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Breathing Zen: Thomas Merton's Search for 'The Death of Self'

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Figure 8. Cell density at confluence for control and cryopreserved BCEC.

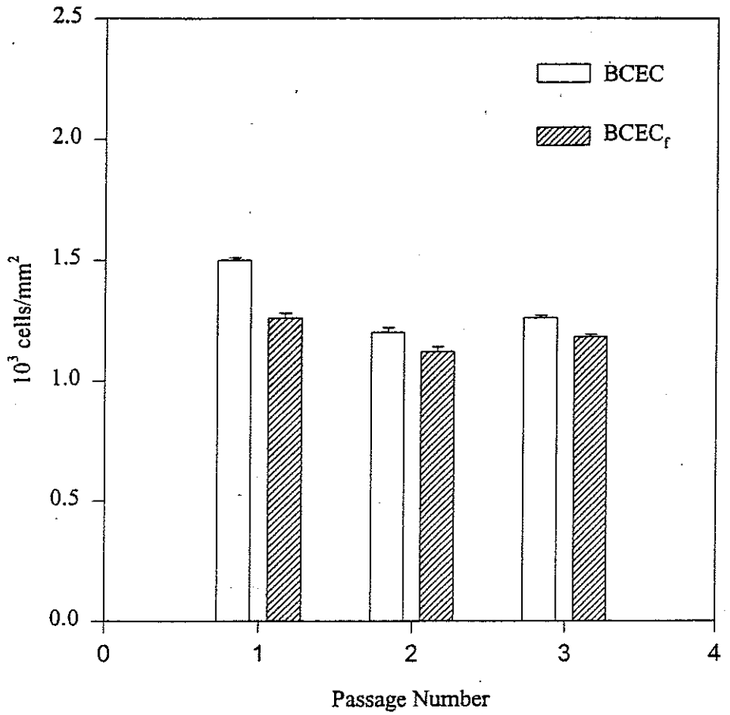

Figure 8. Cell density at confluence for control and cryopreserved BCEC. Figure 8 represents the cell densities of control and cryopreserved cells (BCEC and BCEC$_f$) as determined by hemacytometry. Analysis showed that the difference among cell densities was significant ($p<0.0001$). Multiple comparisons showed that the significant difference was between BCEC$_1$ and all other ($p<0.01$). Differences in cell density among all other groups was not significant ($p>0.05$).

BREATHING ZEN: THOMAS MERTON'S SEARCH FOR THE DEATH OF "SELF"

By Angela Fairbanks — Honors Thesis directed by Lawrence Snyder

Abstract

Thomas Merton, a well known American monk of the twentieth century, distinguished himself as a writer, a social activist, and a religious thinker. Among his manifold interests, he was intensely devoted to the study of other religions, particularly Zen Buddhism. This study seeks to examine Merton's relationship to Zen and discern how he was simultaneously able to participate in this Eastern tradition and also remain a Roman Catholic. A look at Merton's books, journals, and letters suggests that his understanding of the fundamental aspects of Zen closely cohered with his lifelong desire to live a contemplative life. Also, Merton's perspective on religious plurality was characterized by an openness to finding truth in religions other than Christianity. Even though Merton studied and participated in Zen, as well as other traditions, he remained a Roman Catholic until his death in 1968.

Foreword

In 1949, Friar Louis, a talented, enthusiastic young monk, wrote a letter to his abbot, saying, "My personal desire in the priesthood is one of obscurity and simplicity. I ask Jesus to make me a purely contemplative priest. . . . he has so few who are concerned with him alone, in simplicity, silence, recollection and constant prayer. . . . I want to be a forgotten and unknown saint, hidden in God alone."[1] The statement, undoubtedly made in sincerity and hope, now carries extraordinary irony; the young monk wanted to be forgotten, but over the course of the next two decades he became a prolific writer, expressing his insights on the spiritual life, his strong opinions with regard to many controversial social issues, and his intense interest in other world religions. Known to the world as Thomas Merton, he was one of the most popular and influential Roman Catholics of the twentieth century.

While Merton was well known as a Catholic, he also developed a reputation as a serious student of Asian religions, causing some to speculate that, toward the end of his life, Merton was actually more Zen Buddhist than Christian. Five years after Merton's death, Michael Zeik wrote an article for *Commonweal,* a Catholic magazine, in which he asked, "Had 30 years of study and meditation convinced him that Buddhism was 'the greater vehicle'...?"[2] Zeik concluded at the time that Merton was still very much Catholic, and now, a quarter of a century later, the issue is even more clear. After the publication in the past decade of Merton's extensive journals and letters, a deeper study of his life and thought is now possible. This information, together with Merton's published work, demonstrates that Zeik was correct: Merton was not on the verge of converting to Buddhism. He was both a student of and participant in Asian religions, but he remained a faithful Roman Catholic monk. Merton was able to balance such diverse commitments because, in his study of Buddhism, he identified a truth in Buddhist teaching that he perceived as vital to his life as a Christian contemplative. In Merton's understanding of Buddhism and Christianity, both religions taught that a person must overcome his attachment to his external self. It was this similarity which drew Merton, as a Roman Catholic monk, to study and practice Buddhism.

As Merton related in his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain,* his personal ambitions were not always centered on the spiritual life. He was born in France to an American father and French mother and raised nominally Protestant. A lifestyle of dissipation, tempered by the occasional moderate interest in religion, characterized Merton's adolescence and early adulthood until his conversion to Catholicism while a graduate student at Columbia University. After joining the Roman Catholic Church, Merton continued his education, aspiring either to an academic or literary career. At the age of 26, he cast these ambitions aside and entered Gethsemani, a Cistercian monastery in Kentucky. There he lived for the remainder of his life, taking a vow of silence and striving to attain a life of contemplation. In 1968, Merton died in Bangkok while attending an ecumenical conference of Cistercian monks.

During his years at Gethsemani, Merton pursued a wide array of interests. In addition to his daily monastic activities, he was a poet and author, writing more than 40 books throughout his life. Among other topics, Merton's diverse literary endeavors included a book about the Shakers, a small 19th-century Protestant community in Kentucky; a translation of the writings of early Egyptian hermits; and writings against the Vietnam War. He also corresponded with literally

hundreds of people, including prominent figures such as Pope John XXIII, Flannery O'Connor, and Dorothy Day.

One of the dominant themes of Merton's personal and professional life was contemplation, or the pursuit of a union of man's spirit with God. Although the concept is present in many religions, Merton's use of the term had its precedents in the Christian mysticism of Theresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, and Meister Eckhart. As those before him, Merton entered a monastery because he sought an environment of solitude which would facilitate a life of prayer and meditation on the scriptures. This ardent desire permeated his writing, and many of his books, essays, and letters pertained to the contemplative life. In this pursuit Merton did not limit his interaction to the mystics of the Roman Catholic tradition; his intense desire to be a contemplative also led him to investigate the concept in relevant literary movements and in many of the other major religions. He studied and wrote about these traditions extensively, and his interest frequently surpassed the merely academic. The close affinity which Merton felt for contemplatives of other traditions frequently inspired him to engage in a dialogue with these individuals and attempt to learn from them.

Although Merton studied a wide variety of religions, the non-Christian tradition with which he identified most closely was Zen Buddhism, a form of Buddhism which originated in China in the 6th century and continues to be practiced in modern Japan. He published two books dealing primarily with Zen, mentioned Zen repeatedly in his letters and journals, and read about the subject extensively, especially the works of the renowned Zen scholar Daisetz T. Suzuki. Suzuki was one of the first Japanese scholars to write about Zen in English, and he figured prominently in America's widespread interest in Zen during the 1950's. Merton's relationship with Suzuki illustrates the depth of his appreciation for Zen.

The correspondence between the two began in 1959 when Merton, full of enthusiasm, asked Suzuki to write a preface for his book *The Wisdom of the Desert.*[3] In a letter, Merton introduced himself and, in flowing, joyful language, explained both his great love for Zen and his admiration for Suzuki. The two exchanged letters throughout the next decade. In addition to discussing practical matters such as the book preface, they also engaged in conversations pertaining to Zen and Christianity. Some of the ideas discussed in the letters found a public forum in a series of articles written by both men and published in Merton's book *Zen and the Birds of Appetite.* The dialogue consisted of Suzuki's preface, Merton's interaction with it, and concluding remarks by both authors.[4]

The relationship between Merton and Suzuki continued when, much to their mutual pleasure, they were able to meet in New York City in June 1964. Although they saw each other only in two brief meetings, they participated in a tea ceremony and enjoyed informal conversation about the religious life. The experience significantly affected Merton, who wrote afterwards in his journal, "It was profoundly important for me to see and experience the fact that there really is a deep understanding between myself and this extraordinary and simple man. . . . I had a renewed sense of being 'situated' in this world. . . . For once in a long time I felt as if I had spent a few moments with my own family."[5]

The respect for Suzuki which Merton conveyed in this entry became even more apparent in an article he wrote after the Zen scholar's death.[6] Here, Merton eulogized Suzuki, comparing him to the "superior man" of the ancient Asian religious traditions, and he also wrote of his great esteem for Suzuki's religious life and character, describing him as "someone who . . . had matured, had become complete and found his way."[7]

Merton's praise of Suzuki was not limited to a strictly Buddhist audience. He also complimented the renowned Zen Master in some of his letters to fellow Catholics. Merton spoke of the joy he felt upon meeting Suzuki and called him "deeply Christian in a 'natural' sort of way."[8] Elsewhere he admired Suzuki for understanding and living a life of simplicity.[9] In a letter to the German priest Father Hans Urs von Balthasar, Merton even said that Suzuki understood aspects of Christian theology better than some Christian theologians. He commented, "I have been in contact with a Master of Zen Buddhism, and in fact had an exchange with him that showed him to have a 'natural' grasp of the Patristic approach to Paradise and the Fall which is most remarkable. He understands it much better than many technical theologians and indeed many monks."[10]

Based on Merton's letters to Suzuki, his statements to other Catholic monastics, and his public writings, he evidently held the elderly Zen master in high regard. These positive sentiments also extended

to the religion itself. In one 1959 letter to Suzuki, Merton declared his passionate love for Zen. He wrote, "Not to be foolish and multiply words, I'll say simply that it seems to me that Zen is the very atmosphere of the Gospels, and the Gospels are bursting with it. It is the proper climate for any monk, no matter what kind of monk he may be. If I could not breathe Zen I would probably die of spiritual asphyxiation."[11] From the pen of a Trappist monk, such a comment may seem somewhat surprising. Yet, for Merton, it was a natural expression of his joy at the way so many elements of his life were woven together.

As a monk rooted in the Catholic tradition, Merton saw his own path as one which combined a variety of elements, including Christian monasticism, contemplation, and a great love for Zen. This study seeks to examine Merton's interaction with Zen and to understand how he was able to remain within the Roman Catholic tradition while simultaneously participating in that Buddhist tradition. In short, how could Merton, writing to Suzuki as a Catholic monk, say, "If I could not breathe Zen I would probably die of spiritual asphyxiation"? Taken by itself, this statement might imply that Merton was becoming a Buddhist. A careful investigation of Merton's general approach to other religions, however, will dispel this notion. Although he was for over two decades a monk in the Roman Catholic Church, Merton also believed that truth could be found in other religions, and he sought to learn from them. The reason Merton was able to identify with Zen in particular was because he found there a truth which he felt was vital to his life as a contemplative monk. Merton saw within Zen the idea that there was no such thing as an individual "self" and that the search for such a self gave rise to all sorts of suffering. He correlated this Zen concept to his own Christian idea of the "false self" that prevented man from attaining a contemplative union with God. Because contemplation held such personal import for Merton, his increasing interest in Zen was a logical development. In this manner he did not leave Christianity to become Buddhist, but he instead identified a Buddhist idea which was personally important to his growth as a Christian.

In brief, this study argues that Merton was able to be a Roman Catholic monk while also practicing Zen because he observed a truth in Zen which he had long thought to be a necessary element of Christian contemplation. Merton did not see this overlap of religious traditions as violating his Catholic beliefs because he had at the same time become increasingly inclusive in his approach to thinking about other religions. He believed that all religions possessed truth to varying degrees, and his goal in studying these traditions was to affirm the truth he found in them.

This argument will be developed in three sections. The first part of the paper focuses on Merton's experience as a Catholic monk, particularly examining the idea of contemplation and its importance in Merton's life. This section establishes that the idea of a "false self" was important to Merton's world view before he began to study other religions. The next section turns to Merton's encounter with Zen, analyzing the role that the Buddhist concept of "no-self" played in Merton's comparisons between Zen and Christianity. This investigation should demonstrate that Merton understood the Zen teaching of "no self" as a point of commonality between the two religions. The final section reviews Merton's thought on the plurality of religions in general and traces the development of his increasingly inclusive approach. The argument will finally come full circle by examining the implications which Merton's encounter with world religions had on his place within the Roman Catholic faith.

Friar Louis, a Roman Catholic Contemplative

Throughout Merton's extensive journals, which he kept from his conversion until his death in 1968, he repeatedly expressed his aspirations to be a contemplative. He defined *contemplation,* however, in so many different ways that it is a difficult term to explain clearly and precisely. It is almost necessary to read widely among Merton's many writings on contemplation to absorb the flavor of the concept. A definition is, however, for practical purposes essential, and the first two chapters of *New Seeds of Contemplation* provide the most comprehensive discussion.[12] In these chapters Merton used "contemplation" to talk about a person's experience of God, an experience of being fully aware and amazed at the very fact of existence, appreciating the beauty of being as a gift proceeding and inseparable from an infinite Source.[13] Contemplation was not focusing on abstract ideas or doctrines, nor was it a trance or self-hypnotism. It was different from emotional enthusiasm; it was more than peaceful reflection; it was not meditation on beliefs. Contemplation was a response to a call in which a person did not discover new ideas about God, but was carried away by God.[14]

In *The Seven Storey Mountain,* Merton described the contemplative life as one in which the entire person was concerned only with the love of God, and as his highest goal he awaited the union or marriage of his soul with God. Contemplation was a "rest, suspension of activity, withdrawal into the mysterious inner solitude in which the soul is absorbed in the immense fruitful silence of God and learns something of the secret of His perfections . . . by fruitive love."[15] Man's personal identity "vanished," and God alone remained as the source of action.[16]

The concept of contemplation was not one which Merton merely wrote about. In many ways, it was a desire which permeated his life, touching everything. His writings were thus a product of the struggles and insights of this personal quest, which began before he joined the monastery and continued until his death. Before coming to the Abbey of Gethsemani, the Trappist monastery in Kentucky where he lived for over two decades, Merton desperately wanted to become a monk, but he was under the impression that he could not because of his scandalous past. The fact that this ardent desire remained unfulfilled was the source of much anxiety in the young Merton's life. Merton was elated when circumstances began to indicate that he would be allowed to enter the monastery after all. On November 28, 1941, only weeks before he arrived at Gethsemani, he wrote in his journal:

> In bed suddenly I am amazed – in four weeks, with God's grace, I may be sleeping on a board – And there will be no more future – not in the world, not in geography, not in travel, not in change, not in variety, conversations, new work, new problems in writing, new friends, none of that: but a far better progress, all interior and quiet!!! If God would only grant it! If it were only His will.[17]

After arriving at Gethsemani, Merton continued to pursue the theme of contemplation in his journals. He repeatedly expressed not only his personal desire to concern himself solely with God, but also his frustrations with activities which interfered with this goal, activities such as writing. He even recorded several misgivings he had with the Cistercian order, misgivings which contributed to his temptation to join the Carthusians, a monastic order with an even greater emphasis on solitude.[18]

Merton's frustrations with the monastic life at Gethsemani, which he felt was inadequate to foster contemplation, were often mixed with self-doubt. He frequently wondered if his difficulties were more likely due to his own behavior rather than to the structure of the monastic life. On October 12, 1947, he commented in his journal:

> What is the use of my complaining about not being a contemplative, if I do not take the opportunities I get for contemplation? I suppose I take them, but in the wrong way. I spend the time looking for something to read about contemplation – something to satisfy my raffish spiritual appetite – instead of shutting up and emptying my mind and leaving the inner door open for the Holy Spirit to enter from the inside, all the doors being barred and all my blinds down.[19]

Perhaps partially due to this self-doubt, Merton chose to remain at Gethsemani and take vows as a Cistercian. But his decision by no means abolished those doubts or frustrations about the order. At many points during the 1950's his convictions regarding the contemplative vocation were so strong that he resolved to leave. On September 13, 1952, for example, he wrote,

> I have been making decisions. The chief of these is that I must really lead a solitary life. It is not enough to try to be a solitary in a community. Too much ambivalence. Wednesday – a conference with Fr. Bellarmine. He is the first person who has ever told me point blank that I belonged in a Charterhouse and *not* at Gethsemani. I cannot doubt him, as far as my vocation to solitude is concerned. Whether it is to be the Carthusians, Camaldolese or somewhere else remains to be seen.[20]

During the late 1950's Merton was so serious about leaving that he was investigating various sites in Mexico where he could start a new monastery, and writing other monastics concerning the possibility of changing orders. Eventually, the Vatican officially denied Merton permission to leave Gethsemani. By way of compromise, he lived for several years in a hermitage on the monastery grounds, which afforded more time for solitude, prayer, and study. As he was about to embark on his journey to Asia, the issue of leaving Gethsemani arose again. This time Merton considered living as a hermit either in Asia or in Alaska, which he actually visited before his trip to Bangkok. As his journals, letters, and writings confirm, Merton's

objective in leaving was to find a place more conducive to contemplation, with greater solitude and more time for meditation and prayer.

It comes as no surprise that Merton addressed contemplation frequently in his writings. In his exposition of the theme, Merton espoused the idea that each person was born with a "false self," the empirical ego, which was an obstacle to his union with God. The original edition of *Seeds of Contemplation* provides the most information regarding Merton's early thoughts on the connection between the loss of the empirical ego and a life of contemplation. The book was his first attempt not merely to explain but to foster an experience of God in his readers' lives, and he spent much of the introductory chapters establishing the existence of and consequent harm resulting from the "false self."

Merton contended that each person, upon entry into the world, became absorbed in an identity which never really existed. People tried to construct a "self," an existence apart from God, and they devoted all their energy to a facade of meritorious traits which made that self seem important. They felt that if they exerted enough effort, they could make the self, their prized possession, something real. They were wrong. The lists of accomplishments which somehow suggested the existence of a "person" to the rest of the world were merely empty shells. Those who feverishly composed them were building an illusion; unable or unwilling to acknowledge that reality, the true self, could only be found in God, they attempted to become gods. Trying to form a real life separate from the only Being who exists as Real, independent of anything else, was a pointless endeavor. As Merton aptly remarked, "This is the man that I want myself to be but who cannot exist, because God does not know anything about him. And to be unknown of God is altogether too much privacy."[21]

In addition to the obvious problem of separation from God, the promotion of the false self also tended to separate humans from one another. Each person had to stand out; each needed to prove his existence. Man created a "self" by making distinctions between "self" and "other." He convinced himself he was somebody by being what those around him were not. The greater the extent to which he surpassed others, the more he was to perceive his own defining lines.[22] The solution to this frenzy of insecurity and self-doubt was, in Merton's words,

> . . .to have a will that is always ready to fold back within itself and draw all the powers of the soul down from its deepest center to rest in silent expectancy for the coming of God, poised in tranquil and effortless concentration upon the point of my dependence on Him; to gather all that I am, and have all that I can possibly suffer or do or be, and abandon them all to God in the resignation of a perfect love and blind faith and pure trust in God, to do His will.[23]

This alternative entailed a contentment to be the person whom God created and God knew, a person whose true identity remained in God. For nothing existed outside of God; and nothing was the most accurate description of the false self. It did not exist, and it never had.

As Merton continued to address various aspects of the contemplative life in *Seeds of Contemplation,* he wove this theme, the death of the false self or ego, throughout. He included, for example, a chapter on solitude in the monastic life, and in his discussion he was careful to note that aloneness was not a withdrawal inward. He bemoaned this type of meditation, arguing that it would only cause a person to focus more consistently on himself. Merton's insightful comments on despair also touched on the concept of the false self when he suggested that this emotion constituted the height of selfish concern. In despair, even though man could no longer maintain the image of himself as a god, he still refused to accept the true creaturely status and receive the love of God.[24] With each new issue, Merton made it clear that "true contemplation," the ideal which characterized his monastic aspirations, entailed "the complete destruction of all selfishness – the most pure poverty and cleanness of heart."[25] Thus, when he began to explore Zen Buddhism, Merton had already given a considerable amount of thought to the notion of self as an impediment to spiritual progress, and it became his major ground for comparing the two religions.

Thomas Merton, a Christian "Zen man"

Before proceeding any further, a working definition of Buddhism and some related terms might be helpful. Buddhism, specifically Zen Buddhism, as a religion or system of thought is difficult to define. In the first place, it is difficult to place in any established Western categories such as religion or philosophy. Even more problematic, a basic tenet of Zen is that words can never accurately describe reality; they always distort or falsify. Hence, from a Buddhist

perspective, the very endeavor of defining Buddhism is doomed from the start. These unique problems are further complicated by the normal difficulties of differing scholarly interpretation, bias, and extreme diversity within the tradition. Bearing these difficulties in mind, this study will primarily utilize the description of Zen found in the *Oxford Dictionary of World Religions.*[26]

Zen is the Japanese name for *chan,* a type of Buddhism which first developed in China from within Mahayana Buddhism.[27] As such, Zen affirms the basic teachings of the Buddha: the world, characterized by impermanence, is unavoidably full of suffering because people always desire something permanent. The end of suffering comes when a person attains enlightenment–he ends desire by following the middle way of the eight-fold path, a path which is between indulgence and asceticism. Included within the foundational concepts of Buddhism is the idea of *anatman,* or *no-soul.* Buddhists believe that humans themselves are not exceptions to the transience of the world, and consequently there is no such permanent essence as a soul.[28]

The Oxford Dictionary defines Zen Buddhism as "a coalition of related ways for attaining realization, even beyond enlightenment, of the true nature underlying all appearance including one's own – and above all, that there is no duality within appearances, but only the one Buddha-nature."[29] A couple of key points emphasized in Zen as opposed to other forms of Buddhism are that there is a direct transmission of the religion from one who is enlightened, not from texts, and secondly that the experience of enlightenment is something that already is true about a person, not something he must achieve. For the Zen Buddhist "there is only the Buddha-nature underlying all appearance; when one realizes that this also is what one is, all differentiation ceases and one rests in that nature."[30]

As Merton studied Zen, he focused on this idea that there is only one nature and that all others were mere illusions. Although Buddhism uses the word *anatman* or *no-self,* Merton frequently made use of the term "ego." Because the word is so laden with connotations, it may well be the cause of some confusion. Its importance here is derived from Merton's use of it to express a fundamental spiritual concept, and it is therefore absolutely essential to grasp the idea as it exists in both Zen Buddhism and in Christianity.

When describing Zen, Merton used a wide array of terms to communicate the concept of the ego. He called this entity the "empirical 'I,'" "empirical self," "everyday mind," "empirical ego-subject," "ego-self," and "individual person."[31] When Merton wrote of the ego, he referred to a person's awareness of himself as an independent being. The ego was the "I" that was capable of experiences, or it was the agent that conceived of itself through relationships to other agents. In Zen, Merton found, it was the ego, the awareness of a self distinct from other selves, that was the source of illusion. The "I" prevented a person from recognizing the "ground of Being."[32] The goal of the Zen practitioner was then to "accomplish the long and difficult labor of divesting himself completely of this 'I' and all its works, in order to discover the deeper spontaneity that comes out of the ground of Being – in Buddhist terms, from the 'original self,' the 'Buddha mind,' or *prajna*. . . ."[33]

The diversity of Zen is evident in the reflections of other authors. William Johnston, a Jesuit priest living in Japan, also wrote about the Zen concept of the ego in *The Still Point,* his book on Zen and Christian mysticism.[34] Johnston focused on the dissolution of the subject-object relationship and described the goal of Zen as the search for unity. When a person attained enlightenment, he realized he was "one with the rain pattering on the roof or the cloud floating in the sky, no longer 'I' and 'it' or 'I' and 'thou,' but only 'is.'"[35] Johnston also described the experience of enlightenment by comparing horizontal and vertical thinking. Instead of extending self-knowledge, which was the broadening, horizontal type of thought, the person brought the conscious mind to a standstill and probed downward, or vertically, to a new level of the mind. If one continued to the absolute bottom layer, he became identified with the universe.[36]

D.T. Suzuki, the aforementioned Zen scholar, described the concept in a manner very similar to that of Merton and Johnston, but he included a significant distinction. Suzuki affirmed their conclusion that the ego was a polluting agent, and he suggested that the solution was the Zen concept of emptiness. At this point Suzuki diverged slightly from the two Roman Catholic writers. Both Merton and Johnston understood the ego as something one had to get rid of Suzuki, in contrast, defined emptiness as realizing that this "thingish ego-substance" never really existed in the first place.[37] As Merton continued his dialogue with Suzuki, he modified his own interpretation of Zen to

incorporate Suzuki's criticism.

Between March 1959 and May 1965, Merton and Suzuki exchanged a series of letters and penned the dialogue intended for *The Wisdom of the Desert,* Merton's compilation and translation of the sayings of the 4th-century desert monastics. Merton had asked Suzuki to write a preface because he had noted similarities between the wisdom of these Christian monks and that of the Zen Masters. Merton's study of Suzuki's work, coupled with this personal interaction, led him to write numerous essays about Zen, particularly regarding the relationship between the Buddhist and Christian forms of contemplation. He published his earliest essays on the subject in the book *Mystics and Zen Masters* (1967), while those from the last four years of his life he compiled in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (1968).

In almost all of Merton's essays on Zen, the idea of "no self" figured prominently. Merton argued in "Mystics and Zen Masters," for example, that the Zen Enlightenment was not a self-absorption; rather, it required dissolution of the ego, thereby allowing the "ground of being" to break through.[38] In "A Christian Looks at Zen" he maintained that both Zen and Christianity demanded an experience of self-emptying. For Zen this occurred through the "Great Death," for Christianity through "dying and rising with Christ."[39] Merton then continued in a similar vein in "Nirvana" to explain that this end-goal of Buddhist experience entailed "losing" one's self. While the theme of "no self" often dominated these essays, a comprehensive exegesis of these writings would be tedious and repetitive. Fortunately, the point is aptly demonstrated through the story of Merton's interaction with D.T. Suzuki, including their letters, the essay dialogue, and one personal meeting. In each of these avenues, the most important observation is not simply that Merton liked or identified with the Zen concept of Emptiness, but that he saw this idea as a point of connection between Zen and Christianity.

As previously mentioned, Merton's first letter to Suzuki, written in March of 1959, expressed the author's enthusiastic interest in Zen and requested that Suzuki write the preface for *Wisdom of the Desert.* In his reply, Suzuki requested a copy of Merton's manuscript, and then offered several opinions on Christianity. He wrote,

> I am trying to write my understanding of Christianity. Some of the ideas I have are:
> We have never been driven out of Eden;
> We still retain innocence;
> We are innocent just because of our sinfulness;
> Paradise and Original Sin are not contradictory;
> God wanted to know himself, hence the creation;
> When we know ourselves we know God.[40]

To many western Roman Catholics or Protestants, that description is probably not readily identified as basic Christian theology. When Merton replied to Suzuki, however, he was quite positive concerning these statements, eagerly interacting with and exploring Suzuki's thoughts in significant depth. As Merton understood Suzuki, the two of them had the same perspective, and he interpreted Suzuki's presentation of Christianity to mean that the whole world had already been created anew in Christ. This being the case, humanity was not separated from God, but was instead already in Paradise. He then added,

> Then comes the question whether or not the Resurrection of Christ shows that we had never really been separated from Him in the first place. Was it only that we *thought* we were separated from Him? . . It was a thought that each one of us had to be god in his own right. Each one of us began to slave and struggle to make himself a god, which he imagined he was supposed to be. Each one slaved in the service of his own idol – his consciously fabricated social self. Each one then pushed all the others away from himself. . . . This is Original Sin.[41]

In this portion of his letter, Merton clearly focused on the idea of self. While the casual observer might not interpret Suzuki's statements as self-evident observations (even though he presented them with absolutely no explanation), Merton seemed to comprehend Suzuki's unstated rationale completely and even elaborated upon it. What is really interesting is that the basis for Merton's elaboration was the concept of the false self, a point which he evidently assumed as common ground between himself and Suzuki. In this particular quotation he tried to explain Suzuki's paradox that paradise and Original Sin were not contradictory. He did this by arguing that people were really already in paradise, and that Original Sin entered the scene because men rejected God's paradise by trying to be gods to themselves.

Merton continued, "Christ Himself is in us as unknown and unseen. We follow Him, we find Him . . . and then He must vanish and we must go along without Him at our side. Why? Because he is even

closer than that. *He is ourself.* Oh my dear Dr. Suzuki, I know you will understand this so well, and so many people do not, even though they are 'doctors in Israel.'"[42] Merton's radical statement, "He is ourself," may sound strange to Western ears; he clearly thought that it would. Yet, he was certain that Suzuki, coming from a background in Zen and not in Christianity, would understand it completely. Here Merton was describing to Suzuki the idea of the human self unified with the Absolute, and he was doing so in the context of Christianity. Evidently he found the correlation between his own idea of a false self and the doctrine of *anatman* in Zen to be strong enough for Suzuki to grasp his meaning better than many of Merton's own co-religionists.

Suzuki never responded directly to Merton's comments, but he did touch on the issue in the 1959 preface for *Wisdom of the Desert.* In this article, entitled "Knowledge and Innocence," he analyzed the Zen term "Emptiness" in comparison with the Christian term "Innocence." By "Emptiness" Suzuki meant the absence of the self from which "evil and defilements" arose, and he further described the term by using the illustration of poverty.[43] A person who was poor was not an individual who gave up all of his possessions to another object; poverty was not a loss or "getting rid of."[44] He saw it instead as a realization that one possessed nothing to begin with. In the same way, Emptiness did not mean renouncing the self, but rather realizing that no such entity had existed in the first place. Suzuki then related these concepts to the Christian reader by correlating his description of Emptiness to the image of poverty found in Meister Eckhart, a German mystic from the late 13th and early 14th centuries.

After receiving Suzuki's essay, Merton wrote back that, although he found it to be quite good, he wanted to add some comments in an essay of his own. He thought the average Catholic reader would have difficulty grasping the connection between the sayings of the desert fathers and Suzuki's comments on Emptiness.[45] In his response Merton tried to engage the Christian reader by demonstrating that the same ideas Suzuki had expressed were present elsewhere in the Christian tradition.

One of the Christian stories Merton mentioned was the Genesis account of Adam and Eve in the Garden before they took upon themselves the knowledge of good and evil. According to Merton's description, the first humans were completely innocent. They were only aware of God and did not conceive of themselves as existing separately from him. Merton thought that this ideal state could be recovered in the present time through the work of Christ, the "New Adam."[46] Christian theology taught that Christ had restored man to unity in Himself, and Merton understood this unity to require a death of the individual self. Merton drew a connection for his readers between the Christian idea of dying to one's self with Suzuki's description of Emptiness, saying, "If we are to be moved in all things by the grace of Christ should we not in some sense realize this as action out-of-emptiness, springing from the mystery of the pure freedom which is 'divine love,' rather than as something produced in and with our egotistical, exterior self, springing from our desires and referred to our own spiritual interest?"[47] Here, just as in his earlier letter to Suzuki, Merton's point of comparison was that man's "exterior self" was an obstacle to his spiritual growth.

Merton emphasized the point even more when he argued that the final and greatest obstacle to attaining paradise was the thought of spiritual perfection, a person's belief that he could achieve the goal by his own desire, effort, and spiritual maturity. The only solution to the barrier of spiritual pride was humility, or what Suzuki had described as emptiness and poverty. Merton pointed out that the soul which was poor "must possess and retain absolutely nothing, not even a self in which he can receive angelic visitations, not even a selflessness he can be proud of."[48] Thus Merton drew from Suzuki the insight that someone who transcends the ego-self cannot even hold onto the experience of transcending. Once he eliminated this last vestige of the ego, the final effort to cling to something which the self could call its own and take pride in, man returned to the innocence of paradise.

In his response to Merton, Suzuki did not entirely affirm Merton's analysis nor his use of Zen terms. In Suzuki's concluding essay for the dialogue he argued that Merton did not plunge deeply enough in his interpretation of Emptiness.[49] Suzuki attributed the deficiency to a fundamental difference between Eastern and Western thought, the former being impersonal and nondualistic, the latter personal and dualistic.[50] Specifically, Merton's concept of God as Creator was too far removed from Zen concepts, and Suzuki much preferred the idea of "Godhead" from which God the creator "came out" but never actually left. The disagreement was important enough in

Suzuki's opinion to mention it not only in the published dialogue but also in a personal letter to Merton. In November 1959, shortly after receiving Merton's article, Suzuki sent a letter in which he commented,

> One's 'intellectual antecedents' are bound to condition everything one desires to elucidate. ... As human beings we perhaps cannot avoid being so conditioned. Some may say 'historical' or 'psychological' instead of 'intellectual.' Just the same, either way, we are destined to differ. The only thing we can do in the circumstances is to be tolerant toward each other.[51]

Coming from one of the most prolific exponents of Zen to the West, this statement is indeed a strong one. Suzuki critiqued Merton's interpretation of Zen concepts in this instance as being unavoidably conditioned by his location in Western culture. While Merton acknowledged the legitimacy of Suzuki's critique, he was not resigned to the barriers which Suzuki felt were so unavoidable. In his own concluding essay Merton continued to explore the parallels between Suzuki's "Emptiness" and Christian theology.

After Merton and Suzuki completed their four-essay dialogue in 1959, they exchanged no additional letters until 1964, when the latter wrote that he would be traveling to New York and would like to arrange a meeting. In June of that year the two did indeed meet, and, in addition to drinking a traditional Japanese tea, they discussed such topics as Paul Tillich, the death of Zen in Japan, and the philosophy of Chuang Tzu. Merton later remarked that their time together was far too short to waste discussing doctrinal matters, which would seem to indicate that they did not try to pinpoint specific similarities between Zen Buddhism and Roman Catholicism.[52] Merton did, however, remark in his journal that they "could not get anywhere definite on the idea of 'person.'"[53] In many of his contemplative writings and his essays on Zen, Merton used the term 'person' to discuss the true self, the being which was united to God after the "death" of the false self. This statement from his journal, brief though it may be, offers further confirmation that in his study of Zen, Merton was specifically interested in the idea of the "self."

With this meeting in New York, only two years prior to Suzuki's death, the bulk of the correspondence between the two religious writers came to an end. In the realm of ideas, however, Suzuki continued to impact Merton's thought. In fact, in "The Study of Zen," the last essay on Zen which Merton ever published, he admitted that Suzuki had been correct in his earlier criticism, and Merton adapted his understanding of Zen to cohere with that of Suzuki. He did so by using an example which Suzuki himself was fond of, that of the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart.[54] Merton wrote, "At this point I may take occasion to say clearly that, in my dialog with Dr. Suzuki, my choice of Cassian's 'purity of heart' as a Christian expression of Zen-consciousness was an unfortunate example.... A fuller and truer expression of Zen in Christian experience is given by Meister Eckhart.[55]

In his discussion of Eckhart, Merton first introduced some of Eckhart's ideas which were very similar to those of other Christian mystics. Eckhart believed, for instance, that a person prepared himself for God to act within him by freeing himself from all attachments. From this basic foundation Merton showed how Eckhart went beyond other mystics to say that a person must not even think that he provided a vehicle or "place" for God's action. This was the ultimate spiritual poverty because the person could not even retain an identity for himself as an instrument of the divine. If God acted in humans, it was only because God himself was within that individual, providing the "place" for the action. Eckhart's image came closer to Zen than did the idea of "purity of heart," which Merton utilized in the earlier essay, because it completely eradicated any validity to a separate consciousness. Merton paraphrased Eckhart saying, "only when there is no self left as a 'place' in which God acts, only when God acts purely in Himself, do we at last recover our 'true self' (which is in Zen terms 'no self')."[56] It might be difficult for both the student of Zen and reader of Eckhart to understand with their reason how such dissolution of the consciousness could occur. This was precisely the point. Zen could not be grasped by analysis, for all such efforts were the product of the external self. The student instead had to "penetrate the outer shell and taste the inner kernel which cannot be defined."[57]

In this essay Merton clearly emphasized the idea of "no self" and found it to be present in Christianity as well as in Zen. Toward to the end of the essay he wrote, "Whatever Zen may be, however you define it, it is somehow there in Eckhart." Thus, while Merton did change his understanding of Zen, his primary objective remained the same. Throughout his essays and his dialogue with the Zen scholar D.T. Suzuki,

Merton emphasized the Zen concept of "no self," or "emptiness," as a significant aspect of Christianity.

Given Merton's extensive discussion of the same theme in his earlier writings on contemplation, it seems reasonable that he would be attracted to this aspect of Zen. Before Merton even began to study Zen, he wrote that man's "false self" precluded a contemplative union with God. During the years of his correspondence with Suzuki, Merton continued to write about contemplation. A careful examination of these later writings confirms that it was Merton's personal interest in contemplation which facilitated his connection to Zen. For although Merton did not change the ideas regarding contemplation, he was increasingly prone to using Zen terminology to describe them.

Comparing Merton's early and later works on contemplation is a rather interesting endeavor. While the idea of the "external self," or "empirical ego," is present and fully developed in his 1949 *Seeds of Contemplation*, his later works do reflect his exposure to Zen. The impact of Zen on these works, however, is not a change in Merton's concept of the "self." Indeed, if a reader who is well versed in Zen studies *New Seeds of Contemplation*, the 1961 revised version of the earlier work, he will find it very difficult to correctly identify which passages Merton wrote prior to his exposure to Buddhism. For instance, when he described the ultimate end of contemplation, Merton wrote,

> 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. . . . You no longer exist in such a way that you can reflect on yourself or see yourself having an experience, or judge what is going on, if it can be said that something is going on that is not eternal and unchanging and an activity so tremendous that it is infinitely still.[58]

Without using the Zen vocabulary of "emptiness" or "*prajna*" or "*anatman*" or "awakening," this quotation sounds remarkably like a description of *nirvana.* In fact, it sounds very much like Merton's own description of *nirvana* in his essay by the same name.[59] It was written, though, in 1948, the very same year Merton published *The Seven Storey Mountain,* in which he dismissed "Oriental mysticism" as only being useful to help him go to sleep.

As this example illustrates, it really cannot be argued that Merton's study of Zen dramatically changed his perspective on contemplation. But, the data does indicate that he identified a connection between the two interests. The evidence that Merton made such a connection is found in his tendency to use the vocabulary of Zen in his later writings on contemplation.

An excellent example of this propensity is found in the first chapter of *New Seeds of Contemplation.* In this section, which was not part of the original 1949 version, Merton described contemplation as "a sudden gift of awareness, an awakening to the Real within all that is real. A vivid awareness of infinite Being at the roots of our own limited being."[60] The information which Merton related in this quotation is not qualitatively different from that of the previous quotation: both discuss the mystical union of man with the ultimate, particularly with regard to the dissolution of the subject/object relationship. In the latter version, however, Merton used distinctly Zen terms. "Enlightenment," after all, means an awakening, and the phrase "Being at the roots of our own limited being" hearkens back to the Zen phrase "ground of being." Elsewhere in the same chapter Merton said that contemplation "sees 'without seeing'" and "denies what it has affirmed."[61] Both of these phrases appeared in Merton's own description of Zen. He quoted the Zen master Shen Hui as saying that "the true seeing is when there is no seeing"[62] and wrote that the position of Zen concerning structures and forms was one which neither affirmed nor denied them.[63] In each of these examples Merton used the vocabulary of Zen to communicate his ideas about the nature of contemplation, but the ideas themselves were not new to Merton's thought. His use of Zen in this manner adds additional confirmation to the argument that Merton was attracted to that Eastern tradition because he understood the insights to pertain directly to his ambition to live a contemplative life.

Thomas Merton, a Christian Inclusivist

While this study seeks to understand Merton's interaction with one specific tradition – Zen Buddhism – it is essential to place Merton's relationship to Zen in the context of his general approach to non-Christian religions. Merton did not study and practice meditation in isolation. He belonged to a separate

tradition, one which has tended to apply its truth claims cross-culturally; hence, Merton approached Zen with certain beliefs regarding the relationship of Roman Catholicism to other world religions. These beliefs, in turn, shaped Merton's study of and participation in Zen.

Some scholars have classified responses to a religiously plural society according to three basic categories: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. The exclusivist position holds that one religion is true and that it alone provides salvation. Inclusivism affirms the complete truth of one religion, but also acknowledges that other religions contain truth and offer positive contributions to society. As such, these religions are not false, they are merely incomplete. Instead of condemning members of other traditions, the inclusivist sees their salvation in terms of his own religious understanding. A Christian inclusivist, for example, might believe salvation possible for a Buddhist or Hindu, but such salvation would still occur through the redemptive work of Christ. A pluralist perspective, on the opposite end of the spectrum from exclusivism, seeks to treat all religions as a true expression of the many-faceted larger Truth.[64] As the American scholar Diana Eck notes in her book *Encountering God,* most religions contain individuals who fit each of these groups.[65] In fact, Eck suggests that these categories may be present within each of us as an "ongoing dialogue."[66] For Thomas Merton, this dialogue was a salient reality. Throughout his life he found himself at different points along this continuum.

When Merton first wrote Suzuki, his interest in Buddhist belief and practice clearly surpassed that of a polite inquiry or surface curiosity. He made the rather bold claim that Zen was vital to his spiritual life. A cursory look at Merton's journals and writings quickly betrays that this was not always the case. In fact, his earlier attitude toward most of the other world religions, including Protestant Christianity, was often either critical or one of only mild interest. His statements on Oriental mysticism in his 1948 autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain,* offer a stark contrast to his correspondence with Suzuki a decade later. After discussing in *The Seven Storey Mountain* how he used the techniques of Oriental mysticism to fall asleep, Merton made the following comment on the relative worthlessness of the traditions:

> Ultimately, I suppose all Oriental mysticism can be reduced to techniques that do the same thing, but in a far more subtle and advanced fashion: and if that is true, it is not mysticism at all. It remains purely in the natural order. That does not make it evil, *per se*, according to the Christian standards: but it does not make it good, in relation to the supernatural. It is simply more or less useless, except when it is mixed up with elements that are strictly diabolical: and then of course these dreams and annihilations are designed to wipe out all vital moral activity, while leaving the personality in control of some nefarious principle, either of his own, or from outside himself.[67]

Here, Merton's distrust of other religions is characteristic of an exclusivist view. Following *The Seven Storey Mountain,* Merton continued the same line of thought in a devotional book entitled *The Seeds of Contemplation.* He expressed a basic distrust of non-Christian forms of mysticism when he described Islamic Sufi mystical experiences as "sensual dreams" which were inferior to Christian contemplation.[68]

The most extensive early exposure which Merton had with a non-Christian religion was his relationship to the Hindu monk Bramachari, whom he met and befriended at Columbia University before his conversion to Catholicism. Bramachari had come to the Chicago in 1932 as a representative of his monastic order at the World Fair's Congress of Religions. As Merton described the relationship in *The Seven Storey Mountain,* the presence of the penniless Hindu monk amidst the materialistic American culture was quite an anomaly to Merton and his friends. He respected Bramachari's lifestyle, commenting that he was "beyond laughing at the noise and violence of American city life and all the obvious lunacies like radio-programs and billboard advertising."[69] In spite of this respect, Merton conceived of the origin of Bramachari's piety as natural, not divine:

> Their whole spirituality is childlike, simple, primitive if you like, close to nature, ingenuous, optimistic, happy. But the point is, although it may be no more than the full flowering of the natural virtue of religion, with the other natural virtues, including a powerful natural charity, still the life of these pagan monks is one of such purity and holiness and peace, in the natural order, that it may put to shame the actual conduct of many Christian religious, in spite of their advantages of

constant access to all the means of grace.[70]

As this quotation demonstrates, although Merton admired Bramachari's monastic life, he was not particularly interested in studying or practicing Hindu traditions. He acknowledged that Bramachari's conduct surpassed that of many Christians in terms of a peaceful and holy lifestyle, but Hinduism was still for Merton merely an expression of natural piety.

In his journals during his first decade at the monastery, Merton was basically silent on the topic of other religions. At some point during this time, however, he developed an intense interest in many other religions, particularly as they related to a monastic or contemplative life. Unfortunately, Merton did not record this transformation in his public writings or private journals; thus, the reasons for the change are unclear. *The Sign of Jonas*, a collection of journals from 1946 to 1952, contains two references to Buddhism and Hinduism, but Merton's tone was matter-of-fact, lacking the intense interest and enthusiasm of later years.[71]

Charles MacCormick, in his article "The Zen Catholicism of Thomas Merton," mentions these two comments regarding Asian religions which Merton included in his journal in 1949, and he suggests they are indicative of a renewed interest in the wisdom of the East.[72] MacCormick's analysis of these quotations, however, is less than satisfactory. In the first of these journal entries, recorded on June 4, 1949, Merton briefly discussed a visit from the Archbishop of Nanking, Paul Yu-Pin, and remarked that Yu-Pin "spoke in Chapter about China and the contemplative life and Buddhist monasticism – and about the reproach that Buddhists fling at us, that is, we are very fine at building hospitals but we have no contemplatives."[73] MacCormick interprets this comment as a "sympathetic interest in Buddhist contemplation," albeit an implicit one, but he neglects to observe what aspect of the statement he perceives to be sympathetic. He assumes that the mere absence of a negative remark implies sympathy.

MacCormick's analysis of Merton's second reference to Asian religions also exceeds what can be reasonably inferred from the data. On November 24, 1949, Merton wrote,

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

According to MacCormick, "Merton's positive interest in Oriental mysticism is patent." All Merton actually says, however, is that he intends to study Patanjali's yoga. He does not record any positive or negative sentiments, and his tone is objective and noncommittal. These instances of exposure to Asian thought might have influenced what later became a very important aspect of Merton's life as a monk and writer, but MacCormick is on shaky ground to infer from them anything more definite.

Donald Grayston, another Merton scholar, dates Merton's study of Zen to the mid 1950's,[74] noting that "as a result of the reading and research which he did after...1950, Merton felt free to develop an interest in and respect for these spiritual traditions other than his own."[75] Grayston is silent, however, on the precise agents which promoted Merton's more appreciative perspective toward other religions.

What is known chronologically of Merton's interest in Asian religions begins with the earliest revised version of *Seeds of Contemplation* in December 1949. This text provides some evidence that Merton was beginning to mellow, as he omitted his disparaging reference to the Sufis.[76] Around the same time Merton was engaged in a study comparing Patanjali's Yoga with St. John of the Cross and found himself surprised by the similarities.[77] Sometime in the mid-1950's, Merton began to read Suzuki's work. Unfortunately, he did not keep a journal from April 1954 to June 1956, and it is therefore difficult to pinpoint when and why he became interested in the Zen master's thought. As early as July 1956, however, Merton mentioned Zen, along with psychiatry and psychoanalysis, as a tool which he found personally helpful for the development of Christ in his soul.[78] By 1959, when Merton first wrote to Suzuki, his interest in other world religions was very explicit and developed.

One Muslim with whom Merton communicated was Abdul Aziz, a Pakistani lay person who had studied Sufism extensively. The letters to Aziz demonstrate the significant change that had occurred in Merton's thought. In one of his first letters, Merton expressed embarrassment and regret over his earlier statement on Sufism in *Seeds of Contemplation*:

> As to *Seeds of Contemplation,* the reason I have not added this to the others is, frankly, shame. The book was written when I was much younger and contains many foolish statements, but one of the most foolish reflects an altogether stupid ignorance of Sufism. This I have many times regretted, now that I know much better what it is, but I could not bring myself to send you a book containing such a lamentable error.[79]

In contrast to the statement in *Seeds of Contemplation* to which Merton alluded with such regret, his statements to Aziz which directly pertain to Sufism display nothing but deep respect. Regarding one book Aziz sent him, Merton was particularly appreciative and complimentary:

> I have been tremendously impressed by Titus Burckhardt on Sufism. . . .It is one of the most stimulating books I have read for a long time, and I realize there is very much in it for me. In a sense it is one of those books that open up new horizons that I have been waiting for. I am tremendously impressed with the solidity and intellectual sureness of Sufism. There is no question but that here is a living and convincing truth, a deep mystical experience of the mystery of God our Creator Who watches over us at every moment with infinite love and mercy. I am stirred to the depths of my heart by the intensity of Moslem piety toward His Names, and the reverence with which He is invoked as the "Compassionate and the Merciful."[80]

This comment to Aziz, in a letter from January 1961, indicates that Merton had relaxed his exclusivist position and become more inclusive.

Merton's new inclusivist attitude embraced not only Sufism but also many different forms of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism. His 1967 book *Mystics and Zen Masters*[81] contained essays on Zen as well as on Taoism and the American Shakers. Included among Merton's last books are *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, another collection of essays on Zen, and *The Way of Chuang-Tzu,* a free-rendering of some of the Taoist writings of Chuang-Tzu. Merton also studied important Hindu texts such as the Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad, and he wrote an essay on the significance of the Bhagavad-Gita.[82] The height of Merton's ecumenical endeavors came when he traveled to Asia to address a conference of Catholic monks in Bangkok. Prior to the conference, Merton traveled throughout East Asia, visiting with monastics of different traditions, including the Dalai Lama.

Merton himself remarked on this diversity of elements which contributed to his monastic life as he reflected in his journals following his meeting with Suzuki in 1964. "Literature, contemplative solitude, Latin America, Asia, Zen, Islam, etc., all these things come together in my life. It would be madness for me to attempt to create a monastic life for myself by excluding all these. I would be less a monk. Others may have their ways of doing it, but I have mine."[83] He did indeed have his own unique style of monastic life as he incorporated all of these elements, a style which raises the question of how he was able to reconcile his inclusive perspective, arising in the late 1950's and early 1960's, with his prominent position in the Roman Catholic church. Did these religions, in which Merton had cultivated such an intense interest, contradict his Christian beliefs?

One of the most noticeable features of Merton's writing, as he wrestled with this question, was his critique of what he perceived to be two extreme positions. Although Merton didn't use the terms "exclusivism" and "pluralism," he was criticizing variations of these ideas. He first lamented the tendency on the part of many Christians to reject as false any non-Christian religious experience, arguing that such a position was the result of superficial analysis.[84] Merton felt that an inter-religion dialogue in which the participants believed other religions to be corrupt in their "inner heart" was necessarily superfluous,[85] and he opposed such exclusivism, insisting that God did not need to consult men before choosing the time, manner, and place in which he revealed himself. Consequently, there was no *a priori* reason for denying the possibility of supernatural revelations to individuals, irrespective of culture or religious tradition.

In spite of these rather favorable statements for religious plurality, Merton was not a proponent of what he perceived to be the other extreme position. On more than one occasion he expressed his qualms about accepting all religious truths as equally good or valid. In fact, Merton described this perspective as "loose and irresponsible syncretism,"[86] which "accepts everything by thinking of nothing."[87] This type of ecumenical discussion, he observed, eagerly noted surface similarities while attributing any differences to cultural factors. The fruit of such dialogue was only confusion.

Merton noted that the mystics were one group in

particular to which this syncretistic outlook was frequently applied. Some of his contemporaries assumed that the mystical experience in different religions was actually a single phenomenon, but that within the individual traditions the experience became clothed with different theologies and philosophies, making the experiences of different mystics seem distinct. Proponents of this position readily embraced the idea that all religions met at the same destination, and that all means to reaching the destination were equally efficacious. Merton approached the theory with much more caution, maintaining that it had not been sufficiently investigated, and expressing doubt that the experiences of the mystics were not themselves shaped by their specific beliefs.[88]

In spite of Merton's rejection of this syncretistic perspective, he was personally hesitant to address specific differences between religions. He made numerous comparisons concerning the similarities between the contemplatives of different traditions; yet, he always seemed to preface them with disclaimers concerning the theological differences which he did not wish to discuss. Merton acknowledged this tendency in a letter to Aziz in June of 1963. The Muslim scholar had written a description of Islam in his previous letter, to which Merton responded,

> Personally, in matters where dogmatic beliefs differ, I think that controversy is of little value because it takes us away from the spiritual realities into the realm of words and ideas. In the realm of realities we may have a great deal in common, whereas in words there are apt to be infinite complexities and subtleties which are beyond resolution.[89]

This hesitancy is even further complicated by a brief but rather perplexing comment which he made in a letter to Suzuki in 1965. After discussing the concepts of simplicity and paradise in both Buddhism and Christianity, Merton wrote, "In any event, there is only one meeting place for all religions, and it is paradise. How nice to be there and wander about looking at the flowers. Or being the flowers."[90]

This comment presents obvious difficulties in comparison with statements Merton made in other writings, letters, and journal entries. Was he beginning to espouse the syncretistic view which he had earlier criticized? Unfortunately, Merton did not elaborate upon his intended meaning. Because he wrote this letter to Suzuki in 1965, only three years before his death, it is possible that these later sentiments expressed a progression of his thought. Before drawing such conclusions and taking his comment to Suzuki to be Merton's definitive statement on the issue, it might be helpful to place Merton in the context of his time, the atmosphere of reform associated with Vatican II.

Pope John XXIII convoked the Second Vatican Council in 1962 to evaluate the function of the church in the modern world. Among numerous other monumental changes, the council issued a *Declaration on Non-Christian Religions*, to which Merton referred in his book *Mystics and Zen Masters*.[91] He mentioned the Council's position that all peoples are capable both of contemplating the divine and seeking answers to life's fundamental questions, and he affirmed the council's goal of promoting the Christian faith while at the same time seeking to preserve and value a culture's existing spiritual goods.[92] The council's declaration opened the Roman Catholic church to the possibility that any individual who sincerely sought the truth using the spiritual resources available through his own culture could receive grace and salvation. Merton himself verbalized this position in a 1963 letter to Aziz, saying,

> I perfectly agree that any man who in his heart sincerely believes in God and acts according to his conscience, with all rectitude, will certainly be saved and will come to the vision of God. I have no doubt in my mind whatever that a sincere Muslim will be saved and brought to heaven, even though for some reason he may not subjectively be able to accept all that the Church teaches about Christ. There may be many extrinsic reasons which make it impossible for him to understand what the Church means. This also applies to Jews, Hindus, Buddhists and in fact to all sincere men...This is certainly the teaching of the Catholic Church, and this is being brought out clearly now, in connection with the Council.[93]

Placed in the context of this atmosphere of reform, Merton's comment to Suzuki does not seem nearly so out of place, nor does it contradict the delicate balance Merton seemed to walk between the extremes of rigid exclusivity and unexamined syncretism. In fact, some comments from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, a collection of thoughts taken from notebooks which he kept throughout the late 50's and early 60's, confirm that his perspective closely corresponded to

that of Vatican II.

In these pages Merton revealed an understanding of the plurality of religions that sought to affirm other traditions by looking within his own and discovering sameness.[94] For Merton, acknowledging the truth in other religions was a way of embracing truth to its fullest extent. He felt that rejecting Islam or Buddhism or Protestant Christianity as false would entail rejecting any Buddhist, Islamic, or Protestant teachings that appeared in Roman Catholicism. To be "Catholic" in a sense which completely rejected all other traditions actually served to undermine the concept of truth because it meant accepting a particular premise in the context of one belief system while rejecting it in the context of another. These years of the late 1950's and early 1960's, during which Merton espoused this inclusive position of seeking and affirming truth wherever it was to be found, corresponded to his most focused study and writing about Zen. The two trends in his life most certainly go hand in hand. Merton appreciated Zen because he was able to connect Zen ideas to his own goal of contemplation. The fact that Merton became more inclusive in his approach to faiths outside Roman Catholicism allowed him to make such connections and still make sense of his own position as a Cistercian monk.

Afterword

This study began as an attempt to understand how Merton was able to participate in Zen while remaining Roman Catholic. The previous sections have addressed the question by exploring Merton's interest in contemplation, his specific comparisons between Zen and Christianity, and his approach to religious plurality. Merton's inclusive approach to religions enabled him to explore Zen with an open mind, and he discovered that the heart of Zen was quite consistent with his personal spiritual quest.

At this point the thought naturally arises, if Thomas Merton were so convinced that the truth in Zen was essential to his goal of contemplation, perhaps he wasn't entirely within the boundaries of Roman Catholic Christianity. Merton may have died a Cistercian monk, but to what extent did he still fit within the tradition? Some evidence does indeed suggest that, in the latter years of his life, Merton began to distance himself from his monastic community and from the Roman Catholic Church in general.

In January of 1967, a mere two years before Merton's death, he wrote a distressed letter to the feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether, asking advice concerning his qualms with the Church. In it he expressed his doubts and frustrations, saying,

> I do wonder at times if the Church is real at all. I believe it, you know. But I wonder if I am nuts to do so. Am I part of a great big hoax? I don't explain myself as well as I would like to: there is a real sense of and confidence in an underlying reality, the presence of Christ in the world which I don't doubt for an instant. But is that presence where we are all saying it is? We are all pointing (in various directions) and my dreadful feeling is that we are all pointing wrong.[95]

In the same letter Merton mentioned that while he loved the many nice, well-meaning Catholics whom he encountered, he felt a deeper understanding with Zen Buddhists, and he even remarked that he would be "perfectly content" to forget he was Catholic.[96] In another letter to Ruether, Merton expressed his discomfort with "dictating to all the 'other religions' that we are the one authentic outfit that has the real goods."[97]

Merton not only verbalized these misgivings, but he seemed prepared to act on them as well. During his trip to Asia, Merton indicated in his journal that he intended to leave Gethsemani, and as possible alternatives he considered living as a hermit in Alaska, starting a meditative monastery open to Buddhism, and studying under a Tibetan guru.[98] Regarding the last option Merton wrote,

> Sonam Kazi...thinks I ought to find a Tibetan guru....At least he asked me if I were willing to risk it and I said why not? . . .I would certainly like to learn something by experience and it does seem that the Tibetan Buddhist are the only ones who, at present, have really large numbers of people who have attained to extraordinary heights in meditation and contemplation.[99]

Merton's interests in this statement are directed toward a mystical experience which he does not, at least on the surface, connect to Roman Catholic beliefs. Did he, in these later years, still consider himself a Christian contemplative?

Notwithstanding these few quotations, most of the evidence indicates an affirmative answer. While it is true that Merton intended to leave Gethsemani, he still planned to retain official connection to the monastery, and he anticipated spending his last days there.[100]

During the trip to Asia, Merton received suggestions about starting a contemplative Christian monastery, and he wrote in his journal in December of 1968, "It needs some thought. I hope to write Fr. Flavian about it. There is much to be said for the idea." Regarding his comments to Ruether, he was careful to qualify his doubts by stating that he did not intend to leave Catholicism.[101]

As Merton expressed doubts about the Church in these last few years of his life, he wrote from a position of confusion, not from one of certainty. These sentiments exist in the form of questions, not a creed; Merton was wondering "what if," not proclaiming "I believe." Whether Merton's concerns with the Church would have developed into a more defined "I believe," an "I believe" which would have placed him outside the confines of the Roman Catholic Church, is improbable. On the one hand, he seemed to have struggled throughout his life with various frustrations about the Catholic Church and his monastic order. On the other, he had always written very specifically about Christian teachings, especially when he addressed other religious traditions. Although Merton thought the insights of Zen were essential to contemplation, he did not believe that they encompassed the whole of contemplation. He firmly held to the eschatological element of Christian theology.

This point comes out most clearly at the end of Merton's essay in the dialogue with Suzuki. Throughout this piece Merton focused on the Zen concept of Emptiness and its correlation to the innocence of Adam and Eve in the garden. He thought that the paradise of the garden could be recovered in the present because of the work of Christ, the "New Adam."[102] After explaining this "recovery of paradise" which occurred through the individual's identification with the death of Christ, Merton explained that paradise, instead of being the final goal, was actually a fresh beginning. The ultimate goal was to be something entirely new, an eschatological dimension which he did not detect in Zen. In Merton's words,

> This is the real dimension of Christianity, the eschatological dimension which is peculiar to it, and which has no parallel in Buddhism. The world was created without man, but the new creation which is the true Kingdom of God is to be the work of God in and through man. It is to be the great, mysterious, theandric work of the Mystical Christ, the New Adam, in whom all men as "one Person" or one "Son of God" will transfigure the cosmos and offer it resplendent to the Father. Here, in this transfiguration, will take place the apocalyptic marriage between God and His creation, the final and perfect consummation of which no mortal mysticism is able to dream and which is barely foreshadowed in the symbols and images of the last pages of the Apocalypse.[103]

Merton also confirmed his personal commitment to the eschatological perspective in his journals. In December 1964, long after Merton had begun studying and writing about Zen, he commented,

> If it were a matter of choosing between contemplation and eschatology, there is no question that I am and would always be committed entirely to the latter. Here in the hermitage, returning necessarily to the beginnings, I know where my beginning was: hearing the name of god and of Christ preached on Corpus Christi Church in New York. I heard and I believed. And I believe that he has called me freely, out of pure mercy, to His love and salvation. That at the end, to which all is directed by his will, I shall see him after I have put off my body in death and have risen together with Him to take up my body again. That at the Last Day all flesh shall see the salvation of God.[104]

For Merton, at least as late as 1964, Zen clearly did not constitute the whole of his personal religious experience.

Even in the midst of his expressed doubts regarding the Catholic Church a few years later, Merton continued to affirm his faith in the reality of Christ in the world. Indeed, in one of the last letters he wrote, a circular letter to friends which he penned while in Asia, Merton continued to attest to this faith. He concluded this account of his travels saying, "I wish you all the peace and joy in the Lord and an increase of faith: for in my contacts with these new friends I also feel consolation in my own faith in Christ and His indwelling presence. I hope and believe He may be present in the hearts of all of us."

Thomas Merton's journey to Asia, both in the literal and metaphorical sense, is an increasingly common aspect of contemporary religious experience. Intercultural and interreligious contact are a reality of modern life. As such, one component of the academic study of religion is understanding how

members of one tradition react with another. In particular, how do they deal with conflicting claims to truth? Thomas Merton's search continues to fascinate his readers because he eagerly sought dialogue. He approached other religions not as one whose beliefs were threatened, but with a genuine interest and desire to learn. Merton remained within Catholic Christianity, but he came to understand other traditions as an integral part of his personal religious life.[105]

Endnotes

[1]Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity,* ed. Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990), 11.

[2]Michael Zeik, "Merton and the Buddhists," *Commonweal*, 12 October 1973, 34.

[3]Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert* (New York: New Directions, 1960). This work is a translation of sayings of the 4th-century desert fathers. Merton detected a Zen-like quality in them and sent a copy of the manuscript to Suzuki.

[4]Merton wanted to include this series of essays as an East-West dialogue at the end of *The Wisdom of the Desert*, but it was withheld by the censors. The essays were eventually published in *New Directions* 17 and later in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968), 99-138.

[5]Thomas Merton and D.T. Suzuki. *Encounter: Thomas Merton and D.T. Suzuki.* ed. Robert E. Daggy (Larkspur Press, 1988), 85-86.

[6]The article, entitled "D.T. Suzuki: The Man and His Work," was included in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*. It was first published in *The Eastern Buddhist* 2.1 (August 1967).

[7]Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, 62.

[8]This quotation came from a July 1964 letter written to Dame Hildelith Cumming, an English Benedictine nun. *The School of Charity*, 223.

[9]Merton made this comment to Father Aelred, an Anglican at St. Mary's Cottage, Oxford. *The School of Charity,* 254.

[10]*The School of Charity,* 219.

[11]Thomas Merton and D.T. Suzuki, *Encounter,* 7.

[12]Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), 1-13. Both of these chapters were added to this revised edition of the earlier *Seeds of Contemplation* (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1949).

[13]Merton, *New Seeds,* 1.

[14]Ibid., 4-13.

[15]Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1948), 404-405.

[16]Merton, *New Seeds,* 286-287.

[17]Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountains: The Story of a Vocation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 458.

[18]Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1948), 25-26.

[19]Ibid., 69-70.

[20]Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude,* ed. Lawrence Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 15.

[21]Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation,* 22.

[22]Ibid., 33.

[23]Ibid., 31.

[24]Ibid., 102-103.

[25]Ibid., 28.

[26]John Bowker, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[27]The two major traditions of Buddhism are Theravada and Mahayana. Theravada maintained that enlightenment was extremely difficult and possible only for monks, while the Mahayana school held that it was attainable by all.

[28]Bowker, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary,* 172.

[29]Ibid., 1066.

[30]Ibid.

[31]The first four terms are from Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967), 223-225. The last two are found in *Zen and the Birds,* 73.

[32]*Mystics,* 224.

[33]Ibid.

[34]William Johnston, *The Still Point* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1970).

[35]Ibid., 7.

[36]Ibid., 45-46.

[37]*Zen and the Birds,* 109.

[38]Merton, *Mystics,* 20-21, 27.

[39]Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite,* 51.

[40]*Encounter,* 12-13.

[41]Ibid., 19-21.

[42]*Encounter,* 21.

[43]Suzuki, "Wisdom in Emptiness," in Merton, *Zen and the Birds,* 109.

[44]Ibid., 109.

[45]Merton, *Encounter,* 39.

[46]Ibid., 117. Merton picked up the term from St. Paul's description in Romans 5.

[47]Ibid., 119.

[48]Ibid., 125.

[49]Ibid., 133.

[50]Suzuki in Merton, *Zen and the Birds,* 133. Even in the first sentence of his essay, before raising any specific criticism, Suzuki was trying to emphasize this East versus West dichotomy. He referred to the Christian writers Merton quoted as "logically-minded theologians who have endeavored to intellectually clarify their experiences."

Suzuki believed the difference between this approach and that of Zen, which claimed to transcend logic and any attempt to verbalize experience, was insurmountable.

[51]Merton and Suzuki, *Encounter,* 47.

[52]Merton, *Zen and the Birds,* 62.

[53]Merton, *Encounter,* 82.

[54]In the postscript of *Zen and the Birds of Appetite,* 139, Merton noted that this article, appearing first in the book, was actually the one he had written most recently. Suzuki himself used Eckhart in the dialog on pages 109-110.

[55]Ibid., 9.

[56]Ibid., 10.

[57]Ibid., 13.

[58]Merton, *New Seeds,* 283.

[59]Merton, *Zen and the Birds,* 86. Merton wrote, "Nirvana is beyond experience. Yet it is also the 'highest experience' if we see it as a liberation from merely psychological limitations. The words 'experience of love' must not be understood in terms of emotional fulfillment, of desire and possession, but of full realization, total awakening – a complete realization of love not merely as the emotion of a feeling subject but as the wide openness of Being itself, the realization that Pure Being is Infinite Giving or that Absolute Emptiness is Absolute Compassion." In this quotation, as in the one above, Merton describes a dissolution of the subject/object relationship which is replaced by pure love without division.

[60]Merton, *New Seeds,* 3.

[61]Merton, *New Seeds,* 1.

[62]Merton, *Zen and the Birds,* 5.

[63]Ibid., 4.

[64]These definitions follow Diana Eck's summaries of the three positions in *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banara* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 166-199. For a more comprehensive analysis, see Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1982).

[65]Eck, 169.

[66]Ibid., 170.

[67]Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain,* 185.

[68]Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1949), 87. In this section Merton was discussing the importance of the teaching and tradition of the Roman Catholic Church in fostering contemplation. He published in 1961 a revised version of *Seeds of Contemplation,* entitled *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1972), which contained several entirely new chapters. In the revised version, Merton omitted the reference to Sufism, which stated, "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, or the sensual dreams of the Sufis."

[69]Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Signet, 1948), 193.

[70]Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain,* 190-191.

[71]*The Sign of Jonas,* 197 & 243.

[72]Charles MacCormick, "The Zen Catholicism of Thomas Merton," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 9.4 (Fall 1972), 806.

[73]*The Sign of Jonas,* 197.

[74]Donald Grayston, *Thomas Merton, The Development of a Spiritual Theologian* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1985), 169.

[75]Ibid., 100.

[76]Ibid., 93. 99-100.

[77]David F.K. Steindl-Rast, O.S.B., "Destination: East; Destiny: Fire – Thomas Merton's Real Journey" in *Thomas Merton: Prophet in the Belly of a Paradox,* Gerald Twomey, ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 169.

[78]Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude,* Lawrence Cunningham, ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 48.

[79]Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love. The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns,* ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985), 44.

[80]Ibid., 48.

[81]Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1961).

[82]Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chang-tzu* (New York: New Directions, 1965); Merton mentioned his study of the Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad in *The Hidden Ground of Love,* 128; his essay "The Significance of the Bhagavad-Gita" was published posthumously in *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1968).

[83]Merton, *Encounter,* 89.

[84]Merton, *Mystics,* 208.

[85]Ibid., 206.

[86]Ibid., 207.

[87]Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander,* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1965), 129. This book is a collection of undated entries from notebooks which Merton kept between 1956 and 1965. In this particular passage Merton is discussing the necessity of affirming the truth found in other religions. The full quotation reads, "This does not mean syncretism, indifferentism, the vapid and careless friendliness that accepts everything by thinking of nothing. There is much that one cannot 'affirm' and 'accept,' but first must say 'yes' where one really can."

[88]Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite,* 43.

[89]Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love,* 54.

[90]Merton, *Encounter,* 74.

[91]Although *Mystics* was first published in 1961, Merton wrote a preface to a later addition in 1966, in which he referred to the *Declaration on Non-Christian Religions* (p. viii-ix), which was promulgated in October 1965. At least one article within the book, "Contemplation and Dialogue," also refers to the declaration. As the articles themselves are not dated, it is uncertain if the article was written after 1965 or simply revised from its original form.

[92]Merton, *Mystics,* 206.

[93]Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love,* 57.

[94]Merton, *Conjectures,* 128-129.

[95]Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love,* 500.

[96]Ibid., 499-500.

[97]Ibid., 501.

[98]Merton, *The Asian Journal,* 82, 149, 218.

[99]Merton, *The Asian Journal,* 82.

[100]Ibid., 149.

[101]Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love,* 499-500.

[102]Ibid., 117. Merton picked up the term from St. Paul's description in Romans 5.

[103]Ibid., 132.

[104]Thomas Merton, *A Vow of Conversation* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988), 116.

[105]Merton, *The Asian Journal,* 325.

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