglect and contempt for the 'external' as worldly, sensual, material and opposed to grace" and isolates oneself in self-righteousness.⁷⁰ The experience of desolation, Merton said, "may be the result of a wrong start in which a cleavage has appeared, dividing the 'inner life' from the rest of one's existence."⁷¹

The experience of consolation in prayer life is not necessarily a blessing either. When one "is content precisely with the petty consolations of devotionalism and sentimentality," one is trapped in individualism, which "resists the summons to communal witness and collective human response to God."⁷² An individualist sees interior and communal life or personal devotion and social commitment in dualistic terms. An individualist fixates on a particular form of consolation and refuses to participate in what is not immediately pleasing to devotional taste at the present. The fixation only produces false assurance, unreal spiritual identity, and imaginary fulfillment, and perhaps even an excuse for evading the realities of life. This kind of interiority is false and is a "spiritual

⁶⁹ Ibid., 33.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., 38.

⁷² Ibid., 108.

disease," said Merton.⁷³ Authentic interiority, on the other hand, does not "divorce from reality, from act, and from social commitment."⁷⁴

To pray is to "see God," but not in the so-called spiritual realm. In Merton's own words, "we are certainly not running away from life, negating visible reality in order to 'see God.'"⁷⁵ There is no duality between God and the world. To pray is not to "black out" from the problems and anxieties of contemporary existence. To pray is to "see," to see God in the world, or better, to see the world in the eyes of God. "Prayer does not blind us to the world, but it transforms our vision of the world, and makes us see it, all men, and all the history of mankind, in the light of God."⁷⁶

Self-denial and sacrifice are absolutely essential to the life of prayer, as said in both early and later writings. But the dualistic separation of body and spirit is sharply condemned in *Contemplative Prayer*. Christian asceticism, Merton said, is by no means "a cult of suffering for its own sake."⁷⁷ To affirm the importance of solitude, fasting, obedience, penance, renunciation of property and of ambition is not to suggest that the task of making a living in this world is insignificant, or that one can resign oneself to a condition of social injustice and destitution.⁷⁸ "This is bad theology and bad

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 112.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 72.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 73.

asceticism," said Merton.⁷⁹ The purpose of ascetic discipline is to seek "detachment and freedom with regard to inordinate cares, so that we are able to use the good things of life and able to do without them for the sake of higher ends."⁸⁰ Self-imposed sacrifices are only acts of external routine performed to exorcise interior anxiety or to arouse attention. They betray authenticity. With a kind of Zen humor, Merton wrote, "It would be more sincere as well as more religious to eat a full dinner in a spirit of gratitude than to make some picayune sacrifice of part of it, with the feeling that one is suffering martyrdom."⁸¹

Lastly, the holistic view of Christian prayer is expressed in terms of "imageless" contemplation. God is hidden and "imageless" because "God is invisibly present to the ground of our being."⁸² "It is in fact absurd and impossible to try to grasp God as an object which can be seized and comprehended by our minds."⁸³ God is beyond human understanding. In seeking to know God, "we must forget the familiar subject-object relationship which characterizes our ordinary acts of knowing."⁸⁴ God is not an object "'out there' or anywhere."⁸⁵ The unitive knowledge of God in love is not the knowledge of an object by a subject.⁸⁶ It is that the subject or the "self" realizes itself to be possessed by God in the inmost depths of its

⁷⁹ Ibid., 39.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid., 74.

⁸² Ibid., 82.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 83.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 33.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 77.

being.⁸⁷ To know God is to know the "self" in God: "We know him in and through ourselves in so far as his truth is the source of our being and his merciful love is the very heart of our life and existence."⁸⁸

The above examples demonstrate a non-dualistic view of contemplative prayer and a strong favor for the spirituality in ordinariness. They also show the marks of Zen-Taoist influence.

Conclusion

The later writings of Merton give readers a different impression of who he is as a monk. When Merton wrote *The Seven Storey Mountain* in 1949, he presented himself as a "world-denying contemplative."⁸⁹ But a decade after, he was known as a "social catalyst."⁹⁰ If Merton's early writings, particularly *The Ascent to Truth*, suggesting an image of a faithful defender of the Church and the Catholic tradition, the later writings evoke an image of "something like a rebel."⁹¹

⁸⁷ Ibid., 83.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Merton admits that his image of being a "world-denying contemplative" is a mistake to be corrected. "[D]ue to a book [*The Seven Storey Mountain*] I wrote thirty years ago, I have myself become a sort of stereotype of the world-denying contemplative--the man who spurned New York, spat on Chicago, and tromped on Louisville, heading for the woods with Thoreau in one pocket, John of the Cross in another, and holding the Bible open at the Apocalypse. This personal stereotype is probably my own fault, and it is something I have to try to demolish on occasion." Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1971), 143-144.

⁹⁰ Shortly after Merton's death, James Thomas Baker presents Merton as a "social catalyst" in his article "The Social Catalyst," *Continuum* 7 (1969): 255-264.

⁹¹ This phrase is used as the title of a book: William Shannon, *Something of a Rebel: Thomas Merton, His Life and Works* (Cincinnati, Ohio: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1997).

Merton is indeed a "rebel" who challenged established ways of doing things. As Joan Baez, the American folk singer and social activist remarks after visiting Merton in 1967, "He was a rebel. And I imagine [this] man tucked so far away [in a monastery] gave priests and nuns and other church people the courage to take steps they wouldn't otherwise have taken."⁹² As a "rebel," Merton refused to be stuck in past thinking and practices that are alien to the present realities. He was not afraid to enter into uncharted territories, when he believed that it is the right way to go. In spite of others' suspicions and criticisms, he insisted on showing respect and appreciation for the value of other religious traditions. He pointed out sharply that monastic life at the time needed major reforms if it was to survive as a viable force in contemporary society. But Merton is not a harsh or sinister "rebel." His rebellion against the status quo and traditional mode of thinking are seasoned with deep compassion for the poor and the weak and with heightened awareness of the mystery of life and God.

The mature Merton dared to break new grounds in his view of contemplation. In his later writings he attempted to compare Christian contemplation and Zen enlightenment in terms of self-discovery. He saw active contemplation and the married life as a blessed way of life in and of itself. He gave up the belief that contemplation is a monopoly of the Christian by perceiving contemplation as "full awareness" of life. He interpreted

⁹² Paul Wilkes, ed., *Merton: By Those Who Knew Him Best* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 43. Quoted in *Something of a Rebel*, xii.

"contemplation," wither to a technical term in mystical theology, as an ordinary and accessible experience for everyone who seeks a deeper relationship with God and as an attitude of life and ministry for all Christians. Last but not the least, he worked very hard to deconstruct the dualistic elements of Christian spirituality and to advocate a holistic approach to the life of prayer. These elements together give a different picture of Merton's view of contemplation.

How can we compare Merton's early and later views of contemplation? To begin with, we must say that in the early writings Merton unreflectively followed the tradition in using the word "soul" to describe the human person. But he tried by all means to avoid repeating the word in his later writings. Another important observation is that Merton's early view of contemplation is constructed according to the traditional model of spiritual life. As shown in chapter five, the traditional model on which Merton built his own contemplative ideas contains a number of distinctive characteristics. But those characteristics of the traditional model are transformed and reconstructed in his later view.

First, the traditional model takes an "ascension approach" to spiritual life. Merton adopted the same approach in his early view. He believed that the praying person goes from the beginner's stage to the stage of the proficient. In his three major early works he upheld the idea that spiritual maturity involves a transition from meditation to contemplation. By the way he talked about desire and union with God in *What Is Contemplation?*, he seemed to suggest that Christian spiritual journey is a linear or vertical ascension to God

the most high. Conscious of it or not, Merton suggested in his early writings an idea of God *coming down* to humanity and humanity *looking up* for God. But such a linear or vertical ascent model of spirituality is veiled, if not broken down, in Merton's later view. In *Contemplative Prayer* he remarked that the praying person should learn to be always a "beginner" in the life of prayer. According to *New Seeds of Contemplation*, the spiritual itinerary of prayer life is defined in terms more of the depth of awareness than of progressive stages. Merton wrote in the language of Zen-Taoism that one's contemplative journey moves from "full awareness" to "awe at the sacredness of life" and finally to "realization of the Source of life." From what he wrote, we can visualize that this is a journey of "circling into" the "ground of being." It also recalls the importance of the circle as a symbol in Chinese spiritual traditions.

The second characteristic of the traditional model of spiritual life concerns the distinction between active contemplation and infused contemplation. Likewise, in his early view Merton perceived the mystical union with God in infused contemplation as the "goal" or consummation of one's spiritual life. He, on the other hand, defined active contemplation, together with its required ascetic disciplines, as the "way" to full or infused contemplation. Active contemplation is less valuable than infused contemplation simply because it is a transition or a stepping stone to a higher spiritual plane. However, Merton corrected himself in his later view. In both *The Inner Experience* and *Contemplative Prayer*, he repeatedly stressed that active contemplation can be an end in itself. He preferred to

see contemplation as a way of life rather than a spiritual state reached by ascetic disciplines. Lay and married people can be as fully contemplative as the monastics. Above all, "contemplation," he said boldly, is not a term to designate a lofty stage unreachable by ordinary Christians. Contemplation is an attitude and orientation of life accessible and necessary for all. The gift of union with God is not only reserved for monks and not so much given at the peak of one's contemplative prayer; instead, anyone who is awakened to the inmost self where God is can enjoy the gift in everyday activities.

The traditional model also sees spiritual life as ultimately "God-centered" discipline. In his early view Merton emphasized the centrality of God's action in contemplation. In both *What Is Contemplation?* and *Seeds of Contemplation* he said that the seeds of contemplation are sown and nurtured by God. God is the one who harvests the fruits maturing from the seeds. Contemplation is sheer grace. Everything the praying person does in the spiritual journey should be attributed to the grace of God. But interestingly, in his later writings Merton was less eloquent and somewhat vague in his theology of prayer life. He seemed to be very careful in using the word God in *New Seeds of Contemplation*. In *The Inner Experience* he dared to suggest that the Zen Masters may be experiencing God in their realization of the true nature of the self. Merton's understanding of God in the later period of life is not exactly the same as that in his early life.

If Merton's later view of contemplation in a number of ways deviates from that of the traditional model, is his later view still

a "Christian" understanding of contemplation? We shall discuss this in more detail in the last chapter, where Merton's later view of contemplation will be evaluated. It is enough to say at this point that although Merton was deep into Zen-Taoism by the time he wrote *New Seeds of Contemplation* and seemed to have assimilated a Zen-Taoist view of reality, he had never abandoned his own tradition. In the newly added chapters of *New Seeds of Contemplation* where we can detect Zen-Taoist influences, Merton also wrote in a biblical and typical Christian tone, "It (Contemplation) is the religious apprehension of God, through my life in God, or through 'sonship' as the New Testament says."⁹³ Merton had not totally given up the God-centered view of contemplation. Among many Zen expressions we also read that "[contemplation] is the experience of the transcendent and inexpressible God...It knows Him as if it had been invisibly touched by Him."⁹⁴ Merton also maintained that contemplation is not the fruit of our own efforts.

To answer the question of whether Merton's later view is "Christian" or not, we can say that Merton remained faithful to the basic teachings of the Christian contemplative tradition. But as pointed out above, his later "Christian" view of contemplation is very different from his early view. His later view of Christian contemplation contains many Zen-Taoist expressions. In the next chapter we shall explore how much of the change in Merton's later

⁹³ Ibid., 4.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 2.

understanding of contemplation can be attributed to the influence
of Zen-Taoism.

CHAPTER SEVEN

INFLUENCE OF ZEN-TAOISM ON MERTON'S VIEW OF CONTEMPLATION

Introduction

Chapter six has indicated that Merton grew continually in his understanding of contemplation. What was said about contemplation in his early writings, as reviewed in chapter five, is not his final word on the subject. Merton expanded his view of contemplation in the later period of his life where he learned a great deal from other religious traditions. Chapter six has also underlined the fact that the new elements of Merton's view of contemplation expressed in the later writings are related to Zen-Taoism. It is certain that Merton had integrated the insights of Zen-Taoism into his later view of contemplation.

What is unsure, however, is the extent and implications of the discernible influences of Zen-Taoism on Merton's writings on contemplation. Some scholars go so far as to say that the influence of Zen is pervading in every piece of Merton's later work. For example, John Wu junior writes, "His writings are in fact full of Zen, and such elements can be found in the most unexpected places."¹ William Johnston agrees that "Merton's writings were full of Zen even when

¹ John Wu, Jr., "The Zen in Thomas Merton," in *Your Heart Is My Hermitage: Thomas Merton's Vision of Solitude and Community* (Papers presented at Southampton Conference of the Thomas Merton Society, May 1996), ed. Danny Sullivan and Ian Thomson (London: The Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 1996), 90.

they were not about Zen."² Are these overstatements, or truthful testimonies to the Zen-Taoist influence on Merton's writings?

The purpose of this study is to explore how far Merton's later view of contemplation was influenced by Zen-Taoism. In the following we shall highlight five major differing elements in Merton's later view of contemplation and discern in what ways these elements are influenced by Zen-Taoism: 1. Merton's writing approach; 2. his attitude toward the world; 3. his understanding of God in contemplation; 4. his understanding of self-realization in contemplation; 5. his understanding of contemplative prayer and spiritual itinerary.

From a Dogmatic to an Experiential Approach

One of the unique characteristics of Merton's later writings is its experiential approach. In his later writings Merton moved away from a strict dogmatic framework and took a new direction that focused on experience. A note in his journal of 1957 showed his strong rejection of the Christian dogmatic approach:

Against those who rejoice in every dogmatic definition as a new limitation which restricts the meaning of such and such a dogma to what is contained in this formula nothing more. Who desire to have more and more formulas, more and more limitations, so that in the end everything is narrowed down to a minimum of meaning which must be held. On the contrary, dogmatic definitions set limits beyond which error cannot pass, but does not set limits to truth, in the sense of

² John Wu wrote to Merton in a letter on August 3, 1965, mentioning Johnston's comment of his writing. Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience & Social Concerns* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985), 629.

forbidding a dogma to mean more than is envisioned in a given formula.³

Merton's later works, overall, witness a commitment to write about spiritual things in the light of experience. The scholasticism dominant in the earlier writings disappears and its emphasis on reasoning is balanced by an accentuation of intuition. The truth of contemplation is not so much explained through conceptualization and reasoning as described in terms of experience.

In the early years of life in the monastery, Merton appreciated the intellectual, dialectical, and speculative character of Thomism in the theology learned in the novitiate. His enthusiasm for Thomist theology was fully expressed in *The Ascent to Truth*. In it he accentuated the activities of the various faculties of the soul involved in the activities of prayer, namely memory, imagination, intellect, and will. He sharply distinguished the supernatural activities of these faculties from their natural mode of operation. His approach was abstract and highly analytical, assumed the body-soul dichotomy, and spoke of prayer as the activity of the soul. The book as a whole abounded in precise definitions, subtle distinctions, minute explanations, and dogmatic statements of the Catholic Church.

In his later writings, however, Merton adopted a different approach. He was no longer satisfied with scholasticism's analytical character but sought the intuitive apprehension of reality. He tried to do synthesis, not analysis. Merton went so far as to say that

³ Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life. The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 3, ed. Lawrence Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 87.

contemplation "is beyond philosophy, beyond speculative theology. . . .beyond systems, beyond explanations, beyond discourse. . . ." ⁴ He regretted the publication of *The Ascent to Truth* and referred to it as his "wordiest and in some ways emptiest book." ⁵

Merton did not change in a day or a year. The move away from a rigid dogmatic framework had already been foreshadowed in the late forties when he wrote *Seeds of Contemplation*, which spoke of "spiritual things from the point of view of experience rather than in the concise terms of dogmatic theology." ⁶ Perhaps feeling obliged to serve and defend the Church, he did not pursue the experiential approach in *The Ascent to Truth*. It was not until 10 years later when Merton wrote *The Inner Experience* that his commitment to write about contemplation from an experiential and existential perspective was confirmed.

What had happened in the ten years' period that made Merton decide to renew writing about contemplation from an experiential perspective? It is natural to consider Merton's immersion in the monastic tradition and his own practice of contemplative prayer. As Merton's prayer life developed and intensified, it is reasonable to believe that he would have felt increasingly comfortable with a more existential approach to reality based on experience.

⁴ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), 2.

⁵ Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life. The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 5, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 116.

⁶ Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1952), 7.

But there is considerable evidence to show that Merton had come under the influence of Zen and Taoism in his decision to return to an experiential approach in spiritual writings. As pointed out in chapter six, Merton drew the link between finding the true self and Satori in *The Inner Experience*. In the same book he also paraphrased some of the passages from *The Way of Chuang Tzu*. The new chapters of *New Seeds of Contemplation* contain even stronger evidence of Zen-Taoist influences on Merton's decision to let go of the dogmatic approach. The new chapters contain expressions, intuitions, insights, and nuances that come from Zen-Taoist literature. For example, in trying to avoid giving a definition of contemplation, Merton suggested that "[c]ontemplation cannot be taught. It cannot even be clearly explained. It can only be hinted at, suggested, pointed to, symbolized."⁷ This statement clearly resembles an exhortation given by Zen masters. The Zen master often said to his disciples that his teaching was only "the finger pointing to the moon."

Merton's conviction to move away from a strict dogmatic and speculative framework is likely to be reinforced by his appreciation of the common characteristics of Zen and Taoism. Both Zen and Taoism emphasize concrete and direct experience of life. They minimize the use of concepts and definitions while advocating an awakening to the reality of oneself and of human existence. Merton fully agreed with all these basic principles. As he wrote, "Zen is not a systematic explanation of life, it is not an ideology, it is not a world view, it is not a theology of revelation and salvation. . . .in fact, it

fits no category of ours."⁸ Zen rejects all systematic elaboration so as to get in touch, as far as possible, with the pure unarticulated and inexpressible ground of direct experience.⁹ It is exactly the inexpressible nature of Zen, Merton said, that can teach the Christian "to regain a healthy, natural balance in our understanding of the spiritual life."¹⁰

What exactly is the contribution of Zen and Taoism to Merton's decision to change his approach? Zen and Taoism provide him with a new language to articulate the contemplative experience. As pointed out in chapter six, Merton keenly adapted the Zen-Taoist idea of awakening or awareness to his understanding of Christian contemplation. "Contemplation," he wrote, "is, above all, awareness of the reality of the Source."¹¹ In an article on "Contemplation and Dialogue," Merton even defined contemplation without referring to the Christian concepts of the Divine, grace, union with God, faith, and so on:

By contemplation here we mean not necessarily mysticism pure and simple, but at least *the direct intuition of reality, the simplex intuitus veritatis*, the pure awareness which is and must be the ground not only of all genuine metaphysical speculation, but also of mature and sapiential religious experience.¹²

⁷ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 6.

⁸ Thomas Merton, "A Christian Look at Zen," in John C. H. Wu, *The Golden Age of Zen: The Classic Work on the Foundation of Zen Philosophy*, John C. H. Wu (New York: Doubleday Image, 1996), 3.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁰ John C. H. Wu, *The Golden Age of Zen: The Classic Work on the Foundation of Zen Philosophy* (New York: An Image Book, 1996), 20.

¹¹ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 1.

¹² Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1969), 203. Emphasis is mine.

This quotation shows that Merton emphasized the experience of "direct intuition of reality," but not the theological importance of the graceful action of God or the spiritual state of the person who prays. Such a definition of contemplation is very different from his earlier description. In one of his early works, Merton wrote, "It [contemplation] is deep and intimate knowledge of God by a union of love."¹³ But in his later writings, he said, contemplation is "direct intuition of reality." Merton was excited to find in Zen-Taoism the language to verbalize the mystical experience in contemplation. With the help of the language, he could smoothly write about contemplative experience without relying on strict dogmatic structure and terminology.

Merton's attempt to adapt the Zen-Taoist concept of awakening or pure awareness to his understanding of Christian contemplation implies, on the one hand, his openness to interfaith dialogue and, on the other hand, his belief of what can be called "common core mysticism." We shall explore Merton's ecumenical thoughts in the last chapter where Merton's later view of contemplation is evaluated.¹⁴

From World Denial to World Affirmation

Another noticeable difference in Merton's later writings is its affirming attitude toward the world. In *The Inner Experience* Merton stated clearly that if the "world" means the created universe, it

¹³ Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, 11.

¹⁴ "Contemplation and dialogue" is the title of Merton's essay collected in

is not evil but good.¹⁵ He condemned God-world dualism in contemplation. He stated that "the mere fact of breaking off communication with the world and of losing interest in it certainly does not make one *ipso facto* a 'contemplative.'"¹⁶ "On the contrary," he added, "a certain openness to the world and a genuine participation in its anguish would normally help to safeguard the sincerity of a commitment to contemplation."¹⁷ A true contemplative "is not just a man who forgets about the world."¹⁸ To pray is to "transform our vision of the world," and to "see all the history of mankind, in the light of God," said Merton.¹⁹

His early writings, however, give a different impression of the world. The world is depicted as a kind of stumbling block on the road to spiritual maturity. The monastery is "a barrier and a defense against the world."²⁰ To desire for God, as said in *What Is Contemplation?*, one needs to withdraw from the world. Asceticism is

Mystics and Zen Masters, 203-214.

¹⁵ It must be noted, however, that Merton's later world-affirming attitude is in fact balanced by a continuing critical attitude. In other words, he does not embrace the world with open arms; he remains sharply critical of the many worldly values he continues to see as evil and destructive. Though his early writings tend to denounce the entire socio-political world, in his later writings he directs his criticism toward specific issues of social concern. As John F. Teahan aptly puts it, "Whereas a generalized socio-political critique had informed his earlier denunciations of the world, now Merton discussed racism, militarism, the peace movement, the Third World, and many other specific topics with a deeper understanding of the salient issues than had been evident in his earlier denunciations. His critique of worldly evils in the sixties was also less gratuitous and more cogently argued than before." John F. Teahan, "Renunciation of Self and World: A Critical Dialectic in Thomas Merton," *Thought* 53 (1978): 143.

¹⁶ Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, 204.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Thomas Merton, "The Inner Experience: Prospects and Conclusions (VIII)," *Cistercian Studies* 19 (1984): 340.

¹⁹ Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Image, 1996), 112.

seen as a necessary path toward contemplation.²¹ "We experience God in proportion as we are stripped and emptied of attachment to His creatures," said Merton.²²

What made Merton rethink his early view of *contemptus mundi*? There are two ways to answer the question. One is to attribute the change totally to Merton's monastic formation. For example, Glenn Hinson contends that Merton's move from a world-denying to a world-affirming view is "a consequence chiefly of his own formation at Gethsemani."²³ Hinson explains:

Badly traumatized by a world of violence, disorder, irrationality, hopelessness, and evil, the young Merton tried to clang the doors shut so as to seal the world out completely. But that world, he came to realize, entered with him. He discovered "the enemy" and it was he. The contemplative life took him from behind his own back and stood him before his face and made him look at himself. When it looked as if he would be overwhelmed during a "dark night" - his "submarine earthquake" - he experienced a breakthrough and a resurrection: the sign of Jonas.²⁴

Hinson is right in stating that the young Merton, who entered Gethsemani at age 26 in 1941, was not capable of accepting responsibility for the world and therefore "pronounced a not-too-polite curse on all that was outside the monastery."²⁵ But 10 years later, as Merton grew in his contemplative life, he was aware of the cause of his negative reaction to the world and began to express doubts about the value of technically precise and systematic methods

²⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (London: Sheldon Press, 1975), 320.

²¹ Ibid., 53.

²² Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, 174.

²³ Glenn Hinson, "Contemptus Mundi-Amor Mundi: Merton's Progression from World Denial to World Affirmation," *Cistercian Studies* 26 (1991): 339.

²⁴ Ibid., 349.

of asceticism.²⁶ He discovered in himself the inability to empathize with the tortured and twisted world. He understood "catholic" "not merely to be correct according to an abstractly universal standard of truth, but also and above all to be able to enter into the problems and the joys of all, to understand all, to be all things to all men."²⁷

It is true that Merton began to rethink his early reaction to the world in the early 1950s, but he did not openly declare a world-affirming attitude until the end of that decade. Only in Merton's later writings do we see clearly a new orientation toward the world. This observation leads us to believe that Merton's new perception of the world was caused by something more than his own religious experience. It seems that while Merton's growing experience in monastic life had taught him about the real meaning of solitude, his extensive learning from Zen-Taoism in the mid and late 50s had reinforced his desire to actually change his perception of world.

Merton learned a great deal from Zen-Taoism and consequently

²⁵ Ibid., 342.

²⁶ Merton did remark in his journal of 1951 about his immature thinking of the world, "Actually, I have come to the monastery to find my place in the world, and if I fail to find this place, I will be wasting my time in the monastery. It would be a grave sin for me to be on my knees in this monastery, flagellated, penanced, though not now as thin as I ought to be, and spend my time cursing the world without distinguishing what is good in it from what is bad. Wars are evil, but the people involved in them are good, and I can do nothing whatever for my own salvation or for the glory of God if I merely withdraw from the mess people are in and make an exhibition of myself and write a big book saying, "Look! I am different!". . . .My first duty is to start, for the first time, to live as member of a human race which is no more (and no less) ridiculous than I am myself. And my first human act is the recognition of how much I owe to everybody else." Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk & Writer. The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 2, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 451.

adopted an Asian perspective on human existence. As Deba P. Patnaik aptly puts it, "Through his study of Zen, Merton discovered an interpenetration of personal, secular, and sacred history, and he came to see all history as sacred."²⁸ Merton appreciated the fact that Zen-Taoism is not so much a religion or a philosophy as a way of being in the world. The Zen masters whom he admired never emphasized the importance of withdrawing from the world of people and cities. He assimilated the Zen-Taoist approach to life and to the world. He defended Zen-Taoism and wrote to Christians in the West that "Zen is not an esoteric and world-denying cult of inner illumination, but that it has its rare and unique sense of responsibility in the modern world."²⁹ He urged Christians to learn from Zen-Taoism in achieving a down-to-earth spirituality. The Zen teachers moved him to integrate deep prayer with active social involvement. Merton met Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese monk, at Gethsemani in May 29, 1966.³⁰ The next day he wrote a brief article called "Nhat Hanh is My Brother," in which

he openly identified himself with the Vietnamese monk in his social concern.

He is more my brother than many who are nearer to me by race

²⁷ Hinson, "Contemptus Mundi-Amor Mundi," 341.

²⁸ Deba P. Patnaik, "Syllables of the Great Song: Merton and Asian Religious Thought," in *The Message of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1981), 84.

²⁹ Thomas Merton, "Nhat Hanh is my Brother," in *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*, ed. William Shannon (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 261.

³⁰ Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 6 (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 76. See also Shannon, *Silent Lamp*, 201.

and nationality, because he and I see things exactly the same way. He and I deplore war that is ravaging his country. We deplore it for exactly the same reasons: human reasons, reasons of sanity, justice and love.³¹

Considering Merton's appreciation and active promotion of the down-to-earth characteristic of Zen-Taoist spirituality, we believe that Zen-Taoism had affected Merton's later attitude toward the world. At the least, Zen-Taoism served a motivating function in Merton's decision to outspokenly change his perception of the world.

God and Tao

The third differing element in Merton's later writings on contemplation concerns Merton's understanding of God. Merton was deeply influenced by the book *Chuang Tzu*. He believed that the thought of the *Chuang Tzu* could open up exciting horizons and help him to be in touch with the mystery of God. He wrote, "I can see no other way to be honest before God than to hear the premonitions of His wisdom in one like Chuang Tzu."³² In many instances he keenly assimilated Taoist ideas in his later writings on contemplation.

Merton savored, among others, the concept of the Tao in classical Taoist literature. He perceived that the concept of the Tao and its relationship to humans is analogous to some of the insights of Christian contemplation, when he wrote, "Where there is no longer word or silence Tao is apprehended."³³ The sense that the Tao can

³¹ Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace*, 260.

³² Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World. The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 4 (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 102.

³³ Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (New York: New Directions, 1965), 152.

only be apprehended in silence is parallel to the concept of the dark night of the soul. And the way classical Taoism affirmed that "what can be said of the Tao is not really the Tao" can be compared to the Christian apophatic approach to God.

However, Merton knew very well that classical Taoism is not in the accepted sense a mystical doctrine and that it is not basically concerned with the same kind of experiences as what John of the Cross or Meister Eckhart described. Classical Taoism is in a literal sense a way, a mode of living that seeks harmony with the existence of universal forces, something close to what can be called natural laws. It does not entertain any sense of a transcendental spirit or being. The Tao comprehends all contradictions; it assembles and destroys; it is neither the Totality nor the Void; it is and is not; it acts and has no form.³⁴ After all, "there is nowhere it [Tao] is not to be found."³⁵

In classical Taoist literature there is no idea of a mystical union with a god that is transcendent as well as immanent, and there is no ecstatic experience which sanctifies the humanity of the Taoist as a true mystic. The very idea of transcendence is alien to a belief that in Tao all beings must live according to their natures. Classical Taoism is more an ethical teaching on how to live wisely rather than how to fear or love the gods. It is more concerned with what is seen in everyday life than with what will be seen in Heaven. It teaches the way to attain a fulfilled life at the present moment.

³⁴ Ibid., 124.

³⁵ Ibid., 123.

The rule of living under Tao is threefold--uselessness, non-action, and complementarity.³⁶

Merton knew that Tao is not to be understood in a Christian sense.³⁷ But at times he could not stop himself from linking the concept of Tao with the Christian concept of *Logos*. John Wu, his tutor on Classical Taoism, certainly had influenced his view on the relation between the Tao and the *Logos*. Merton read Wu's translation of the *Tao Te Ching* and admired the way Wu compared the Tao with the *Logos*.³⁸ Like Wu, Merton would go as far as to equate the Tao with the *Logos* and use the two concepts interchangeably. For him, Tao and *Logos* represent the same Mystery. A typical example is found in *Inner Experience* where he expounded on the will of God and spiritual growth.

Spiritual maturity, he said, correlates with one's ability to accept one's hidden and dark self. One needs to discern the evil growth of one's actions from the good ground of the inner self. To avoid being controlled by one's inner darkness, Merton said, it is required that one gives oneself to the divine will in silence, hope, expectation, and unknowing.³⁹ But the divine will, Merton quickly clarified, is "not an arbitrary and magic power whose decrees must be spelt out from cryptic cyphers."⁴⁰ The divine will is clear and

³⁶ See the section "The Way of Tao" in chapter two of this study.

³⁷ Thomas Merton, "The Inner Experience: Christian Contemplation (III)," *Cistercian Studies* 18 (1983): 215. See also Thomas Merton, "The Inner Experience: Prospects and Conclusions (VIII)," *Cistercian Studies* 19 (1984): 341; and his exposition of the Tao in Thomas Merton, "Christian Culture Needs Oriental Wisdom," in *A Thomas Merton Reader*, ed. Thomas P. McDonnell, 294-299.

³⁸ See John C. H. Wu, trans., *Tao Teh Ching* (Boston & London: Shambhala, 1990).

³⁹ Merton, "The Inner Experience: Christian Contemplation (III)," 215.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

graspable, because it is seen in "the stream of reality and of life itself."⁴¹

In speaking of the divine will as the stream of reality of life, Merton perceived the Divine in the light of Tao. Obviously, Merton's perception of God was influenced by Zen-Taoism. First, in his later writings Merton deliberately shunned the expression that God is an object "out there" or "up there" to whom the praying person tries to reach out.⁴² He preferred to underline the obscurity of God in Zen-Taoist terms. God, he said in *Contemplative Prayer*, is "invisibly present to the ground of our being."⁴³ God is not so much an external object than the ground of the subject. In *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, he wrote that the "Transcendent" or the "Absolute" or "God" is experienced "not so much as object but Subject."⁴⁴ "It is in fact absurd and impossible to try to grasp God as an object which can be seized and comprehend by our minds."⁴⁵ God is in the depth of the self. In the poem *The Strange Islands*, he identified God as an inward Stranger whispering in deep silence.

Closer and clearer
Than any wordy master,
Thou inward Stranger
Whom I have never seen,
Deeper and cleaner
Than the clamorous ocean,
Seize up my silence
Hold me in Thy Hand!⁴⁶

⁴¹ Ibid. See also Thomas Merton, "The Inner Experience: Kinds of Contemplation (IV)," *Cistercian Studies* 18 (1983): 296.

⁴² Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 33.

⁴³ Ibid., 82.

⁴⁴ Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (Boston, Mass: Shambhala Publications, 1993), 152.

⁴⁵ Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 89.

⁴⁶ Thomas Merton, *Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1977), 290.

Second, influenced by the concept of Tao, Merton depicted God in a way he described Tao in *The Way of Chuang Tzu*. God is "the stream of this life," he said.⁴⁷ God is the depth of one's being as well as the life movement in this world. To know God, then, is to attune to the "logos" of the present situation of humanity, getting acquainted with its deepest suffering and being sensitive to its most viable hopes.⁴⁸ To do the will of God is to appreciate in the actuality of human life the values that are permanent, authentically deep, human, and truly spiritual. One who is in touch with God "is the one who is in harmony with the Tao."⁴⁹

Contemplation and Enlightenment

The fourth noticeable feature in Merton's later writings is the comparison between the experience of Zen enlightenment and Christian contemplation in terms of the awakening to the true self. The discovery of one's true identity is a major theme in Merton's writings on contemplation.⁵⁰ Early in *Seeds of Contemplation* Merton introduced

⁴⁷ Merton, "The Inner Experience: Christian Contemplation (III)," 216. .

⁴⁸ Merton, "The Inner Experience: Prospects and Conclusions (VIII)," 341.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Scholarly publications on this theme are numerous. See, for example, William H. Shannon, "Thomas Merton and the Discovery of the Real self," in *The Message of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publication, 1981), 192-203; William H. Shannon, "Thomas Merton and the Quest for Self-Identity," *Cistercian Studies*, vol. 22 (1987), 172-189; William H. Shannon, "Original Blessing: The Gift of the True Self," *The Way*, vol. 30 (1990), 37-46; Anne E. Carr, *A Search for Wisdom and Spirit: Thomas Merton's Ideology of the Self* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988); and George Kilcourse, "Personification of the True Self in Thomas Merton's Poetry," *Cistercian Studies*, vol. 24 (1989), 144-53; Ekman P. C. Tam, "Message to the Wounded World: Unmask the True Self-Merton and Zen," *Journal of Religious Studies and Theology* 17 (1998): 71-84.

It should be noted that, although many scholars have explored this

the concept of finding the true self in contemplation. He continued to develop it throughout his later writings and made some striking remarks in his unpublished manuscript *The Inner Experience*. He stated that on the level of experience Zen enlightenment and Christian discovery of the inner self are convergent. Both Zen awakening of the "original face" and Christian contemplation of the true self, he said, are the same experience of interior self-realization, like an inner explosion that blasts the mask of the false exterior self to pieces and reveals the inmost self.⁵¹

Another similarity he observed in the two self-realization experiences is their unexpected nature. Neither Zen meditation nor Christian contemplative practice can guarantee self-realization. The Zen students are advised to kill the Buddha, if they claim to have seen him in meditation. Likewise, Christians are taught to receive, not to produce infused contemplation. Merton wrote, "[T]here is and can be no special planned technique for discovering and awakening one's inner self, because the inner self is first of all a spontaneity that is nothing if not free."⁵²

By comparing the Christian experience of awakening the inner self with the Zen enlightenment of the original face, Merton gained new insights into his early understanding of the true and the false self. Zen teaching on pure awareness provided him with an even more radical

important theme in Merton's writings, a full study of Merton's comparative view on finding the inner self in Zen enlightenment and Christian contemplation is yet to be undertaken.

⁵¹ Merton, "The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation (I)," *Cistercian Studies* 18 (1983): 5.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 5.

way of understanding the true self as pure consciousness in which the subject, that is, the false self, disappears. Walter Conn is right in commenting that "[p]erhaps the area most clearly influenced by Zen were [sic] Merton's ongoing reflections on the true self and the false self."⁵³

Merton also tried to make sense of the Zen enlightenment experience from a theological perspective. He noticed that the major difference between Zen and Christianity involves the notion of God. For the Zen Buddhist, he said, enlightenment is the full realization of the inner self. "In Christianity," however, "the inner self is simply a stepping stone to an awareness of God."⁵⁴ One passes beyond the inner "I" to meet the "I AM."⁵⁵ But for the Zen Buddhist, Merton explained, "the real 'I' is just simply oneself and nothing more."⁵⁶ Zen enlightenment is the experience of coming home to the "homely" self, whereas Christian contemplation is the experience of coming home to the God of "I AM."

Merton knew so well that Christianity and Zen speak from two apparently different religious frameworks. While Christianity sees the inner self as grounded in God, Zen makes no ontological reference to the inner self. The true self in Zen exists as it is, whereas in Christianity the true self is a created image of God. Christianity seems to address two dimensions of reality--God and human. God created humans and humans live in God, and it is by the grace of infused

⁵³ Walter E. Conn, "Merton's Religious Development: The Monastic Years," *Cistercian Studies* 22 (1987): 285.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

contemplation that the two dimensions become one--God living God or Love loving in Freedom.⁵⁷ In contrast, Zen accentuates only the human dimension; it does not implore for divine intervention. Zen enlightenment, as Merton put it, is "the natural working of the inner self."⁵⁸ In Zen, the discovery of the inner self is simply depicted as the union with one's homely self. But in Christianity, the contemplative awareness of the inner self is at the same time an encounter with God. In Merton's words, it is a "natural" as well as a "supernatural" experience.⁵⁹

What makes the "natural" experience "supernatural" is the working of faith. It is by faith that the Christian experiences the presence of God in discovering the inmost self.⁶⁰ Without the working of faith, Christian contemplation remains to be a psychological purification of the inner self. Faith therefore brings the "supernatural" dimension to the Christian experience of finding the true self and therein separates the Christian experience from the "natural" experience of Zen enlightenment. Merton wrote,

Our awareness of our inner self can at least theoretically be the fruit of a purely natural and psychological purification. Our awareness of God is a supernatural participation in the light by which He reveals Himself interiorly as dwelling in our inmost self. Hence the Christian mystical experience is not only an awareness of the inner self, but also, by a supernatural intensification of faith, it is an experiential grasp of God as present within our inner self.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ See Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 283-284.

⁵⁸ Merton, "The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation (I)," 7.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 6-8.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 10.

⁶¹ Ibid.

However, Merton was not happy about the hidden sense of superiority in labeling Zen enlightenment as "natural" and Christian contemplation as "supernatural." He said,

[T]his distinction does nothing to win for him the regard of the non-Christian religions. Since it obviously implies a double standard, and since it is explicit in claiming a complete and essential superiority for Christian mysticism as such, this distinction has the effect of completely silencing all ecumenical dialogue right from the start.⁶²

Out of respect, Merton theologized the experience of Zen enlightenment and turned it from "natural" into "supernatural." He suggested that what the Zen Buddhist says about the enlightened Self should be perceived as the presence of the Divine, since "the mystical union between the soul and God renders them in some sense 'undivided' (though metaphysically distinct) in spiritual experience."⁶³ Merton suggested that although Zen has no theology and rejects a concept of God, Zen enlightenment can be an encounter with God.⁶⁴

By theologizing the Inmost Self of Zen as the Divine, Merton could comfortably see the experience of Zen enlightenment as an anonymous or hidden "supernatural" grace, of which the Zen Buddhist is unaware. Merton's theological understanding of Zen enlightenment is noteworthy. We shall comment on this in the final chapter of this thesis. Here it is important to note that Merton tried to unify the

⁶² Merton, "Contemplation and the Dialogue between Religions," *Sobornost* 5 (1969): 564-565. This essay was revised and printed in *Mystics and Zen Masters* in 1967. But the paragraph quoted above did not appear in the revised essay. In the revised essay, Merton substituted the above paragraph with the Declaration on Non-Christian religions and simply stated that "supernatural contemplation is certainly admitted as possible in all religions." Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, 206-207.

⁶³ Ibid., 11.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

two experiences by identifying only one single difference in terms of the notion of God. The notion of God is for him only a difference in theological formulation. In mystical experience, God and Self are "undivided," as he said. Merton would suggest that the Christian should by all means learn from Zen and could attain a kind of Christian Zen enlightenment in which the meeting with the God of "I AM" is realized. Zen certainly had influenced Merton in his understanding of the contemplative realization of the true self.

Contemplation and Ordinariness

The last discernible difference in Merton's later writings is its emphasis on what can be called ordinary spirituality. Merton blurred the distinction between the way and the goal of contemplation and intended to deconstruct the traditional itinerary of prayer life. He highly valued lay spirituality and condemned the duality between prayer and everyday life. He denounced elitism, professionalism, dualism, and pragmatism in Christian contemplation, which, he believed, are against the principle of ordinariness. The accentuation of ordinary spirituality as well as the style and content of his teaching on this subject, is very much the wisdom of Zen-Taoism. This shows that Merton had assimilated the ordinary aspect of Zen-Taoist spirituality in his view of contemplative prayer and spiritual itinerary.

The Danger of Elitism

Merton never supported spiritual elitism. Early in *What Is*

Contemplation? Merton noted that contemplation is available to every Christian, although infused contemplation remains a special gift to a few, who are considered to be proficient in the life of prayer.⁶⁵ He was careful not to present active contemplation as inferior to infused contemplation. Merton's early awareness of the danger of spiritual elitism in Christian contemplation was affirmed when he came to know Zen-Taoist spirituality.

Merton learned that Zen and Taoism reject spiritual elitism and he fully agreed with that position. Consequently, he was not hesitant to assert in his later writings that contemplation is not the monopoly of a few experts in spiritual life. In *Contemplative Prayer*, for example, he wrote that it is wrong to "elevate the contemplative above the ordinary Christian by initiating him into a realm of esoteric knowledge and experience," as if the person were a passionless angel.⁶⁶

Merton strongly denounced spiritual elitism in his later writings. He found it unacceptable to categorize people into "specialist" or "lay person." The specialist is seen as one who takes contemplative life as a lifelong vocation and is specially gifted with esoteric experiences in contemplation. The lay person, on the other hand, is regarded as one who would not, for some reasons, live a life of solitude and is therefore almost incapable of receiving the grace of contemplation. But such a distinction, in Merton's view, is unhealthy. He preferred to underscore the importance of lay spirituality, for he had in his mind many stories of the Zen masters

⁶⁵ See chapter five of this study, the section on What Is Contemplation?.

⁶⁶ Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 23.

who were illiterate and yet had profound wisdom in spiritual life.

He was also impressed by the depth of the ordinary person described in the *Chuang Tzu* as the "man of Tao." He encouraged lay people who were interested in spiritual life to form groups to foster contemplative spirituality.⁶⁷ To married lay people he affirmed their married state and remarked that "their sharing of married sexual love enters into their contemplation."⁶⁸

Above all, Merton stressed that lay people can experience the grace of contemplation as well as the contemplative monks. This is because, he said, lay people are not concerned with success in contemplation, and "when contemplation is no longer sought, or cherished, or desired, the grace of contemplation is most secure and most efficacious."⁶⁹ He even perceived similar qualities between the lay contemplative and the "man of Tao." The lay Christian contemplative, who "is not seeking anything special or demanding any particular satisfaction," he said, "is the one who is in harmony with the Tao."⁷⁰ Like the "man of Tao," a lay Christian contemplative "can swim with the living stream of life and remain at every moment in contact with God, in hiddenness and ordinariness of the present moment with its obvious task."⁷¹

The Danger of Professionalism

⁶⁷ Merton, "Inner Experience: Problems of the Contemplative Life (VII)," 276.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 278.

⁶⁹ Thomas Merton, "Inner Experience: Kinds of Contemplation (IV)," *Cistercian Studies* 18 (1983): 295.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 341.

⁷¹ Ibid., 296.

The twin brother of elitism is professionalism. According to the mystical tradition, Christian spiritual life is depicted in terms of stages. It is said that the Christian grows in the life of prayer from the early stage of the beginner to the optimal stage of the proficient. The early stage is seen as transitory to the optimal. The optimal stage is like the final destination of a journey. In his early works Merton followed the teaching of the mystical tradition and reiterated the spiritual itinerary of prayer life. He encouraged readers of *What Is Contemplation?* to aim at higher goals in spiritual life, that is to pursue infused contemplation.⁷² In other early works he identified full contemplation with proficiency in spiritual life.

However, Merton shifted his emphasis in his later writings, particularly in *Contemplative Prayer*. He focused more on the ordinary instead of the supernatural aspect of contemplative prayer. In the book he used the term "contemplation" in a non-technical sense, denoting it as a kind of "contemplative orientation of the whole life of prayer" rather than the mystical state uncommon to the ordinary Christians.⁷³ He claimed that "the term 'contemplation' is both insufficient and ambiguous when it is applied to the highest forms of Christian prayer."⁷⁴

Merton also contended that the growth in spiritual life is not necessary linear and progressive. Those who perceive spiritual

⁷² Thomas Merton, *What Is Contemplation?* (Springfield, Illinois: Templegate Publishers, 1996), 7-12; 25-26.

⁷³ Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 114.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

growth as such, he said, may be tempted to strive for professionalism, to get ahead in the life of prayer. They may try to "attain this or that, and try to write down their own ticket in the life of contemplation."⁷⁵ But prayer life, he added, is not a career; it is not to be evaluated in terms of success or performance.

Merton learned from the Zen master and the Taoist sage that the correct attitude in the life of prayer is gratitude, humility, and contentment. When the Zen master is praised about his spiritual advancement, he will say, "Sorry, I don't understand what you are saying." Master Chuang's advice is this: "Achievement is the beginning of failure, and fame is the beginning of disgrace."⁷⁶ The simple men of Tao do not enjoy power and reputation. The one who has mastered Zen meditation is actually the one who has unmastered it, the one who has given up all the various ways of keeping oneself unhappy, by living in the future or the past. Merton remembered by heart the famous Zen story of trying "to make a Buddha by practicing Zazen."⁷⁷ The story sarcastically points out the mistake of those who try to be proficient in spirituality.

In Zen, meditation does not take the person on a journey to some other dimension or to a faraway land. It only shows the person who and what and where she or he really is. The feeling one gets when one meditates, of having made a leap or a journey, is only a measure of how far one has strayed from oneself in the first place in the busyness and distraction of one's day to day life. The journey of

⁷⁵ Ibid., 37.

⁷⁶ Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, 115.

Zen meditation, then, is not a forward movement but a traveling back to where one really is, to where one really exists. Zen meditation is a nonjourney, a leap that is not there.

The Zen masters, with their sensible spirituality, are like soaring eagles up in the sky. However high a state they have attained, they never cease to deny that fact. They teach their student that the only way to go upward is by descending to the earth. Thus, when a monk asked the master Chi-chen, "What is the way upward?" the master replied, "You will hit it by descending lower."⁷⁸

Likewise, the Christian who wants to go deeper in the life of prayer, Merton said, must be "first perfectly content to be a beginner and really experience himself as one who knows little or nothing, and has a desperate need to learn the bare rudiments."⁷⁹ Those who are always concerned with how far they have proceeded in the prayer itinerary and are too eager to reach what they believe to be "a high degree of prayer," get away from the truth of prayer and from the reality of life. The compulsive "professionals," while "observing themselves and trying to convince themselves of their advance, they become imprisoned in themselves," said Merton.⁸⁰

No one wants to be beginner. Everyone desires to be on the top, to be extraordinary. But Merton advised his readers in the language of Zen that "we will never be anything else but beginners, all our

⁷⁷ The full story was quoted in Chapter three, p. 96.

⁷⁸ John Wu, *The Golden Age of Zen: The Classic Work on the Foundation of Zen Philosophy* (NewYork: Doubleday Image, 1996), 187.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

life!"⁸¹ In saying this Merton referred to an important insight in Zen: one who claims to be an "expert" is an ignorant "beginner," and one who admits to be a "beginner" is a real "expert." A Zen story, which Merton came to know through John Wu, can illustrate this. It is about the Zen Master Ch'ing-yuan Hsing-ssu, the student of Hui-neng:

On his first visit to the patriarch, he asked, "What should one do in order not to fall into the sphere of relative degrees?" The patriarch asked back, "What have you been doing lately?" Hsing-ssu replied, "I have not even practiced the fourfold Noble Truth [the basic Buddhist teaching]." "What degree have you arrived at?" asked the patriarch.

Hsing-ssu said, "Since I have not even practiced the Noble Truth, how can I speak of any degrees?" The patriarch was deeply impressed by the depth of his insight, and made him the leader of the community.⁸²

Trying to transmit the Zen insight to his readers, Merton advised his readers to remain a beginner rather than to be an expert in the life of prayer. If one treats contemplative prayer as a career, he said, one will be concerned with achievement, and contemplation at the end will not be different from the desire to get ahead, to get more money, or a better job. To be ordinary in the life of prayer is a blessing in itself. Merton poetically expressed his encouragement to those taking the course of ordinariness in prayer life.

Be still:
There is no longer any need of comment,

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² John Wu, *The Golden Age of Zen: The Classic Work on the Foundation of Zen Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday Image, 1996), 53.

It was a lucky wind
That blew away his halo with his cares,
A lucky sea that drowned his reputation.⁸³

The Danger of Pragmatism

Pragmatism is as dangerous as elitism and professionalism. Being immersed in the monastic tradition, Merton was aware of the danger of pragmatism in the life of prayer. He offered very few concrete directives for the practice of prayer in his writings. Granted his fundamental reservation about techniques, he only referred to the Eastern Christian practice of the "Jesus Prayer" and mentioned the possibility of using short scriptural texts as a basis for prayer. As Michael Casey rightly observes, Merton did not want to give the impression that "a particular technique or practice is an infallible means of 'getting contemplation,' or that any particular method is so significant that it could not be bypassed."⁸⁴ Merton feared that prayer techniques might become means by which one protects oneself from God's action and short-circuits any emergent movement of purification. "The contemplative way is, in fact, not a way. Christ alone is the way," he warned his readers.⁸⁵ While a method of prayer can be helpful in one's prayer life, he said, it may so fill the time of prayer that the felt need for God is extinguished.⁸⁶

In his later writings Merton warned his readers about the danger of seeking "a systematic program of spiritual self-purification in

⁸³ Merton, *Collected Poems*, 279.

⁸⁴ Michael Casey, "Merton Within a Tradition of Prayer (II)," *Cistercian Studies* 14 (1979): 87.

⁸⁵ Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 88.

order to attain to certain definite interior experiences."⁸⁷ All deliberate and systematic attempt to cultivate one's interior life is grounded on an artificial basis. It is because, Merton explained, "a contemplative and interior life which would simply make the subject more aware of himself and permit himself to become obsessed with his own interior progress would be no less an illusion."⁸⁸

Interestingly, the way Merton renounced Christian prayer methods and spiritual disciplines is similar to that of the Zen masters. The Zen masters teach the students to take meditation with a certain quality of playfulness. When meditation loses its lightness, they would say, it becomes like everything else – another object of desire. When one meditates for something other than meditating, one only becomes further ensnared in the endless cycle of getting and spending, whereby every activity in every moment has to have a goal. Reaching that goal yields fulfillment or happiness; failing brings disappointment or despair. The Zen masters remind their students that meditation ought to decrease the compulsion of their lives, not make it worse.

In the same fashion, Merton warned his readers that it is rather easy to master the methods, or the "tricks," of spiritual life, but in fact "in spiritual life there are no tricks and no short cuts."⁸⁹ Anyone who fixates on a particular form of consolation and emotional highs from meditation or contemplation is having a "spiritual disease."

⁸⁶ Casey, "Merton Within a Tradition of Prayer (II)," 88.

⁸⁷ Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 72.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 37.

It is because, he explained, "the fixation only produces false assurance, unreal spiritual identity, and imaginary fulfillment, and perhaps even an excuse for evading the realities of life."⁹⁰ Prayer is not about keeping score, nor is it about obsessively looking for a particular result. Prayer, Merton said, is a way of one's ordinary life. To have an ordinary mind in the life of prayer is to face desolation with serenity. Merton wrote in one of his poems,

His God lives in his emptiness like an affliction.
What choice remains?
Well to ordinary is not a choice:
It is the usual freedom
Of men without visions.⁹¹

One of the most difficult challenges in prayer or meditation is to let go of expectation and simply rest in God. Prayer does not make one better or worse or different than one is. Merton nicely adopted the Taoist principle of "uselessness" in his view of Christian prayer life. The principle of "uselessness" considers the value of things from the standpoint of uselessness, as expressed in Merton's *The Way of Chuang Tzu*.⁹² In applying the principle to the development of spiritual life, Merton encouraged his readers to let go of the urge to do "useful" things and to become a "useful" person in God. They should appreciate the "usefulness" in "uselessness." It is "the apparent useless element in the life of prayer which makes it truly a life," Merton wrote.⁹³

To pray is not to gain, nor to be extraordinary. Put in a

⁹⁰ Ibid., 108.

⁹¹ Merton, *The Collected Poems*, 280.

⁹² See Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (New York: New Directions, 1965), 35-36, 59, 153.

Zen-Taoist term, "to pray" is just "to see." "Prayer," Merton said, "transforms our vision of the world, and makes us see it, all men, and all the history of mankind, in the light of God."⁹⁴ Merton warned that Christians, like the Zen students, may be trapped by the thinking that they must pray deeply or harder in order to benefit from the practice. Actually, the opposite is true. If one prays too deeply and too hard, Merton said, one will most likely miss the point of praying, which is simply to be aware of the present place and time, of the people around us, and above all, of God who is the hidden ground of love. Zen teaches that the purpose of meditation is to keep one alert to the realities. Borrowing from Zen this teaching on meditation, Merton would advise Christians that "[w]hen you meditate you are not trying to have any particular experience. You are simply awake."⁹⁵

The Danger of Dualism

Merton brought with him a kind of dualistic thinking about the sacred and the secular when he entered the monastery in 1941. But, as mentioned in the above section on Merton's worldview, Merton began to be aware of the pitfall of dualism in the early 50s. From then on, Merton tried in many ways to amend his view of the world. Being touched by the down-to-earth quality of Zen-Taoist spirituality, Merton was motivated to explicitly affirm a non-dualistic worldview.

⁹³ Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 114.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁹⁵ Clark Strand, *The Wooden Bowl: Simple Meditation for Everyday Life* (New York: Hyperion, 1998), 96.

He tried to draw the attention of Christians to social issues of the country and of the world.⁹⁶ When he wrote about contemplative prayer, he carefully reminded the readers of the danger of dualism.

Dualism appears, Merton said, when one divides the inner life from the rest of one's existence. To cultivate one's inner life does not necessarily mean to have contempt for the external as worldly, sensual, and material. This kind of spirituality is based on "a bad theology,"⁹⁷ said Merton. A healthy spirituality, on the other hand, is rooted in the concrete realities of everyday life; it is not based in opposition to nature and the body. One's spirituality manifests itself in one's respect for one's work, one's friends, and one's surrounding. Discipline of prayer or meditation is in vain if it is abstracted from one's ordinary life. In Merton's own words, "Meditation has no point and no reality unless it is firmly rooted in life."⁹⁸

Dualism is harmful to one's spiritual life because it usually fosters a wrong attitude toward asceticism. With a dualistic view of reality, Merton said, one may end up making "a cult of suffering for its own sake."⁹⁹ The real purpose of ascetic practice, Merton

⁹⁶ For example, in his journal of November 10, 1959, he reflected on social injustice and his own religious life. He wrote, "I cannot escape the fact that the stagnation of my prayer life here-- especially in community exercise like Conventional Mass, is due to deep involvement in the collective sin of American society and American Catholicism--a sin of which we all refuse to be aware. How offer to God prayer as an act of justice when I am living in injustice? An injustice which pervades the whole world and is even greater in the camp of those who can see that we are exploiters. They are worse. The People of God are the poor of the world, in Africa, Asia, Latin America..." Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, 341.

⁹⁷ Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 39.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 72.

explained, is to free oneself from inordinate cares and aggression so that one can appreciate the good things in life. One who feels uncomfortable to enjoy the good things in life is uncomfortable with oneself. Consequently, the uncomfortable self would wish to exorcise interior anxiety and catch the attention of others by self-imposed ascetic works.¹⁰⁰ But this kind of ascetic works can never make a person spiritual. Merton once wrote with Zen humor that it would be more religious eat a full dinner with gratitude than to fast with a gloomy face.¹⁰¹ In writing this, Merton must have recalled images of the "irreligious" Zen masters who ate and sometimes got drunk in the market place.

Merton suggested that to avoid dualism is not to lose sight of the present. Yet, the present is too close to see. As a Zen teacher finely puts it, the present is like the nose on our face, right before our eyes, but we easily look past it.¹⁰² Merton highlighted the important connection between being present to oneself and discovering one's true self. By living fully in the present, one finds the true self and is at the same time in touch with God. Being in touch with God in the here and now, everything one is doing is spiritual. Merton wrote that all that is blessed by His will becomes 'spiritual' even though it may be a material thing like eating."¹⁰³

Prayer is spiritual because it grows out of life. Prayer is not an isolated department of life; it is the realization of the

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 74.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Strand, *The Wooden Bowl*, 122.

¹⁰³ Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, 74.

God-ward potential inherent in life. Merton disagreed with the thought that "Christian perfection is attained only by a simple-minded concern for 'spiritual things' seen as deeply marked off and separated from 'temporal things.'" ¹⁰⁴ When Merton put forward the holistic concept that the sacred is seen in the secular and the secular is nothing short of the sacred, he seemed to have in mind the Taoist idea of complementarity. As he himself wrote in *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, the way of complementarity is to follow two courses at once. ¹⁰⁵ A complementary view of reality involves seeing things as a whole and letting go of one-sided perspectives. ¹⁰⁶ Dualistic thinking violates the law of complementarity.

Conclusion

Zen-Taoism played a significant role in Merton's writings and personal development. The early chapters of this study show that Merton's personal life and writings on contemplation were highly influenced by Zen-Taoism. In the last two chapters, by examining the unique features of his later writings, we further detect the influence of Zen-Taoism on Merton's later view of contemplation. We can say, in conclusion, that Zen and Taoism had influenced Merton's view of contemplation in the following ways.

First, Zen-Taoism influenced Merton's approach to articulate contemplative experience. In his later writings on contemplation, Merton moved from a dogmatic approach to an experiential approach.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Merton , *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, 35.

Although Merton always desired the experiential more than the dogmatic, he did not openly adopt the experiential in his early writings. Merton's learning about the experiential nature of Zen-Taoism motivated him to return to this central focus. The influence of Zen-Taoism in this area is indirect; it serves as a positive stimulation for Merton.

Second, Zen-Taoism influenced Merton contemplative attitude toward the world. Although Merton began to doubt his negative view of the world in the early 1950s, he did not explicitly admit his immature attitude until the very end of the decade. Merton's discovery of the world-affirming spirituality of Zen-Taoism pushed him forward to correct his own attitude toward the world. The Zen-Taoist influence on Merton in this regard is also indirect. It is more a kind of affirmation or reinforcement than a totally new insight.

Third, Zen-Taoism influenced Merton's understanding of God, in the sense that his later writings tended to describe God in Zen-Taoist terms. God was understood not as an external and distant object remote from humanity, but as the ground of one's being and the stream of life. Merton was directly influenced by the Taoist idea of the nameless and invisible Tao.

Fourth, Zen-Taoism influenced Merton's understanding of the process of finding the true self in contemplation. Merton thoughtfully worked out a theological interpretation of the experience of Zen enlightenment in his later writings. Merton was

¹⁰⁶ See Ibid., 42,44,88.

of the opinion that the Christian contemplative awareness of the true self and the Zen awakening to one's true nature were similar experiences, but that their theological articulation was different. In so doing, he tried to make Zen an accessible way of Christian spirituality. Merton was drawn by Zen-Taoism into a dialogue of religious experience.

Lastly, Zen-Taoism influenced Merton's understanding of Christian contemplative prayer. Merton put forward a different outlook on Christian contemplation in his later writings, one which emphasized the importance of ordinariness in contemplative prayer by warning readers to avoid four negative movements in Christian spirituality. He asserted that when ordinary spirituality is duly observed, the dangers of elitism, professionalism, pragmatism, and dualism could be avoided. Merton referred to the practical wisdom of Zen-Taoism in his exposition of Christian contemplative prayer and spiritual itinerary as an aid to dealing with these problems.

In the later period of his life, Merton seemed to be living in two incompatible worlds--Christian contemplation and Zen enlightenment. He was, however, delighted to find himself able to enjoy Zen as well as Christian contemplation. He saw the two traditions as coming from one spiritual source. By drinking from the wells of both traditions, he hoped, as he said shortly before he died, "to become a better and more enlightened monk."¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton et al. (New York: New Directions, 1973), xxviii.

CHAPTER EIGHT

EVALUATION OF MERTON'S VIEW OF CONTEMPLATION

Introduction

The previous chapters of this study have shown that Merton's later works on contemplation were imbued with the wisdom of Zen-Taoism and his later view of contemplation was influenced by Zen-Taoist ideas. In this chapter we evaluate Merton's later view of contemplation. We want to further identify if Merton's view of contemplation is a "Christian" view in a theological sense. We are interested to know if Merton had sacrificed too much of the Christian elements to accommodate Zen-Taoist ideas in his view of contemplation. Did Merton's later view of contemplation indicate that he was a religious syncretist? Why was Merton so enthused about comparing the experience of Christian contemplation and Zen enlightenment? Was there a theological assumption behind Merton's understanding of mystical experience in Zen and Christian traditions?

We evaluate Merton's later view of contemplation from three angles. First, we look at whether Merton's later view was a syncretistic formulation. Second, we explore if Merton's later view of contemplation was somehow a part of his concern for dialogue on religious experience. Lastly, we examine how Merton's view of

contemplation implied a typical Christian construct of common-core mysticism.

The Approach of a Wider Ecumenist

In chapter six, we have briefly touched on the question as to whether or not Merton's later view of contemplation was still "Christian." We believe that Merton was faithful to the Christian tradition while realizing new ways to perceive realities. Merton never lessened his commitment to Christianity and, had he continued to live, we do not believe he would have done so. He could appreciate and appropriate other traditions precisely because he was an advocator of "wider ecumenism."

As a convert, Merton's religious attitude had been essentially "triumphalist," dominated by a baroque view of Catholicism that had ruled the Church for four centuries since the Council of Trent. In his early writings he made many depreciative references to Asian religions. But he was one of those whose standpoint altered dramatically in the years before the extensive Church reforms that Vatican II initiated under the guidance of Pope John XXIII in 1962. In fact, Merton's ecumenical concern began to grow in the mid 1950s.¹

¹ A process of maturation is discernible in Merton's attitude toward ecumenism and interreligious dialogue. For an overview of the development of Merton's ecumenical perception of other Christians, other religions, and non-believers, see E. Glenn Hinson, "Expansive Catholicism: Merton's Ecumenical Perceptions," *Cistercian Studies* 14 (1979): 290-304. Hinson argues that "his [Merton's] ecumenism was really an aspect, an outgrowth, a product of

Merton can be rightly called a pioneer in the modern ecumenical movement within the Roman Catholic Church.² His personal secretary Brother Patrick Hart says that beginning in the 50s, Merton had already made informal dialogue with groups of Baptists, Methodists, Disciples of Christ, and Episcopalians from nearby Kentucky, Indiana, and Tennessee seminaries or exchanged with students from various Midwestern universities. The visitors would spend a day or two at the Abbey of Gethsemani, attend the liturgical offices and eucharistic celebrations with the monks, and then enter into ecumenical discussions with Merton and his confreres.³

both his 'Catholicism' and his contemplation." (p. 291)

²The modern ecumenical movement may be dated from the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910, even though it was an outgrowth of several precedent councils. The Edinburgh Conference ultimately led to the establishment of the World Council of Churches. The establishment of such a wide-scale alliance among churches from different traditions is deemed as a milestone in the history of the ecumenical movement. On August 23, 1948, amid the ruins of the Second World War, the first assembly of the World Council of Churches, have been delayed for 10 years, was finally held in Amsterdam. On that day, delegates from Orthodox, Anglican, and Protestant churches worshipped together, demonstrating a desire to stand in solidarity with the agony of humanity. The participants believed that the event was a landmark occasion for confessing faith held in common and for relating the good news to the wounded and disintegrated world. The Roman Catholic Church, however, did not participate in the event. It was not until 1961 that participants accredited by the Vatican were present at an Assembly as observers. And the 1964 Council Decree on Ecumenism, which regarded members of other communions as "separated brethren," rather than outside the Church, had brought forth a new phase of ecumenical openness. Since then, there was a rapid multiplication of councils of churches, whether on a regional scale, on the national plane, or in towns and local communities. These councils normally include representatives of all denominations, including Roman Catholics. Therefore, ecumenists generally regard the late 1960s as the "golden age" of the ecumenical movement. See Konrad Raiser, *Ecumenism in Transition: A Paradigm Shift in the Ecumenical Movement?* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1991), 1-2; and Robert S. Beilheimer, *Breakthrough: The Emergence of the Ecumenical Tradition* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1989), 1-8.

³ Hart, *Thomas Merton, Monk: A Monastic Tribute*, 211.

Merton was not only eager to create unity among Christians of different traditions.⁴ Toward the end of the decade Merton felt also the urge to dialogue with representatives of the other religious traditions. He recognized the fact that Christians live in a world where there are other Christians and other faith traditions which can embody true insights. In an essay written in 1961, entitled "Christian Culture Needs Oriental Wisdom," he wrote,

At least this much can and must be said: the "universality" and "catholicity" which are essential to the Church necessarily imply an ability and a readiness to enter into dialogue with all that is pure, wise, profound and humane in every kind of culture. In this one sense at least a dialogue with Oriental wisdom becomes necessary. A Christian culture that is not capable of such a dialogue would show, by that very fact, that it lacked catholicity.⁵

Merton advocated the idea of "wider ecumenism."⁶ "Ecumenism," in a strict sense of the word, he said, concerns itself only with the "household of the faith," that is, with various Christian Churches. But to add a qualifier "wider" to the word "ecumenism," Merton explained, is to recover the original meaning of the Greek word

⁴ He wrote in his journal of April 28, 1957, "If I can unite in myself, in my own spiritual life, the thought of the East and the West of the Greek and Latin Fathers, I will create in myself a reunion of the divided Church and from that unity in myself can come the exterior and visible unity of the Church. For if we want to bring together East and West we cannot do it by imposing one upon the other. We must contain both in ourselves and transcend both in Christ." Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life, The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 3, ed. Lawrence Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 87.

⁵ Thomas Merton, "Christian Culture Needs Oriental Wisdom," in *A Thomas Merton Reader*, ed. Thomas P. McDonnell (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1974), 303.

⁶ It is believed that Merton was the first to coin the term "wider ecumenism." A contemporary writer has expounded on the significance of the term and used it to encourage Christians to open for dialogue with other religious traditions. See Hans Schwarz, "The Christian Aspect of the Wider Ecumenism," *Dialogue and Alliance*, 2, no. 2 (1988): 52-61.

"οικουμενη," meaning the whole inhabited world.⁷ The idea of wider ecumenism refers to "the household and spiritual family of man seeking the meaning of his life and its ultimate purpose."⁸

Envisioning the fulfillment of wider ecumenism, Merton urged Christians in the West "to understand various ways in which men of different traditions have conceived the meaning and method of the 'way' which leads to the highest levels of religious or of metaphysical awareness."⁹ He critically reviewed the history of the Christian mission movement in the Orient at the end of the 19th century and wrote regretfully that the contemplative monasteries built there were blatantly "colonial." It was "colonial" because, Merton said, those monasteries built in the mission field "became missionary branch offices of the big mother house in Europe" and the native monks who entered the monastery became "pseudo-europeans."¹⁰

⁷ The word "οικουμενη" is derived from the verb "οικεο," meaning "to dwell." It first appeared in the writings of Xenophanes, a pre-Socratic philosopher. It is originally a geographic concept, meaning the inhabited world. In later Hellenism, especially in the time of Alexander the Great, as philosophy, religion, and politics worked together to create the idea of a common interdependent community of people, the term began to carry also a cultural sense. By then the term was used to designate a cosmopolitan notion of humanity. When later the Roman Empire emerged as the ruling power of the time, it was understood that the Roman Emperor ruled the whole "οικουμενη." Therefore we read in Luke 2:1 that "a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world (the οικουμενη) should be enrolled." Similarly in Matthew 24:14, we read this: "This gospel of the Kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world [οικουμενη]." Hence, the word "οικουμενη," as used in classical literature and in the New Testament, denotes a geographical realm in which diverse cultural and religious groups dwell. See Hans Schwarz "The Christian Aspect of the Wider Ecumenism," pp. 52-61.

⁸ Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1969), x.

⁹ Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, x.

¹⁰ Merton, "The Inner Experience: Prospects and Conclusions (VIII),"

Merton's openness to other religions was fully shown in his study of and writing on Zen-Taoism. "His essays on Zen and Taoism are among his most poetic and sympathetic works, perhaps because here he was in no way bound by the dogmas of a church he himself upheld," as George Woodcock observes.¹¹ Merton's friendly attitude toward Zen-Taoism was not typically Catholic at the time. As he pointed out, both the conservatives and the progressives within the Church were suspicious of Asian religions:

Conservatives because they think all Asian thought is pantheistic and incompatible with the Christian belief in God as Creator. Progressives because they think all Asian religions are purely and simply world-denying evasions into trance.¹²

But those with a contemplative bent, to whom Merton surely belonged, would hold a totally different attitude toward the Asian religions. "Only the Catholics who are still convinced of the importance of Christian mysticism," he continued, "are also aware that much is to be learned from a study of the techniques and experience of Oriental religions."¹³

Merton indeed learned much from Zen-Taoism and his later view of contemplation contained Zen-Taoist influences in a number of areas, as this study has already shown. One may then ask if Merton had sacrificed too much of his belief in Christian contemplation, or if

Cistercian Studies 19 (1984): 339.

¹¹ George Woodcock, *Thomas Merton: Monk and Poet, A Critical Study* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1978), 6.

¹² Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (Boston, Mass.: Shambhala Publications, 1993), 21.

¹³ *Ibid.*

Merton was a religious syncretist. Although Merton appreciated and incorporated wisdom from the Asian traditions, he was not an unreflective syncretist. He rejected "irresponsible syncretism" in an outright manner. For him, "irresponsible syncretism" is unacceptable because its claims are based on "purely superficial resemblances and without serious study of qualitative differences."¹⁴

Merton was not a syncretist because some of his articulations of Christian contemplation, although they contained Zen-Taoist influences, sounded utterly theological. The following quotation taken from *New Seeds of Contemplation* suffices to show Merton's strong theological persuasion on contemplative life. The new chapters of *New Seeds of Contemplation* were permeated with Merton's reading in Zen-Taoism, as we have shown in chapter six. But solid theological discourses on Christian contemplation, such as the following one, still stood firm in the chapters.

It is not the fruit of our own efforts. It is the gift of God Who, in His mercy, completes the hidden and mysterious work of creation in us by enlightening our minds and hearts, by awakening in us the awareness that we are words spoken in His One Word, and that Creating Spirit (*Creator Spiritus*) dwells in us, and we in Him. That we are "in Christ" and that Christ lives in us. That the natural life in us has been completed, elevated, transformed and fulfilled in Christ by the Holy Spirit. Contemplation is the awareness and realization, even in some sense experience, of what each Christian obscurely believes: "It is now no longer I that live but Christ lives in me."¹⁵

¹⁴ Ibid., 207.

¹⁵ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), 5.

This quotation indicates that Merton's understanding of contemplation had not turned into Zen. This typical Christian description of contemplation is enough to prove that Merton had never given up his belief in God the Creator, Christ the Word of God, the indwelling Holy Spirit, and the Bible. On the other hand, however, this quotation does show how Merton tried to assimilate the important Zen-Taoist idea of "awareness" into his mystical theology. But put in such theological context, the Zen-Taoist concept of "awareness" was in some way "theologized."

We can therefore say that Merton's later view of contemplation had not lost its "Christian" identity. His was a fully Christian view enriched by Zen-Taoist wisdom. Merton crossed his own religious boundary to learn from Zen-Taoism because he was a "wider ecumenist," believing that insights could be found in religious traditions other than Christian. He visited the land of Zen-Taoism not because he was homeless. To be "outgoing," he must have a home to which he could return. "And I believe that by openness to Buddhism, to Hinduism, and to these great Asian traditions, we stand a wonderful chance of learning more about the potentiality of our own traditions," said Merton.¹⁶ Merton's attempt to assimilate Zen-Taoism into his Christian understanding of contemplation reflected his belief in "wider ecumenism."

¹⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1973), 343.

The Concern for Dialogue on Religious Experience

Zen-Taoism had not shaken Merton's Christian belief. It expanded his spiritual horizon. Zen-Taoism as a way of being enlightened him to explore the world of religious experience. His later view of contemplation could be seen as an attempt of a Christian dialogue with Zen-Taoism on the level of religious experience.

Merton knew very well that there are radical divergences between Christianity and Zen-Taoism in terms of doctrine and belief. "Zen and Catholicism," he said, "don't mix any better than oil and water. . . .as long as Zen is considered as a school or sect of Buddhism."¹⁷ On a theological and doctrinal level, Zen-Taoism and Christianity are in no way connected, for Zen "is existential and ontological" and Christianity "is theological and personal."¹⁸ Christianity and Zen-Taoism are therefore "like mathematics and tennis," said Merton.¹⁹

¹⁷ Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (Boston, Mass.: Shambhala Publications 1993), 3.

¹⁸ Ibid., 76.

¹⁹ Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, 33. Merton also writes, "Can one tentatively say what these various traditions have in common? Here we immediately encounter difficulties, for it cannot be said that they all culminate in union with a 'personal God.' For the Moslem there is no question that God is a Person, but He is so completely and totally transcendent that the idea of union with Him poses doctrinal problems (which, however, the Sufis, in the main, ignore). For the Hindu, union with God on an 'I-Thou' level is admitted in bhakti, which is, however, considered an inferior form of union. In Buddhism the 'impersonality' of God is pushed to the point of *anatta*, in which not even the *Atman* or supreme Self of Hinduism is admitted. But, on the other hand, as soon as one looks a little deeper into the question, one finds that it is extremely complex and that the whole notion of *personality*, whether divine or human, will require considerable

Merton believed, however, that the only area that the two can relate is religious experience. He began to dialogue with Zen in terms of experience and enter into the world of Zen experience by practicing Zen awareness of realities. He discovered that in Zen-Taoism and Christianity is "the common capacity for contemplative experience and the fact of its realization on a very pure level."²⁰ In his later works *Inner Experience* he compared the Christian experience of contemplative realization of the true self with the Zen experience of awakening to the original nature. In the new chapters of *New Seeds of Contemplation* he tried to assimilate Zen awareness into Christian contemplation. Merton was convinced that from a psychological point of view, the Christian experience of union with God was parallel with the Buddhist experience of enlightenment of the self.

Merton's concern for dialogue on religious experience is accepted as one of the four forms of interreligious dialogue. According to Nigerian Cardinal Francis Arinze, who heads the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, and according to the official documents of the Catholic Church four forms of dialogue are proposed: the dialogue of life, the dialogue of action, the dialogue of theological exchange, and the dialogue of religious experience.

clarification before a real dialogue with the East can begin. Note, however, that all this is on the level of doctrine or of metaphysics. What about experience?" Ibid., 210.

²⁰ Ibid.

First, "dialogue of life" is interreligious relationship at the level of the ordinary relational situations of daily life: family, school, places of social or cultural contact, village meetings, work place, politics, trade or commerce. When neighbors of differing religions are open to one another, sharing their projects and hopes, concerns and sorrows, they are engaging in dialogue of life. Second, "dialogue of action" refers to Christians and other believers co-operating for the promotion of human development and liberation in all its forms. Third, "dialogue of discourse" is usually for specialists. Experts in Christianity and other religions meet to exchange information on their respective religious belief and heritages. Together they try to face modern problems and challenges in the light of their differing religions. Fourth, "dialogue of religious experience" refers to persons deeply rooted in their own religious traditions sharing experiences of meditation, contemplation, faith and its expression, ways of searching for God as the Absolute or of living the monastic or eremitic life, and also mysticism. This dimension of dialogue is important in that it will help to prevent the above three types of dialogue from degenerating into external actions without much spiritual depth.²¹

²¹ Cardinal Francis Arinze, *Meeting Other Believers* (Broughton Gifford, Wiltshire: Cromwell Press, 1997), 5-7. See also the document issued by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples: "Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflections and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus-Christ," *Origins* 21/8 (1991): 122-135.

The contemporary discourse on dialogue of religious experience is an affirmation of Merton's early observation.²² Merton's proposal for dialogue of religious experience was based on his "theology of religions." To say that Merton had a theology of religions is not to mean that Merton had theological reflections on world religions like those of Raimon Pannikar, Gavin D'Costa, and other theologians.²³ Merton's theological reflections were not systematic and always were expressed in the context of contemplation. Like many contemporary Christian thinkers, however, Merton did try to make sense of the existence of the world religions and their relation to Christianity. Merton's theological understanding of religions involves two major areas.

²² However, it is necessary to note that Merton is not the first one to propose "dialogue of religious experience." Back in the early 19th century, the idea of dialogue of religious experience already appeared in the writings of a Norwegian Lutheran missionary in China, Karl Ludvig Reichelt (1877-1952). Reichelt is the founder of Tao Fong Shan Christian Centre in Hong Kong, a "Christian monastery" built in the style of a traditional Chinese Buddhist monastery and temple. See Karl Ludvig Reichelt, *Truth and Tradition: A Study of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism* (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1927; 4th revised and enlarged ed. 1934); and Eric J. Sharpe, *Karl Ludvig Reichelt: Missionary, Scholar, and Pilgrim* (Hong Kong: Tao Fong Shan Ecumenical Centre, 1974).

²³ Both Pannikar and D'Costa propose a Trinitarian theology of religions, although the two disagree in terms of Christian attitude toward other religions. Pannikar adopts a pluralist attitude, whereas D'Costa claims to be inclusivist. They attempt to appreciate and make sense of the truth claims of the world religions from their respective trinitarian frameworks. It is interesting to compare the theology of religions of the two prominent thinkers. See, for example, Raimon Pannikar, *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man: Icon-Person-Mystery* (New York: Orbis, 1973); and Gavin D'Costa, "Towards a Trinitarian Theology of Religions," in C. Cornille and V. Neckebrouck, eds., *In a Universal Faith? Peoples, Cultures, Religions, and the Christ* (Louvain: Peeters, 1992), 139-154; Ekman P. C. Tam, "The Trinity and World Religions Reconsidered," *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 9 (1999): 52-66.

First, Merton believed that although doctrines of religions are irrevocably divergent, human religiosity converges beneath surface differences. Ecumenism, he said, seeks the inner and ultimate spiritual ground that underlies all articulated differences.²⁴ Second, Merton observed that it is the experience, not the revelation, in all religions that "represents the deepest and most authentic fruit of the religion itself."²⁵ "All religions," he wrote, "seek a 'summit' of holiness, of experience, of inner transformation to which their believers aspire."²⁶ For him, all religions share a common goal, the aspiration for a "union with God" in one way or other.²⁷

Merton's view of religions separated religious experience from religious doctrines and regarded religious experience as the ground of doctrinal formulation. This explains why Merton could comfortably dialogue with other religious traditions and often explore the religious experience of different religions. This also explains why Zen-Taoism, as a way of being directly in touch with life, was so attractive to Merton and could influence his view of contemplation.

Merton did not only believe that mystical experience is the ultimate concern and the ground of all religions. Steeped in Christian theology and spirituality, Merton also believed in a common

²⁴ Thomas Merton, "Contemplation and the Dialogue between Religions," *Sobornost* 5 (1969): 56

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

source of mystical experience in all religions. We shall comment on this in the following section.

The Theory of Common Core Mysticism

As Benard McGinn rightly observed, since the last few decades, more and more Christian scholars in the Anglo-American world are interested in the comparative study of mysticism.²⁸ The rise of interest in comparing the mystical elements in different religious traditions reflects an awareness of the plurality of religions.²⁹ Christian scholars with ecumenical zeal have started to dialogue with other religious traditions. They investigate whether different religions share in one way or another some commonalities in mystical experience. They ask if there is a "common core" in mysticism--that is, whether or not all mystical experiences, notwithstanding their divergent fundamental characteristics, are of the same nature.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Benard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century*, 314.

²⁹ Throughout this century, worldwide migrations and voluntary and involuntary populations displacements, together with the dramatic increase in travel, vastly improved communications, and progress in scholarship, have generated a movement of peoples and cultures that is unprecedented in history. These factors lead to, among many other changes, a novel and profound encounter among the religions of the world. According to P. McKenna, it is estimated that Buddhists and Hindus live now in more than 85 countries. The influence of the Hindu and Buddhist teachers in North America is especially noticeable, as indicated in the growing interest in Zen Buddhism and Hindu yoga and Transcendental Meditation. It is reported that Buddhism, not Christianity, is the fastest-growing religion in Canada today. The religious make up of many European countries in this century is much more diverse than that of the last century. See P. McKenna, "Christians Can Learn from Buddha's Way: Dialogue Between the Two Faiths: Focuses on Spirituality," *Compass* 13 (1995): 40-43.

William James and Evelyn Underhill are regarded as the earliest to hint at this question when they observe the common characteristics of mystical experience. Later, W. T. Stace and R. C. Zaehner agree with James and Underhill's observations: although the mystics of different religious traditions interpret their experiences according to their own doctrinal frameworks, the experience themselves share the same characteristics.³⁰ In their views, mystical experience in its pure form is universal; only the overt written expression of mystical experience appears to be theologically or doctrinally different from one to the other.

As seen in his later writings, Merton followed this view of universal mystical experience, although he was hesitant to agree with the claim that "the mystics' in all religions are all experiencing the same thing."³¹ It is true that he affirmed the importance of belief in mystical experience. He said that the fundamental belief of a mystic was not "something that a mystic could throw off like a suit of clothes" and that one's mystical experience was in some sense modified" by one's belief.³² Even if Merton had not yet fully agreed with the idea of universal mysticism, however, he more or less followed this approach in his writing. While he was cautious not to identify

³⁰ The representative works of these two authors include: Robert Charles Zaehner, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane: An Inquiry into Some Varieties of Praeternatural Experience* (New York: Oxford, 1961); and W. T. Stace, *The Teaching of the Mystics* (New York: New American Library, 1960).

³¹ Thomas Merton, "A Christian Looks at Zen," in *The Golden Age of Zen: The Classic Work on the Foundation of Zen Philosophy*, John C. H. Wu, (New York: Doubleday Image, 1996), 9.

³² *Ibid.*, 9.

himself as a "coreligionist," he did appear to be a "common-core theorist."

In *Inner Experience* Merton said that Zen enlightenment and Christian contemplation were similar in experience but different in theological expression, and that it was unfair to categorize Zen enlightenment as a purely psychological or natural experience. He could not totally agree with his Zen mentor Suzuki that "Zen is not mysticism" in the Christian sense of the word. He argued that Zen enlightenment had nothing short of a supernatural contemplation, even though the Zen Buddhists spoke about their mystical experience purely in natural terms. He found an excuse for them by saying that they simply did not care about metaphysics.³³ They were not interested in defining whether the awakened Self is a psychological self (or no-self) or the God self. But Merton would suggest that the "awakened self" is what the Christian perceives as God³⁴ In so doing, Merton seemed to imply that both the mystical experience of awakening to the inner self in Zen enlightenment and the discovery of the true self in Christian contemplation come from the same source--that is, from the Christian God. It is as if he were saying that both the Buddhist and the Christian are experiencing the same God. Or put in other way, he seemed to say that it is the Christian God who graced both the Christian and the Buddhist in their prayer and meditation.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

However, both Christian and Buddhist writers challenge the construct of common-core mysticism. It is said that the Christian claim that all religions are in one way or another in search of God or the Real is an imposition of a monotheistic concept and language on other religions, such as Chinese Zen Buddhism and classical Taoism. For this reason, Masao Abe sharply criticizes the affirmation of a common denominator of all religions as an attempt to search for monistic unity. He says, the view of monistic unity reduces the uniqueness of others' religious experience in life into a prescribed category, like that of "God" or "the Real."³⁵

Steven Katz, a Christian scholar, also declines the theory of common core mysticism. He argues that there is no such thing as an unmediated experience and that mystical experiences are above all religiously specific experiences. He writes, "*There are NO pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences...That is to say, all experience is processed through, organized by, and makes itself available to us in extremely complex epistemological ways.*"³⁶ One's mystical experience is rooted in one's cultural-linguistic world. Therefore, Buddhists have Buddhist mystical experiences; Jews Jewish ones; and Christians have mystical experiences relating to God, the triune deity. In other

³⁵ Masao Abe, "There is no Common Denominator for World Religions: The Positive Meaning of this Negative Statement," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 26 (1989): 80. See also Ekman P.C. Tam, "Another Look at the Theory of a Common Core Mysticism" *Dialogue and Alliance* 11 (1997): 31-42.

³⁶ Steven T. Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," in Steven T. Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (London: Sheldon Press, 1978),

words, Christian contemplation and Buddhist enlightenment are not the same and not to be perceived as coming from one single source, the triune God. According to Katz, to say that the Zen experience of self-awakening is also an experience of the presence of God, as Merton seemed to propose, is overlooking the cultural-linguistic formation of the Zen tradition and judging it too hastily from the Christian frame of reference.

It is understandable for the Christian to perceive all spiritual experiences as supernatural and graceful encounters with God. Similarly, believers in other traditions can also make sense of the Christian experience from their own religious framework. But it is always the Christians who are most active and eager to make theological interpretations of the experience of other traditions. To theologize that mystical experiences, despite their religious labels, are of one common source, which is the Christian God, is certainly out of good intention and helpful in encouraging Christian openness to interfaith dialogue.³⁷ But the Christian idea of common core mysticism somehow sounds provincial and arbitrary to other religious

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³⁷ Publications on the topic of common core mysticism and its implications on interreligious dialogue continue to multiply. See, for example, Sallie B. King, "Two Epistemological Models for the Interpretation of Mysticism," *Journal of American Academy of Religion* 56 (1988): 257-279; Larry Dwight Shinn, "Words, Symbols, Experience, and the Naming of the Divine," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 29 (1992): 418-431; Robert Fastiggi, "Unity, Multiplicity, Transcendence, and Immanence," *Dialogue and Alliance* 6, no. 2 (1992): 3-16; and Harry I. Wells, "Taking Pluralism Seriously; The Role of Metaphorical Theology within Interreligious Dialogue," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 30 (1993): 20-33.

traditions. Zen Buddhists would not be happy to hear that their experience of self-awakening is in fact an encounter with the Christian God. Nor would the Taoists be happy to accept the theological interpretation of Tao as Godhead in Christian terms.³⁶

Merton certainly made a great effort to advocate Christian openness to other religions and to promote friendly dialogue with the Asian traditions. The reason he interpreted Zen enlightenment from a Christian perspective is to show Christian readers that Zen is not an inferior kind of spiritual experience. Out of the same intention he almost stated that the Tao is God. But in "theologizing" Zen-Taoist experience and concept, Merton was not aware of the negative implications of his attempt.

A Synthetic Overview

Coming to the very end of this thesis, we should review again what has been found about the interplay between Merton's learning of

³⁶ For example, Matthew Fox's interpretation of Tao may sound offensive to Taoists. In my opinion, Fox's interpretation shows more of his reaction to Western Christianity than a correct understanding of Tao in classical Taoism. Fox writes, "I myself find the finest way to translate the Tao in Western spiritual language is to compare it to what the great mystics such as Meister Eckhart and Thomas Aquinas called the 'Godhead.' (Borrowing as they did from the fifth century Syrian monk, Denis the Areopagite.) The 'Godhead' is the other face of Divinity--other, that is, than 'God.' God acts but the Godhead does not act; God is God of history but Godhead is the mystery; God becomes but the Godhead just is; God is 'masculine' in both Latin and German; but Godhead is feminine in both languages. God is Creator and Liberator/Redeemer but the Godhead is the Source, indeed the 'Source without a Source.'" Matthew Fox, "Foreword," in R. John Mabry, *God as Nature Sees God: A Christian Reading of the Tao Te Ching* (Rockport, Mass./Shaftesbury, Dorset/Brisbane, Queensland: Element, 1994), 9.

Zen-Taoism and the development of his view of Christian contemplation. First of all, it is important to restate how Zen-Taoism relates to Merton's life and personality. As mentioned in chapters one, two, and three, in the time when Merton was upset and uncertain about being part of the Gethsemani community, he found the teaching of Zen-Taoism very insightful and perceptive. Zen-Taoism was at the time like a spiritual guide accompanying him in finding peace, not in his environment but in himself. As Merton went deeper into Zen-Taoism, he was happy to discover in Zen-Taoism the resources for the revival of Christian monastic life. He believed that the Zen-Taoist way of cultivating interior solitude and the life of "uselessness" should be learned by Western Christianity. In admiring the life and personality of the Zen-Taoist masters, he was convinced of the value of living a simple, solitary, and ordinary way of life.

In chapters four, five, six, and seven, we investigate particularly the influence of Zen-Taoism on Merton's view of Christian contemplation. We arrive at the conclusion that Zen-Taoism influenced Merton in a number of ways. Zen-Taoism indirectly influenced Merton's decision to change his writing approach and his attitude toward the created world. The changes made Merton a very different monk in his relation to society and to the people of other religious traditions. More directly, Zen-Taoism impacted on Merton's understanding of the contemplative life in general and of

the self and God in particular. These three areas of Zen-Taoist influence are visible in his later writings.

First, Merton borrowed the Taoist concept of Tao to delineate God's movement and involvement with humanity. Second, he analyzed comparatively the experience of Christian contemplation and Zen enlightenment regarding the realization of the true self. These two attempts reflect Merton's underlying theological presupposition of the necessity of religious dialogue. Third, Merton wrote eloquently about the attitude and itinerary of contemplative prayer using many Zen-Taoist expressions.

Because Merton's later view of contemplation looks so much different from his early one and contains significant Zen-Taoist influences, we go further to examine the nature of his later view. We hope to know if Merton's later view of contemplation is still a Christian view and what leads Merton to assimilate Zen-Taoism in such a fashion. This final chapter evaluates Merton's later view of contemplation from various angles. To conclude, a number of observations can be made.

First, Merton's later view of contemplation reflects his approach to other religious traditions. Merton was a wider ecumenist. On the one hand, he stood firm in his own tradition, and on the other hand, he was open to learn from other religious traditions. Consequently, his later view of contemplation remained a truly Christian view, but

it was open enough to absorb Zen-Taoist wisdom.

With this observation, we can avoid falling into uncritical praise of Merton's appropriation of Zen-Taoism. The comment that Merton's writings "are in fact full of Zen" should be qualified.³⁹ It is true that Merton learned a lot from Zen-Taoism, but he had given up nothing of his Christian belief. His later view of Christian contemplation was not so full of Zen to the degree that it lost its Christian identity. Merton was never an uprooted Westerner trying to be Asiatic. As a matter of fact, his explication of Zen was not totally free from Christian idioms. This could be seen, for example, in his statement that "Nirvana is the wisdom of perfect love grounded in itself and shining through everything, meeting with no opposition."⁴⁰ And despite his attempt to perceive God through the lens of the concept of Tao and Zen enlightenment, his faith remained utterly theistic.

Merton did not study Zen-Taoism to become either Buddhist or Taoist. He did it as a Christian monk. He received from Zen-Taoism some significant insights about spirituality, such as the concepts of non-duality, ordinariness, complementarity, uselessness, the invisible and yet immanent Tao, and direct realization of reality. These concepts help him to discover and articulate a view of

³⁹ John Wu, Jr. "The Zen in Thomas Merton," in *Your Heart Is My Hermitage: Thomas Merton's Vision of Solitude and Community* (Papers presented at Southampton Conference of the Thomas Merton Society, May 1996), ed. Danny Sullivan and Ian Thomson (London: The Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 1996), 90.

⁴⁰ Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (Boston, Mass.: Shambhala

contemplative life that is fundamentally Christian but with many rich nuances. Such a view of contemplation is particularly welcomed by lay Christians and those who are wearied by dull dogmas.

The second observation about Merton's later view of contemplation is that it is a reflection of Merton's concern for religious experience. Merton saw no contradiction between Christianity and Zen-Taoism at the level of experience; on the contrary, he found numerous similarities in the experience of Zen enlightenment and Christian contemplation. He drew much practical advice from Zen-Taoism in expounding his later view of contemplation and at the same time tried to "theologize" some of the Zen-Taoist concepts. His later view of contemplation is itself a dialogue with Zen-Taoism on religious experience.

Merton's endeavor to create dialogue at the level of religious experience is considered to be one of his unique contributions to interreligious dialogue. His ability to enter into the experience of Zen-Taoism makes him unequalled by other contemporary Catholic writers. At the time he was one of the few Catholic theologians who felt the urge to reconcile the various religious and spiritual traditions that lived in him. As he said, "[M]y job is to clarify something of the tradition that lives in me, and in which I live: the tradition of wisdom and spirit that is found not only in Western

Christendom but in Orthodoxy, and also, at least analogously, in Asia and in Islam."⁴¹

Merton emphasized that dialogue should center on religious experience. He contended that Christian dialogue with other religions on theology and dogma would not go too far, for there were irreducible differences in religions in terms of doctrines. He believed that Zen-Taoism, with its strong emphasis on experience, was conducive to ecumenical progress. For Christians, he said, some basic understanding of Zen-Taoism would help to ground the dialogue in intuition and to free it from a servile dependence on doctrines and concepts. Merton seemed to encourage liberation from religious doctrine. But religions, being so deeply rooted in culture and language, would not dispense with concepts altogether. The Chinese word Wu (nothingness) is in a way a concept in itself. As we see in this thesis, Merton had not rejected any doctrines or concepts as irrelevant or considered them expendable; he simply sought to make them viable, to give giving spirit back to a dead body. In his later writings, the concepts of God, asceticism, solitude, spiritual itinerary, and so on are given new meanings.

Merton perceived a commonality in human religiosity. The dialogue on religious experience, he believed, could offer opportunity for spiritual growth rather than a threat. Merton's

⁴¹ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 176.

contention proves to be correct today, at least in some wider ecumenical movements, such as spiritual direction, Taizé, and Christian Zen meditation, which are signs of a deeper sharing of religious faith on the level of religious experience.

The last observation of Merton's later view of contemplation concerns Merton's underlying theological assumption of common-core religious experience in all religions. Out of good intention, Merton theologized Zen enlightenment experience as an experience of God. This is perhaps the one thing that Merton tried to offer to Zen-Taoism. He wanted to elevate Zen experience from the level of the "natural" to the "supernatural," in the Christian understanding of the terms, and did so by suggesting a divine-human encounter in the Zen experience of finding one's true nature. To present Zen enlightenment as "supernatural" mystical experience, Merton wanted to win respect for Zen from those who regarded the "supernatural" as superior--but that was a disservice to the Zen Buddhist. Merton was not aware that his intended honoring would arouse discomfort among his dialogue partners. On this point I am critical of Merton's hidden assumptions about mystical experience.

Merton's respect for Zen-Taoism should be praised, but his attempt to "theologize" Zen-Taoism is unnecessary. If Merton had lived longer and continued to learn from Zen-Taoism, I believe that he would have made amendment to his early speculations and would have advised

us to truly learn from other religions on their own terms.

To end this thesis, I would like to quote from Merton's journal. The quotation is taken from *Day of a Stranger*, which was written in May 1965. It is a revised journal of a "typical day" in the hermitage where Merton began to stay much more full-time by the summer of 1965. The quotation is presented as "an interview" in which Merton responded with monosyllables. This improvised "interview" reveals his wit in Zen-Taoism and the way he reviewed his inner struggles in the light of Zen-Taoism.

Why live in the woods?

Well, you have to live somewhere.

Do you get lonely?

Yes, sometimes.

Are you mad at people?

No.

Are you mad at the monastery?

Nothing. I don't think about it.

Is it true that your bad back is due to Yoga?

No.

Is it true that you are practicing Zen in secret?

Pardon me, I don't speak English.⁴²

⁴² Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981), 47.

CONCLUSION

The memories of those who have lived with Merton in the monastery of Gethsemani are important to read and hear. John-Eudes Bamberger, for example, was Merton's former student in the monastery for more than 10 years. He remembers Merton as "a most capable teacher and a brilliant spiritual director," whose entire spiritual teaching can be summarized by one word: contemplation.¹ He says that the notes from Merton's talks would first appear in mimeographed papers that were circulated in the community and later collected as chapters of some work on contemplation and Christian spirituality. Merton is remembered as a monk who was dedicated to the study and teaching of Christian contemplation.

However, Merton the Christian monk was also one of the rare spokespersons of Zen and classical Taoism in the late 1950's. With his wonderful ability to penetrate into the heart of an unfamiliar subject and articulate it with unusual clarity, Merton wrote a fairly large number of essays on Zen-Taoism. Considering the scope and depth of his study of Zen-Taoism, one naturally questions whether his view of Christian contemplation remained uninfluenced by the teachings of Zen and classical Taoism. This, of course, is in fact the central hypothesis that guides the process of this doctoral dissertation.

This study began with a brief survey of Merton's life, focusing mainly on the development of his interest in Zen-Taoism. It

¹ John-Eudes Bamberger, "Thomas Merton, Our Brother," *Cistercian Studies* 13 (1978): 391.

discovered that Merton began to read about Zen-Taoism extensively in the mid 1950s. This finding helps to narrow down the hypothesis. If Merton's view of Christian contemplation was influenced by his study of Zen and classical Taoism, the result of the influence would appear in his later writings published between 1959 and 1968.

The second and third chapters aimed at exploring Merton's understanding of Zen and classical Taoism. By studying his publications on Zen-Taoism, we came to know that Merton was one of the few Westerners who could truly grasp Zen and Taoism. No wonder that Wu, Merton's friend and mentor on Chinese religions and philosophies, lavished praise on his book, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*. Wu wrote to Merton, "I come to the conclusion that you and Chuang Tzu are one. It is Chuang Tzu himself who writes his thoughts in the English of Thomas Merton."² One can infer from Wu's compliment that Merton had experiences similar to those described in Zen-Taoist literature. However, in order to decide whether Merton's exposure to Zen-Taoism could have influenced his view of Christian contemplation, it was necessary to study Merton's writings on contemplation.

² Thomas Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience & Social Concerns*, sel. & ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985), 612. In 1966, Wu asked Merton to write an introduction to his own book *Golden Age of Zen*. Moved by Merton's eloquent introduction to his own work, Wu suggests that the reader should first study Merton's introduction before proceeding to take up the body of the book. It is because, he explains, "In a real sense the book may be regarded as a long footnote to the profound insights embodied in his [Merton's] introduction." John C. H. Wu, *The Golden Age of Zen: The Classic Work on the Foundation of Zen Philosophy* (First print, 1967; reprint, New York: An Image Book, 1996), vii.

Chapter four, then, tried to investigate the foundational knowledge of Merton's view of contemplation. It discovered that, among others, the classical writings of John of the Cross, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas form the skeleton of Merton's view of contemplation.

Chapter five and six were devoted to exploring respectively his early (1949-1958) and later view (1959-1968) of contemplation. Three major works from each period were chosen for closer scrutiny: *What Is Contemplation?*, *Seeds of Contemplation*, *The Ascent to Truth*, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, *Inner Experience*, and *Contemplative Prayer*. The result supports the hypothesis that traces of Zen-Taoist influences can be seen in his later writings about contemplation. It is quite clear that Merton expands and reconstructs his later view of contemplation in the light of the wisdom of Zen and classical Taoism.

The purpose of Chapter seven was to synthesize research data gathered in the previous chapters and discuss the extent of Zen-Taoist influence on Merton's later view of contemplation. Five major areas of difference in Merton's later view of contemplation are found to be under the influence of Zen and classical Taoism. First, Zen-Taoism motivated Merton to move away from a dogmatic framework and turn toward an experiential approach. Second, Zen-Taoism affirmed Merton's positive worldview and concern for the wellbeing of humanity. Third, Zen-Taoism expanded Merton's understanding of God. Fourth, Zen-Taoism influenced Merton's understanding of the Christian experience of self-realization. Lastly, Zen-Taoism

affected Merton's view of contemplative prayer and spiritual itinerary.

The final chapter of this thesis evaluated Merton's later view of contemplation. Overall, Merton's later view of contemplation reflected Merton's ecumenical thoughts. First, it shows that Merton's was a wider ecumenist, believing that Zen-Taoism contains invaluable insights that Christians should not reject out of prejudice and pretensions to superiority. What he learned from Zen and classical Taoism was organically integrated into his Christian vocation. Nothing about his Christian practice or belief was changed; it was only Merton who was being transformed.

Second, Merton's later view of contemplation indicates Merton's concern for interfaith experience. Zen-Taoism could be assimilated because it is a direct experience of reality and as such it is comparable to the Christian experience of the reality of God.

Third, Merton's later view of contemplation implies a theological speculation of common-core mystical experience, which assumes that religious experience, despite its religious framework, comes from the same source--God. However, I, being Chinese, am somehow more critical toward his attempt to "theologize" the mystical experience in Zen-Taoism.

In response to the central hypothesis of this study, we may conclude: while Merton's early view of contemplation (1949-1958) was formulated in accordance with the mystical and philosophical writings of the Christian tradition, his later view of contemplation (1959-1968) was constructed under the influence of Zen and classical Taoism.

Zen-Taoism influenced his later view of contemplation in a number of ways, both directly and indirectly.

We must also say that in the process of this study, many interesting questions are aroused. They could surely be explored in future research. Here are a few. First, since Zen-Taoism stresses "special transmission outside Scripture" and does not rely on words or letters, is Merton's understanding of the role of Scripture being led in that direction? Second, Merton has a tendency to compare the Tao with the *Logos*. How far, then, is his Christology influenced by that attempt? Third, as seen in chapter four, Merton's early view of contemplation was significantly influenced by the writings of John of the Cross. But the outlook of his later view of contemplation is so different that it would be interesting to know to what extent Zen-Taoism may also have influenced Merton's understanding of John of the Cross.

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