A Life of Paradox: Thomas Merton's Asian Trajectory

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A LIFE OF PARADOX: THOMAS MERTON'S ASIAN TRAJECTORY

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A LIFE OF PARADOX: THOMAS MERTON'S ASIAN TRAJECTORY
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Anthony Padovano called Thomas Merton a "symbol of the century" inasmuch as he embodied many of the changes facing Christianity during the often tumultuous and violent, but increasingly pluralistic, middle decades of the twentieth century. Merton engaged in a "total ecumenism," in which he intensely studied other religious traditions, most notably the religions of Asia, in order to better understand his own Roman Catholic tradition. This paper will trace the trajectory of Asian ideas and experiences throughout Merton’s life and analyze how these experiences transformed him from a narrow-minded monk to an ecumenical mystic. An ever-present subject emerges: the coincidence of opposites, or the paradox. This theme was Merton’s own understanding of not only inter-religious dialogue but also his very own identity.
In a Zen koan\(^1\) someone said that an enlightened man is not one who seeks Buddha or finds Buddha, but simply an ordinary man who *has nothing left to do*. Yet mere stopping is not arriving. To stop is to stay a million miles from it and to do nothing is to miss it by the whole width of the universe. As for arriving, when you arrive you are ruined . . . .

—Thomas Merton  
*Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*\(^2\)

Be still:  
There is no longer any need of comment.  
It was a lucky wind  
That blew away his halo with his cares,  
A lucky sea that drowned his reputation.

Here you will find  
Neither a proverb nor a memorandum.  
There are no ways,  
No methods to admire  
Where poverty is no achievement.  
His God lives in his emptiness like an affliction.

What choice remains?  
Well, to be ordinary is not a choice:  
It is the usual freedom  
Of men without visions.

—Thomas Merton  
From “When in the Soul of the Serene Disciple. . . .”\(^3\)

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\(^1\) A koan is a “fundamental practice in Zen training, challenging the pupil through a question, or phrase or answer to a question, which presents a paradox or a puzzle. A koan cannot be understood or answered in conventional terms: it requires a pupil to abandon reliance on ordinary ways of understanding in order to move in or towards enlightenment.” [*Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, edited by John Bowker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 552-553.]


Introduction
Among the Stone Buddhas

Thomas Merton took off his shoes. He took them off, perhaps wanting to feel the earth beneath his feet, perhaps feeling as though he was standing on sacred ground. It had rained earlier in the morning, his journal tells us, and the grass and sand were wet as he approached the massive, stone Buddhas. His travel companions, a vicar general from the Ceylonese bishop’s office and the bishop’s driver, hung back (shying away from “paganism,” Merton explained later), and Merton approached the ruins of ancient Polonnaruwa alone.¹

It was December 2, 1968. Thomas Merton, Trappist hermit, Catholic priest, and author of over forty books of poetry, journals, spirituality and politics, had come to a crucial moment in his life. For the first time in his twenty-seven-year vocation as a monk, Merton had been allowed to leave the monastery for an extended period. Arriving in India in early November, Merton came to Asia ostensibly to speak at a conference on monastic renewal in Bangkok. But he knew that this journey had a far deeper significance.

During the previous decade, Merton had submerged himself deeper and deeper into the study of Asian philosophies, especially Taoism and Buddhism. His motivations

¹ Thomas Merton, The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 323. This is the final of the seven-volume collection of Merton’s complete edited journals.
for this study were diverse. It was partly a natural outgrowth of his deep commitment to
ecumism, cultivated by his numerous friendships with scholars of the East like D. T.
Suzuki and John Wu. Studying Eastern monasticism also aided Merton’s writings on the
renewal of Christian monasticism. Merton also sought from Eastern values insights that
could transform Western values and society. The study of Eastern religions had
arguably revitalized his writing career. Some considered his three books that explored
Asian thought his greatest pieces of writing.

Merton desired to penetrate into the deepest regions of spiritual experience, and
believed that the Asian masters of Buddhism and Hinduism held the key to unlocking
these mysteries. On the day he left for Asia, Merton wrote in his journal: “May I not
come back without having settled the great affair. And found also the great compassion,
mahakaruna . . . I am going home, to the home where I have never been in this body.”

Before arriving at Polonnaruwa, Merton had met with monks of the Theravada
Buddhist tradition, consulted with scholars of Hinduism, and spent long hours with the
rinpoches, or reincarnated teachers, of Tibetan Buddhism, including the Dalai Lama
himself, exiled from his homeland and living in Dharamsala. They recognized Merton as
someone who not only had an expansive knowledge of the Eastern traditions but also as

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2 See especially Merton’s comments given during talks just before he left for Asia in Thomas Merton,

3 See Alexander Lipski, *Thomas Merton and Asia: His Quest for Utopia* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian
Publications, 1983).

4 *The Way of Chuang-Tzu* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1992); *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York:
Merton also wrote two long poems during this time, *Cables to the Ace* (New York: New Directions, 1968)

5 *The Other Side of the Mountain*, 205. *Mahakaruna* is Sanskrit for “great compassion.” See *Oxford
one whose deep spiritual awareness placed him on the verge of enlightenment. They bestowed on him honorary titles like the “Catholic geshe” [roughly translated, doctor of divinity] and “rangjung Sangay” [natural Buddha]. Merton considered these the greatest honors he had ever received, and more important than any honor he could ever receive in the West. He even began to literally dream about becoming a Zen monk.

And yet, in quiet moments, Merton questioned the whole purpose of his journey to the East. Perhaps he realized that he was over-romanticizing the people and traditions of Asia. Perhaps he felt that, useful as his Eastern studies were to the renewal of monastic structures, their usefulness to him as a Christian contemplative was limited. At one point, he even noted that he had “a definite feeling it is a waste of time—something I didn’t need to do. However, if I have discovered I didn’t need to do it, it has not been a waste of time.”

Whatever his feelings about his Asian journey, Merton approached the silent stone Buddhas of Polonnaruwa that day with an open-minded awe that propelled him into one of the most profound experiences of his life. Two days later, struggling to find the words that he knew could not describe what had happened to him, Merton reflected on the event. He described the incredible sense of serenity the statues seemed to exude, and he felt “relief and thankfulness at the obvious clarity of the figures.” And then:

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6 Other Side of the Mountain, 266; 278.

7 Ibid., 255.

8 Ibid., 282.
Looking at these figures, I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied\textsuperscript{9} vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious. . . All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear. The rock, all matter, all life, is charged with \textit{dharmakaya}\textsuperscript{10} . . . everything is emptiness and everything is compassion. . . Surely, with Mahabalipuran and Polonnaruwa my Asian pilgrimage has come clear and purified itself. I mean, I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for. I don’t know what else remains but I have now seen and have pierced through the surface and have got beyond the shadow and the disguise.\textsuperscript{11}

Eight days later, after giving a speech to other monks in Bangkok, Thailand, Merton went back to his room alone and was accidentally killed by a faulty electric fan. He was fifty-three years old.

What was the significance of the experience in Polonnaruwa? If Merton had lived longer, perhaps he himself would have reflected on it more. His biographers and students of his life have interpreted the event variously. Most find it a poetic fulfillment to both his life and his Eastern quest. Monica Furlong, author of \textit{Merton: A Biography}, said that among the stone Buddhas Merton’s life “made a perfect circle and was complete.”\textsuperscript{12} According to fellow Trappist Hilary Costello, in some sense, Merton achieved that day the enlightenment experience that he was seeking, and that the contradictions of Merton’s life and varied interests were resolved:

\textsuperscript{9} According to editors Jonathan Montaldo and Patrick Hart, the original manuscript appears to read “half-tired.” See Thomas Merton, \textit{The Intimate Merton: His Life from His Journals} (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), 362.

\textsuperscript{10} \textit{Dharmakaya}, roughly translated from Sanskrit, means “teaching body” and refers to the principal in Buddhism that all phenomena communicate the essential message of the Buddha’s teachings. See the \textit{Oxford Dictionary of World Religions}, 989.

\textsuperscript{11} \textit{Other Side of the Mountain}, 323.

It left him speechless because it was immediately apparent to him that Buddhism and Christianity were converging on the same point, striving towards the same or at any rate a similar ultimate transformation... he saw it as a beginning: an entry into a new mode of monastic life.\textsuperscript{13}

Those who interpreted Merton's last years as a shedding of Christianity in favor of an Eastern identity understood Polonnaruwa to be nothing less that Merton's emergence into Buddhahood. Merton's long-time friend Ed Rice, author of the highly sympathetic \textit{Man in the Sycamore Tree, The Good Times and Hard Life of Thomas Merton}, finished his book with an ode that proclaims him "Incarnate Buddha... Master Thomas."\textsuperscript{14}

Polonnaruwa provided historians with much to argue about because it was such a wonderfully poetic symbol of his yearning for a deep spiritual experience in Asia. But Merton's entire life itself has been the subject of broad interpretation as well. Thomas Merton was a man of deep contradictions. His life often took him in directions that defied a pattern. As a young monk, he exhibited a strong theological arrogance and stuffy piety, and then later expressed shame for things he wrote in his most famous book, \textit{The Seven Storey Mountain}, and sought to break down all doctrinal barriers that separated people of faith. He was a hermit who found that the more he tried to retreat into solitude and God, the more he found himself called into the world. He was a priest in a conservative religious tradition, but found his clearest voice in the confounding riddles of Zen Buddhism.


How do we understand a man who so thoroughly represents the radical cultural and political changes of his generation, especially with regard to changes in the Catholic Church? Merton represented the uniting of ancient monastic values with modern political thought and cultural pluralism. He was one in spirit with his contemporaries the Beat poets and their scathing critique of the meaninglessness of modern society. He was both a student of and a mentor to the growing numbers of Catholics who interpreted their faith in radical political ways, including lay people like Dorothy Day, priests like Daniel and Phillip Berrigan and liberation theologians like Ernesto Cardenal. And he led the way toward embracing the religious pluralism that was becoming increasingly evident in America in the 1950s and 1960s.

But it was not always so. When Merton first entered Gethsemani in 1941, he completely rejected the modern world, including its humanistic, post-enlightenment ideals about the potential for human culture and politics. How did he then become such a representative figure of the century by his death in 1968? Many scholars have attempted to define the trajectory of Merton’s life, to trace the reasons for the radical shift in his thinking in the mid-1950s, and to understand what he was seeking in seemingly contradictory ways. Three models for understanding Merton’s intellectual life have emerged. The first involves a linear interpretation of his life, the second a cyclical one. But these interpretations are limited in their usefulness. A better way to understand Merton is to see him as he saw himself: as a religious and cultural paradox.

In a 1991 article for Cistercian Studies, Christopher Nugent described some of the ways that scholars have variously attempted to answer the question "Quo vadis, Tome?";
that is, "Where are you going, Thomas?"\textsuperscript{15} One of the earliest ways of understanding Merton was to see his life as a linear pattern of stages. Rice's view, of course, was that the last stage involved a breakthrough that would have changed Merton's very identity. As Rice explained, Merton was "an Englishman who became a Communist, then a Catholic, later a Trappist monk, and finally a Buddhist, at which point, his life having been fulfilled, he died."\textsuperscript{16} The emergence from the monastery, Our Lady of Gethsemani, where he lived near Bardstown, Kentucky, for the duration of his monastic career, was like "the Count of Monte Cristo, [who] had cut himself out of the sack."\textsuperscript{17} Likewise, Charles Kinzie, writing in \textit{Contemplative Review}, described a "Merton Rinpoche," who had burned out on Catholicism and would now teach "the mantra of Polonnaruwa."\textsuperscript{18} Although these views do not fit within the consensus of Merton research today, Kinzie and others can point to comments Merton often made in the last years of his life, usually to his close friends. In 1962, to theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether, Merton confessed that he was "browned off" with Catholics and that "I understand Zen Buddhists better than I do them [Catholics] and the Zens understand me better. But this is awful because where is the Church and where am I in the Church?"\textsuperscript{19}

Others, like David Cooper, saw Merton's life in a cyclical pattern, rather than

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{16} Rice, 139.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 137.
\end{flushright}
linear. In *Thomas Merton's Art of Denial: The Evolution of a Radical Humanist*, Cooper described the young, pre-Gethsemani Thomas Merton as a poetic, romantic free spirit, who, due to Freudian psychological factors and guilt over what he considered his misspent youth, became a world-denying monk. Merton attempted to deny his vocation as a writer to satisfy his image of what a monk should be, Cooper argued, but nevertheless could not deny who he was and found a way to blend his monastic calling with his need to write.20 Merton himself once wrote, "It is possible to doubt whether I have become a monk (a doubt I have to live with), but it is not possible to doubt that I am a writer, that I was born one and will most probably die one."21 Cooper described Merton's embracing of his dual calling as the event that finally resolved the circle of his life: the free-spirit poet, at the end of his days, became a radical Christian humanist, not concerned as much with knowing God as realizing God's love in the world of real human beings.

Alexander Lipski also saw in Merton the emergence of a deepening humanism. Lipski's *Merton in Asia: His Quest for Utopia*, is one of the few books to focus exclusively on Merton's interest in the East.22 Lipski's sometimes unflattering portrayal of Merton presents the monk as deeply soured toward Western society at large. Lipski saw in Merton's youthful flirtation with communism the roots of a lifelong tendency toward utopianism. Merton, Lipski said, sought from religion a kind of moral


21 *A Thomas Merton Reader*, x.

22 A critique of Lipski's theory is discussed in the literature review section of Chapter I.
transformation that could bring about revolutionary changes in social structures. He sought it first in the Trappist monastery, and not finding it there, turned toward a romanticized image of Asia and its esoteric spiritual traditions. Lipski pointed out that the day Merton died, he was speaking on the convergence of Marxism and monasticism.

But a common thread throughout all the treatments of Merton’s life is the dominant theme of Anthony Padovano’s work, *The Human Journey, Thomas Merton: Symbol of a Century.* Padovano argued that we should not try to resolve the paradox of Merton’s life at all, since the nature of paradox is that it teaches something about the truth in spite of—even because of—its contradictory nature. This idea, along with terminology from Christopher Nugent, is the most useful way of understanding Merton and especially the Eastern trajectory of his life.

Padovano explored the dialectic present in all of Merton’s work, from his writings on mysticism, to his study of scripture, to the paradox of a cloistered monk commenting on world affairs like Vietnam, the Cold War and racial prejudice. He found that Merton embodied exactly what both Zen Buddhism and apophatic Christian mysticism had always taught: that the experience of the ultimate reality transcends all contradictions and definitions, that it in fact (echoing the Taoist masters Merton loved so much), involves the necessary presence of opposites. The dualities are not resolved. Rather, the truth exists in the very fact of the dualities. Merton was, according to Padovano,

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24 Apophatic theology is “another name for theology by way of negation: according to which God is known by negating concepts that might be applied to him, stressing the inadequacy of human language and concepts to say anything about God” (*Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, 81).
a Christian paradox whose simplicity appears complex to those who have their own image of what a monk must be. He is a Zen koan whose resolution into clarity is unattainable, especially to those whose religious categories are tired and prosaic.25

Nugent called this feature of Merton’s life “the coincidence of opposites.” This term was first used in reference to Merton by his long-time friend, Benedictine monk Dom Jean Leclerq. It was the title of an article Leclerq wrote for Cistercian Studies in which he compared Merton to French philosopher Jacques Maritain.26 Though Leclerq never used the term in the text itself, he did explore how both Merton and Maritain embodied the idea of the creative tension of opposites, especially with regard to how both men found that the deeper they tried to plunge into the darkness of God, the more they felt called to be light for the world.

Nugent called the coincidence of opposites “one of the oldest and, at least for the modern Occident, best kept secrets of human experience.”27 Nugent viewed Merton’s life as a circle that played out this harmony of opposites. He described Merton as a young, cosmopolitan seeker, who became a monk, and then returned to his roots as a seeker, this time as an “archaeologist of catholicity.” Defining “catholic” as a broad, universal vision that seeks truth wherever truth can be found, Nugent saw the deepest paradox in Merton’s life as this: he went backwards, both into the Christian past and its earthy, apophatic mysticism, and into the ancient teachings of Asia, which hold at their center the coincidence of opposites, in order to go forward toward his goal of spiritual awakening.

25 Padovano, 49.
27 Nugent, 260.
(or, as Nugent puts it, "endarkening."). Nugent argued that the coincidence of opposites is not only a useful way of understanding the contradictions of Merton’s intellectual life, but that it was in fact the way Merton understood himself as well. In the preface to *A Thomas Merton Reader* (1962), Merton wrote:

> I have had to accept the fact that my life is almost totally paradoxical. I have also had to learn gradually to get along without apologizing for the fact, even to myself. And perhaps this preface is an indication that I have not yet completely learned. No matter. It is in paradox itself, the paradox which was and still is a source of insecurity, that I have come to find the greatest security. I have become convinced that the very contradictions in my life are in some ways signs of God’s mercy to me: if only because someone so complicated and so prone to confusion and self-defeat could hardly survive for long without special mercy. And since this in no way depends on the approval of others, the awareness of it is a kind of liberation.  

Perhaps the most paradoxical aspect of Merton’s life was what in 1968 he would have considered the most important: his lifetime journey towards the East. This journey did not begin in November of 1968. It appears as early as his undergraduate days at Columbia University. Padovano even found eerie parallels between Merton’s death and the death of his artist father, who also turned to the east in his last years, devoting himself exclusively to the painting of Byzantine icons. Throughout this study, an ever-present theme in Merton’s Asian trajectory emerges: the coincidence of opposites, or the paradox. This was Merton’s own understanding of not only inter-religious dialogue but of his very own identity as well. As he wrote in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966),

> If I can unite in myself the thought and the devotion of Eastern and Western Christendom, the Greek and the Latin Fathers, the Russians with

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28 *A Thomas Merton Reader*, ix-x.

29 Padovano, 15.
the Spanish mystics, I can prepare in myself the reunion of divided Christians. From that secret and unspoken unity in myself can eventually come a visible and manifest unity of all Christians. If we want to bring together what is divided, we can not do so by imposing one division upon the other or absorbing one division into the other. But if we do this, the union is not Christian. It is political, and doomed to further conflict. We must contain all divided worlds in ourselves and transcend them in Christ.  

Merton’s embodiment of the coincidence of opposites made him one of the most important and profound America religious thinkers of twentieth century. Merton united in himself a myriad of forces sweeping across the American religious landscape.

Historian Edwin Gaustad, in his book A Religious History of America, chronicled this “veritable whirlwind of energies and contrary forces” that have affected American religion, including American imperialism and the collision of Christian missionary activities and native faiths; the stunning violence of world wars; the battle of fundamentalist religious beliefs and modern, humanistic and scientific theories; the tumultuous economy of the industrial age; the civil rights movement; the growing role of women in public life and emphasis on women’s rights; and especially the increasingly pluralistic character of American religious life as a result of immigration and the breakdown of Christian hegemony.

These forces often challenged the traditional teachings of Christianity, creating a kind of crisis of faith for many Americans eager to resolve these contradictions. Thomas Merton was just such an American. As Anthony Padovano pointed out,

The present century has been an experience of living out, dialectically, tensions that appear contradictory but are often creative. The character of the century has been tentative in many ways because certitude was

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30 Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, 282.

challenged dramatically and often. This occurred in physics with Einstein's relativity and Heisenberg's principle of interdeterminacy; in philosophy with theories of process, existentialism, and linguistic analysis; in theology with ecumenism, ecclesial reform, and biblical criticism.  

Padovano's book went on to argue that Thomas Merton was a perfect "symbol of the century" because he quite deliberately brought together in himself many of these forces, especially those of ecumenism and church reform. The "coincidence of opposites" is not just Merton's story, but the story of American religious ecumenism as well.

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32 Padovano, xv.
Chapter One:
Quo Vadis Tome?
Merton and His Interpreters

A Biographical Sketch

In his play about Thomas Merton’s life, *Under the Sign of the Waterbearer*,
James Baker imagined a scene in which Merton’s dead father, Owen, converses with
Dom Frederic Dunne, Merton’s first abbot at Our Lady of Gethsemani, about his son’s
prospects as a monk. Owen thinks Thomas is far too independent and headstrong for the
monastic life:

> I said he’s Aquarius, the waterbearer, seeking perfection, never finding it.
> If he appears violent, it's because he's searching for peace. If rootless and
> restless, a permanent home. If unsteady, something big enough to demand
> his allegiance, something he can immerse himself in and love or die
> for. . . . Then there will be guilt, tragedy, pain. He thinks he will stay, but
> he won’t, he can’t. I saw to it he wouldn’t. I took him for my own. I
> made him mine. He’s free. Free of all ties, national, professional,
> ideological. He is even free of me. I taught him to live.¹

On the inside he fit “Owen Merton’s” description. Ultimately, Merton did stay at
Gethsemani, though had he lived his home after the Asian journey may have been
elsewhere. But Merton certainly did wander in his interior life, undergoing more than
one conversion experience of sorts, exploring multiple religious paths, falling in and out
of love. Certain themes, like wandering and paradox, are revealed throughout his life.

The biographical sketch that follows is based on the two primary biographies of Merton’s

Merton: A Biography, by Monica Furlong and The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton, by Michael Mott. Furlong's was the first academic, full-scale biographical work on the monk of Gethsemani, published in 1980. Mott’s vast and well-researched book is the official biography, authorized by the Merton Legacy Trust and published in 1984. Mott had access to what were then never-published and well-guarded documents, and thus The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton remains the definitive biographical study so far. Merton’s greatest biographer was, of course, himself. He began telling the epic of his own life with The Seven Storey Mountain in 1948. The book reveals the triumphal attitude Merton projected in his early years as a monk and the narrow world-view of his early days as a Catholic. In later works, Merton revealed the radical changes that brought him to challenge his old ways of thinking. But even in Seven Storey Mountain, Merton suggested his faith that God was revealing something to him gradually. In the last line, Merton wrote, “SIT FINIS LIBRI, NON FINIS QUARENDI.”

Thomas Merton was born on January 31, 1915, in Prades, France, in the eastern Pyrenees Mountains beneath the rise of a peak called Canigou. His father, Owen Merton, a New Zealander, was an artist who had come to France to further his study of painting. Merton’s mother, Ruth, was an American. Also an artist, she dedicated much of her energy to motherhood after the birth of their first son, recording every detail of his tiny

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2The Merton Legacy Trust was established by Thomas Merton shortly before his death to look after the care and posthumous publication of his writings. For details of how it was established, see Michael Mott, The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), 499-502.

3"This is the end of the book, but not the end of my search.” Thomas Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1976), 423.
life in what would become known as "Tom's Book." Thus, Merton's story was being
told in writing from a very young age.

The Mertons were not a particularly religious family. Owen was nominally a
member of the Church of England, and Tom Merton was properly baptized, but the
family rarely attended church. Ruth occasionally worshipped at Quaker meetings and
was a dedicated pacifist. When the First World War spilled into France and Owen
suddenly faced the possibility of conscription, the Mertons quietly left the country and
went to America to stay with Ruth's parents on Long Island. Tom was less than a year
old.

In America, Owen Merton continued to struggle, making a living as an artist and
occasionally playing organ at a local Episcopal Church. When Tom was three, a younger
brother, John Paul, was born to the family. Soon after, Ruth became very ill with
stomach cancer and was bedridden for the next few years. She died when Tom was six
years old, and Baker said that Thomas Merton "was not to know again a completely
settled and secure existence until he became a monk."4 Leaving John Paul with Ruth's
parents in New York, Owen took Tom with him to Bermuda where they lived for several
months and he revitalized his art career.

Many Merton scholars have noted Merton's efforts to "canonize" his father in
Seven Storey Mountain. While he spoke of his mother's coldness and perfectionism with
matter-of-fact directness, Owen Merton became an icon of the perfect artist and romantic
free spirit. Merton wrote glowingly of his father as the only person with a truly
"religious" sensibility in his young life, though he outwardly did not practice religion

with any particular zeal:

His vision of the world was sane, full of balance, full of veneration for structure, for the relations of masses and for all the circumstances that impress an individual identity on each created thing. His vision was religious and clean, and therefore his paintings were without decoration or superfluous comment, since a religious man respects the power of God’s creation to bear witness for itself.5

Without denying Owen’s positive qualities, it is evident that he was no saint. In fact, while a recent widower in Bermuda with his young son, Owen had an affair with a married friend, author Evelyn Scott. In Heretic Blood: The Spiritual Geography of Thomas Merton, Michael W. Higgins speculated that this was a tremendously painful event for Tom, who was certainly aware of the affair.6 Yet, it is never mentioned in Seven Storey Mountain. Nevertheless, Higgins did give Owen credit for shaping Tom’s love of art and especially for the poetry of William Blake, who would be one of Merton’s favorites throughout his life.7

At any rate, the affair with Evelyn Scott ended quickly, and when Owen decided to return to France, Tom joined John Paul in New York and spent the next four years with his grandparents. In 1925, Tom rejoined Owen in France, and then later they moved to England near Owen’s Aunt Maud and her husband, Ben Pearce. Tom attended English schools and Anglican churches. In 1929 he entered Oakham preparatory school, but within a year Owen Merton was dead of a brain tumor, leaving Tom an orphan at age fourteen. With the financial support of Uncle Ben and Aunt Maud, Tom remained at

5 Seven Storey Mountain, 3.


7 Ibid., 19.
Oakham, although he was terribly unhappy and had lost his faith in religion, coming to particularly despise what he considered the pomp and emptiness of the Church of England. He filled the vacuum in his life with literature, discovering a great love for poetry and fiction, including Eliot, Hemingway and Gerard Manley Hopkins, about whom Merton would someday consider writing a doctoral dissertation, only to abandon the idea for the monastery.

In 1933, Merton was accepted to Cambridge University and the summer before his enrollment he visited Rome, wandering alone amid the ancient ruins and soaring cathedrals, where he felt his sense of faith somewhat renewed. But his return to England marked a low point in Merton's life. Mott called Merton's time at Cambridge "a disaster," pointing out that in the Dante-esque imagery of Merton's autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, "Cambridge is the lowest circle of the Inferno."8 He was studying to enter the British diplomatic corps, but Merton rarely attended class and spent much of his time drinking and engaging in rather casual sexual encounters with women.9 The precise details of much of this carousing do not appear in Merton's books and journals. It is evident that Merton's activities did not bring him joy and his godfather, Tom Bennett, who was financially supporting him, was not at all pleased with his behavior. The evidence for the culminating tragedy at Cambridge is circumstantial, but it appears that a young woman from London became pregnant with Merton's baby, and legal concerns were raised about the means of supporting the child. Furlong speculated that Bennett paid off the woman's family, and when Merton went to America to visit his

8 Mott, 74.

9 Ibid., 80-81.
grandparents the following summer, Bennett suggested that he stay and not return to Cambridge. Though he never mentioned it in his journals or books (published or otherwise), Merton's friends indicated that the whole affair caused him great pain, especially after the woman and child were apparently killed during the London air raids of World War II.  

“"No one can recall all the details today," wrote Merton's friend Ed Rice, "and there is no need to speculate on them, except to say that it was a serious, complicated situation and in retrospect clearly one that had a lot to do with his eventual conversion and vocation."”

The following years were relatively happier for Merton than his days at Cambridge. He entered Columbia University in New York in the winter of 1935 and quickly became a popular and energetic part of its student literary circle, writing and editing articles for the school's paper, yearbook and literary magazines. Between terms he stayed with his grandparents out on Long Island, but he was most at home in the city, and he continued the reckless, cosmopolitan lifestyle that he began at Cambridge. Friends remembered him as the center of attention at nearby bars, often leading songs and banging away at the piano. He courted girls and read voraciously. His love for literature was nurtured by his friendship with English professor Mark Van Doren. Merton’s social circle, made up mostly of students who wrote for Columbia’s various publications, included Ed Rice, Seymour Freedgood and Bob Lax, who all remained lifelong friends. According to Merton’s reflections, they spent many nights drinking and talking into the wee hours about poetry, politics (Merton for a time thought he was a communist) and

\[10\] Sketchy details about this incident appear in Mott, 84; Furlong, 59–62; and Rice, 19.

\[11\] Rice, 19.
religion. Through Freedgood, Merton met a Hindu monk named Bramachari, who encouraged him to read the classics of Christian spirituality.

But there was sadness in the Columbia days, too. Before he graduated both his grandparents died and he suffered what he considered a nervous breakdown. He turned more inward, reading more on religious topics and contemplating life after graduation. In 1938, his degree complete, Merton enrolled in Columbia’s graduate program in English. He had decided to become a novelist, and since success might be a while in coming, a teacher. Merton began writing his thesis on English poet William Blake, and the themes of art and nature in his work. Merton found a kind of deep, vibrant spirituality in Blake’s poetry and his studies led him to the writings of French Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain, which revived his interest in yet another Catholic, Etienne Gilson, whose *Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* Merton had read the year before. The thesis was a turning point for Merton and it wrought in him a desire to nurture his own spiritual life. “By the time I was ready to begin the actual writing of the thesis,” Merton said later, “the groundwork of conversion was more or less complete . . . I not only accepted all this intellectually, but now I began to desire it.”

Inspired by the Catholic philosophers and Dan Walsh, one of his professors, Merton attended Mass and fantasized about becoming a Jesuit priest. With all his friends in attendance (all of them Jews, incidentally, except for the Catholic Ed Rice, who acted as his godfather), Merton was baptized into the Catholic Church on November 16, 1938. He still carried on the chaotic lifestyle of a graduate student, but the direction of his life

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12 Furlong, 69-71.

13 Seven Storey Mountain, 204.
made a significant turn. His Master’s was finished the following Spring and he enrolled at Columbia yet again, this time for his doctorate, with a planned dissertation on Gerard Manley Hopkins. During the summer he became more serious about writing and started working on poems and more than one novel.

But Merton’s mood was turning darker. He was still haunted by his past in England, and the world was moving ever closer to war. Merton started seriously contemplating entering a religious order, feeling as though he needed to dedicate himself to a life of penance and separation from a world he considered increasingly evil. Merton applied for admission to the Franciscans, but when in a fit of guilt he confessed all his deeds at Cambridge, they declined his request for entrance. Merton was crushed, but resolved to live as a kind of lay monk, attending Mass daily and keeping the daily routine of the Franciscans. To help in this endeavor, he took a teaching job at St. Bonaventure’s College in Olean, New York, a Franciscan institution. He also became involved in a Harlem mission operated by the Baroness Catherine de Hueck. For a time, Merton deliberated over his vocation, thinking perhaps he should give himself to full-time lay ministry with the Baroness. But Dan Walsh suggested that he look into the Trappists, and during Holy Week and Easter of 1941, Merton took a train to Bardstown, Kentucky, to Our Lady of Gethsemani, a Cistercian monastery. Merton was immediately enraptured with the deep silence, the quiet presence of the monks, and the vast power of their living liturgy:

O, my God, with what might You sometimes choose to teach man’s soul Your immense lessons! Here, even through only ordinary channels, came to me graces that overwhelmed me like a tidal wave, truths that drowned me with the force of their impact . . . .

\[14\] Ibid., 323.
Merton returned to New York, feeling “like a man that had come down from the rare atmosphere of a high mountain.”\(^{15}\) He continued to deliberate over his vocation, wondering if he should not be with the Baroness, or whether he should investigate other orders, such as the Carthusians, whose monks usually lived as hermits, already an attractive option to Merton at age twenty-six. But ultimately political forces shaped Merton’s fate. He scheduled another retreat at Gethsemani for Christmas 1941. On December 7, Japanese military forces attacked the U.S. naval fleet at Pearl Harbor, and America was propelled into the Second World War. Facing conscription and an uncertain vocation to be a monk, Merton gave away most of his possessions in early December, burned some of his journals and novels, gave the rest to friends, and went to Gethsemani to stay as long as they would let him. He did not leave the monastery for more than a few days during the next twenty-seven years.

Merton loved the austere life of a Cistercian monastery in the 1940s. The monks generally never spoke to one another, communicating only in a limited form of sign language. They wore the same habit the Trappists had worn since the middle ages, shaved their heads in a tonsure, slept on wooden boards in an unheated, open dormitory, ate plain, vegetarian meals, and—in addition to the communal prayer that occurred six times each day—prayed the night office in which they rose every morning at two a.m. Part of every day was engaged in heavy manual labor on the monastery farm. The whole environment appealed to Merton’s desire for separation and penance—and to his poetic sensibilities. He found himself writing in what little spare time allowed, which troubled

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 332.
him, as he thought he came to Gethsemani to escape everything from his past life, including literary pursuits.

But when Merton confessed to his superiors his fears that writing might be distracting him from contemplation, to Merton’s surprise they encouraged him to continue. Dom Frederic Dunne, the abbot of Gethsemani, was an enterprising leader. In the 1940s, as the ranks of the monastery’s novices swelled with men fleeing the darkness of war and the world outside, Dunne saw an opportunity to grow and energize the Gethsemani community. He imagined a kind of gentle public relations effort to present the monastery as a living possibility for modern men yearning for God. Despite his love for Gethsemani, the harsh life had not suited Merton’s physical temperament. Dom Frederic decided to use Merton’s skills as an educated, bilingual writer to help in his efforts to promote the order. Merton was relieved of most responsibilities for physical labor and was instead assigned to complete some French translations and write works on Trappist history for the monastery’s upcoming centenary celebration.

Merton turned out a number of small translations and books in the following years, while also completing his novitiate and training for the priesthood. Later in life, Merton was sorry he wrote some of them. Two of the more famous books, biographies of Cistercians saints (What Are These Wounds? and Exile Ends in Glory), he considered “very bad . . . although they were unfortunately published.” But also during this time Merton began writing his autobiography and keeping a journal, a literary form that was very important to him. There were occasional visitors during these years. His friend Bob Lax spent a Christmas at the monastery, reporting that both he and mutual friend Bob

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16 Thomas Merton Reader, ix.
Gibney had become Catholic, inspired in no small part by Merton. Merton’s brother John Paul, now in the military, also came to visit, just before being sent to Europe in the midst of the war. While at Gethsemani John Paul was baptized a Catholic. The following spring, returning from a bombing mission over Germany, John Paul’s plane crashed in the North Sea and he was killed. The last of Merton’s immediate family was gone; Gethsemani was all he had left.

After a lengthy editing process with the Trappist censors, Merton’s autobiography appeared in 1948. “Into the middle of willed silence and asceticism and penance, The Seven Storey Mountain burst like a bomb,” Furlong wrote, adding, “the landscape was never quite the same again.”17 It was an overnight success. Merton had found his voice as a writer and more books, articles, essays and poetry quickly followed. The tone of The Seven Storey Mountain reflected Merton’s youthfulness as a monk and his deep bitterness towards the world outside Gethsemani’s walls. Merton’s Manichean universe was a contrast of black and white, dark and light, in which humans struggle with their inner sinfulness and the heroes are the Church, and above all, the monastery, embodying all that is true and holy. Furlong explained that “Merton, in his guilt about the past, longed to identify with all this purity . . . and so be fit to approach the love from which he felt excluded.”18 Later in life, Merton would feel a different kind of guilt over the brashness of his most famous book.

Nevertheless, Merton’s voice as a spiritual guide was developing a resonance with readers. Merton was ordained a priest in 1948, and after taking a break from writing due

17 Furlong, 153.
18 Ibid., 160.
to poor health, he published *Seeds of Contemplation* in 1949, a sort of treatise on the mystical life that Merton believed was the heart of Christian testimony. Merton thoroughly revised the book in 1961 as *New Seeds of Contemplation*, and it remains one of his best-loved works on spirituality.\(^{19}\) By 1951, with the completion of *Ascent to Truth*, his study of St. John of the Cross' contemplative path, Merton was a recognized authority on Christian spiritual practice.\(^{20}\)

Merton settled into the role of writer of books on spirituality and a leader of the Gethsemani community. He became Master of Scholastics in 1951, responsible for the theological training of monks who had completed their novitiate. The numbers of newcomers to the monastery had grown in the years following the war, thanks to the promotional efforts of Dom Frederic Dunne and in no small part to the popularity of Merton's books. Dom Frederic died in 1948, and Dom James Fox became abbot of the monastery. Dom James made efforts to modernize life at Gethsemani, bringing electricity and heat to the dark, cold monastery and in general fostering a more open environment. In 1955 Merton became Master of Novices, a responsibility he came to cherish. In this role, Merton looked after the spiritual direction and training of the newest members of the community. George Woodcock, author of *Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet*, argued that the changes at the monastery and especially Merton's new job as Novice Master helped bring a new opening in his life. It gave Merton the opportunity to teach and test out the ideas he was developing in his books, and it put him in closer touch


with the world outside the monastery walls, and a youth that was becoming ever more
counter-cultural.\textsuperscript{21}

Merton published abundantly in the 1950's. \textit{The Sign of Jonas} appeared in
1953, in which he contemplated the paradoxical nature of his life: in his retreat from the
world he had become a famous author. Other titles included \textit{The Secular Journal of
Thomas Merton} (1959), from his days prior to his entry into Gethsemani; three books of
poetry; and books on religion and spirituality that included \textit{No Man is an Island} (1955)
and \textit{Thoughts in Solitude} (1958), among others.\textsuperscript{22}

Despite his literary success, Merton often struggled with poor health, self-doubt
and restlessness. He suffered a variety of ailments, and frequently made trips to
Louisville and Lexington to see doctors. He was craving more solitude, more
opportunity to devote himself to prayer and meditation, which had become increasingly
difficult with his writing schedule, voluminous correspondence, responsibilities to the
novitiate, and his frequent, sometimes unannounced, visitors. Merton struggled with his
abbot over his desire for more time alone, culminating in 1955 with Merton’s request to
change orders. He wanted to leave the Trappists and join the Camaldolese monks, who
typically lived as hermits. After pleading with Dom James and Trappist superiors in
Rome, Merton’s request was refused. He would not be released from his commitment to
the Cistercians. Merton’s bitterness over this decision continued to simmer, and his tense

\textsuperscript{21} George Woodcock, \textit{Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet: A Critical Study} (New York: Farrar, Straus and

\textsuperscript{22} Thomas Merton, \textit{The Sign of Jonas} (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1981); \textit{The Secular Journal of Thomas
Merton} (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1959); \textit{No Man is an Island} (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1955),
\textit{Thoughts in Solitude} (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1958).
relationship with the abbot waxed and waned for several years to come. However, Dianne Aprile, author of a history of Gethsemani, warned that readers often make too much of this conflict, pointing out that both had a deep respect for the other and that Dom James chose Merton to be his personal confessor.\textsuperscript{23}

Confined to Gethsemani and the Trappists, Merton began to rapidly move about in his intellectual and interior life. In the late 1950’s his interest shifted considerably, and as the 1960’s began, two main themes dominated his life: Asian philosophy and the social turmoil of the world outside the monastery.\textsuperscript{24} Merton’s eclectic reading became even more diverse as he studied the classic wisdom books of China, and initiated friendships with Asian scholars like D. T. Suzuki. \textit{The Wisdom of the Desert} (1960), Merton’s study of the fourth-century Desert Fathers, draws parallels between their early brand of Christian monastic teaching and Zen.\textsuperscript{25} And his deepening friendship with Professor John Wu of Seaton Hall University led to Merton’s first work devoted almost entirely to Eastern thought, \textit{The Way of Chuang Tzu} (1965).\textsuperscript{26} Social strife outside the monastery became an overwhelming concern for him, and the paradoxical dimension of his life was further illustrated. Even as he longed to be a hermit, Merton found himself writing about the civil rights movement, the Cold War, and Vietnam, arguing that the Gospel demanded that Christians stand against all forms of violence. He was influenced

\textsuperscript{23} Dianne Aprile, \textit{The Abbey of Gethsemani, Place of Peace and Paradox: 150 Years in the Life of America’s Oldest Trappist Monastery} (Tout Lily Press, 1998), 152.

\textsuperscript{24} Rice, 12.


\textsuperscript{26} Thomas Merton, \textit{The Way of Chuang Tzu} (New York: New Directions, 1965).
in this, too, by Eastern wisdom, as evidenced in *Seeds of Destruction* (1964), *Gandhi on Non-Violence* (1965), and *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966).²⁷

From Merton’s journals, it is clear that the sixties, while still holding plenty of tumult for him, were also times of great joy. An ever-widening circle of friends surrounded him, including writers, peace activists, psychologists, ministers and theologians of various religious traditions. The novices, for whom he remained Master until 1965, adored him, affectionately referring to him as “Uncle Louie” (Merton’s monastic name was Father Louis), and picking up on his Eastern interests, built a Zen garden within the monastery.²⁸ For some time, Merton had been spending short periods away from the community at a tiny hermitage built in 1960 about a half-mile from the monastery for the numerous ecumenical retreats and meetings Gethsemani had begun to sponsor. His battles with Dom James continued, even intensified, when the abbot refused to let him attend a number of conferences or visit Asia, a project already simmering in Merton’s mind by 1964. But the dramatic changes wrought by Vatican II were influencing even the Trappists. In 1965, to Merton’s great joy and after years of resistance on Dom James’ part, the abbot finally gave him permission to live at the hermitage full time. Merton was relieved from his duties as Novice Master (his health problems were beginning to multiply, including a strange skin condition, colitis, a bad back, etc.) and finally he was living his dream to be a hermit. He still came out of the woods every day to attend Mass and pick up his mail, but aside from his heavy schedule


²⁸ Furlong, 247.
of visitors, he was alone. As he wrote in a letter to his friend Dom Jean Leclerq a few weeks after he began his full-time hermitage:

For the first time in twenty-five years I feel that I am leading a really "monastic" life. All that I had hoped to find in solitude is really here and more . . . it is good to have this silence and peace and to be able to get down to the *unum necessarium* [the one necessary thing].

Merton achieved a deeper level of peace at the hermitage than he had known before, and turned out some of his greatest books, including two major works on Asian thought, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (1967) and *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (1968). But the hermitage years had moments of great crisis as well. In 1966, on one of his many hospital stays in Louisville, Merton met a young nurse and fell in love with her almost immediately. This episode was one of the most fascinating of Merton’s life and one on which little has been written. Furlong did not mention it at all since Merton’s journals were restricted at the time she did her research, and evidently his friends kept tight-lipped about it for years. When Mott wrote the official biography in 1984, he was given full access to all the documents, and related many of the details. Merton’s complete journals were recently published, and the sixth volume, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom*, included his entries about her, and portions of a journal he dedicated solely to her. Interestingly, Mott and the Merton Legacy Trust have not revealed the woman’s identity. Further adding to the mystery, Mott referred to the woman by the initial “S.” whereas in *Learning to Love*, the editors called her “M.” A good deal of research

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remains to be done on the influence this relationship exerted on Merton and his identity in the last three years of his life.

This relationship caused great confusion for Merton. The most intense phase of their relationship lasted only a few months. They exchanged love letters that were sealed as “Conscience Matters,” the only way a Gethsemani monk could send or receive mail that was not read by the censors. Merton secretly called her from phones in remote locations of the monastery. He recruited his friends outside the monastery to help him see her, much to their discomfort, arranging meetings at the Louisville airport or a downtown bar when he was supposed to be seeing the doctor, for example. Merton clearly felt passionately about the woman, but he never seriously contemplated leaving the monastery to be with her, though Mott gently suggested Merton led her to believe that this was a possibility to keep the affair going. He eventually confessed to Dom James, and the abbot was very supportive, though he demanded that the relationship come to an end. By this time, Merton already felt foolish over the whole situation. By summer it was clear that any scenario for them being together was futile and they broke it off. Merton wrote in his journal:

I can never be anything else than solitary. My loneliness is my ordinary climate. That I was allowed to have so many moments of complete accord and harmony and love with another person, with her, was simply extraordinary... [It was a miracle, but it did not mean that I was not essentially a solitary.]

In Heretic Blood: The Spiritual Geography of Thomas Merton, Michael Higgins presented Merton’s life as an endeavor to fully integrate the four archetypes in William

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31 Mott, 451.

32 Ibid., 452.
Blake's poetic mythology—The Rebel, The Critic, The Lover, and the Wise One. For Higgins, Merton's encounter with "M" was a necessary step in the process of healing his lifetime of personal loss and becoming a fully integrated human being:

An orthodox Freudian analyst would make much of this, as indeed would a Jungian, but suffice it to say that Merton's quest for the feminine, his recovery of the affective side of his personality, his resuscitation of that buried and hurt love entombed with his mother, and his resolve to face the sexual waywardness of the past through an honest erotic encounter in the present attest to his progress toward "Four-Fold Vision."³³

Ultimately what Merton learned from the relationship is debatable, but it is clear that as 1968 began, he had developed a greater clarity in his life. In the autumn he made an official, written vow to live as a hermit as long as his health allowed (his health had actually improved considerably), and he renewed his writing with great vigor.³⁴ Mott saw a deepening in Merton's spiritual life, and his journal records his happy reflections of the beautiful woods outside his hermitage.³⁵ Things had also changed for Gethsemani as a whole. Dom James retired as abbot in 1967 (ironically, he decided to become a hermit himself) and was replaced by Dom Flavian Burns, who had also lived as a hermit for a time and had been a novice under Merton. Dom Flavian was considerably more open to some of Merton's more unusual interests. In January of 1968, Merton received an invitation from his old friend, Dom Jean Leclerq, to attend a monastic conference in Bangkok, Thailand the coming December. It was a dream scenario for Merton, and Dom Flavian supported the idea. After approval came from Rome, Merton spent most of the

³³ Higgins, 231.
³⁴ For the text of Merton's vow, see School of Charity, 419.
³⁵ Mott, 527-528.
year making quick preparations. He built a full, if somewhat loose itinerary, with plans to meet with a number of Buddhist and Hindu teachers in India, Ceylon, and Japan. To help justify the trip, Flavian assigned Merton to scout possible locations for new monasteries and hermitages. He actually began his travels in August, with a trip to Alaska and northern California to lead retreats for other monastics, and then stopped over in Santa Barbara to speak at a conference before departing for Asia.

Merton understood the trip to be something for which his whole life had prepared him, and his travels were full of meaningful encounters with Buddhist teachers and moments of deep reflection, culminating with the experience at Polonnaruwa. Merton made it to the Bangkok conference and died there, never to visit the Zen monasteries he had so longed to see.

Interpretations of Thomas Merton

Who was Thomas Merton? To some, Merton was a Catholic who grew out of his Catholicism and into a new religious identity. To others he was a great Christian mystic who uncovered the roots of his Catholicism by turning to the East. Some scholars find in Merton a frustrated writer whose many interests were ways of reconciling his true vocation with the one he chose as a monk. To still others he was a frustrated utopian, who used religion as a tool to justify his idealistic dreams of a holy society. All of these have been suggested as ways of understanding Thomas Merton and his Asian trajectory. All offer important insights into his life and ideas. Rather than attempt to reconcile the many competing theories, it is within the inner conflict of Merton’s life that the truth of his story is most clearly told.
Merton died at age fifty-three in a freak accident that left his friends and many readers shaken and sad. Merton must have had some heightened awareness of his own mortality in the years leading up to the Asian journey because he made many arrangements for the care of his papers and correspondence should anything happen to him. He authorized the establishment of the Merton Collection at Bellarmine College in Louisville and the Thomas Merton Legacy Trust, with a number of his friends as trustees, in the months prior to his departure. But despite the suddenness of his death, it did not take long for his followers to begin the endless task of making sense of his life. It was clear that he was a special person, though in 1968 it was not yet clear just how influential his legacy would be.

The first major book to emerge reflecting on Merton's life was written by his close friend Ed Rice. *The Man in the Sycamore Tree, The Good Times and Hard Life of Thomas Merton*, was a warm collection of biographical tidbits, photographs, poems, artwork and personal reflections from the man who acted as Merton's godfather at his Catholic baptism in 1938. Rice did not try to make his book an academic study. It was deliberately friendly and mostly flattering to his old college buddy. The title was based on an unpublished, largely autobiographical novel Merton worked on one summer when he, Rice, Bob Lax and others from the Columbia crowd shared a cottage in Olean, New York.

Rice expressed his conviction that Merton did, in fact, undergo a kind of second conversion experience before his death. The first, of course, was Merton's discovery of Catholicism, but Rice believed this was merely the pathway to his blossoming into
Buddhism, which was for Merton Christianity’s “enrichment and fulfillment.” In fact, Rice suggested Merton experienced Zen enlightenment before he left Gethsemani to go to Asia. For evidence, he pointed to the clarity of Merton’s writing in his last major book, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, and the fact that the Asian masters Merton met immediately perceived something special in him: “To them he was a Buddha,” a completely enlightened being, Rice stated flatly. Rice went so far as to say that Merton knew he would *die* in Asia, as suggested by his efforts to address his funeral arrangements and the care of his papers prior to leaving.

In three articles from *Contemplative Review*, Charles Kinzie made an argument similar to Rice’s. Kinzie, a monk at the Monastery of New Boston in New Hampshire, saw in Merton the essential question of Christianity in the twentieth century—how can the myths of Christianity be made relevant for the modern, pluralistic, technological, post-Christian world? Kinzie compared Merton to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who also symbolized the struggle to answer this question:

> The root of misinterpretation and mystification surrounding the lives of both Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Thomas Merton is to be found in the general assumption that their life and work are to be viewed within the confines of the continued existence of Christendom and of Western Christianity, whereas in fact for both of them it was a post-Christian era. They lived out that fact in their lives. The desire and the struggle to be Christian in a post-Christian era was the most singular mark of their lives.

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36 Rice, 13.

37 Ibid., 130.

38 Ibid., 124.


According to Kinzie, Merton came to believe that a new form of Christianity was needed and that the old forms were "no longer authentic which is to say that they are no longer true or adequate expressions of the Gospel."\(^{41}\) Kinzie wrote that all of Merton's mystical studies prepared him for the discovery of Asian religions and the transformation that discovery would bring. Kinzie was emphatic that Merton sought a new expression of religion because to simply "graft eastern forms of spirituality onto the dead theological branches" of Christianity is "to pour new wine into old wine skins. The old must die first."\(^{42}\) And so Merton went to Asia where he "received the mantra of Polonnaruwa" and the "old dharma of religion is dissolved."\(^{43}\) He became "Merton Rimpoche."

But these interpretations of Merton, while romantic to those who favor the "Zen" Merton, are outside the general consensus of most Merton scholarship today. Many writers have argued vigorously that Merton had no intention of leaving the Catholic Church or Gethsemani. According to Furlong,

>Merton never thought or wrote of ceasing to be a Christian. Christianity was, quite simply, his language, and could no more be renounced than his native tongue; but this did not mean that other languages might not be loved and yield striking insights in the old familiar phrases and ideals.\(^{44}\)

Cistercian Hilary Costello supported Furlong's position and argued that it was, in fact, Merton's interest in renewing Christian monasticism that drove his interest in Buddhism. According to Costello, Merton realized that monasticism's purpose was not

\(^{41}\) Ibid., 9.

\(^{42}\) Kinzie, "The Incarnation of Thomas Merton, Part II," 33.

\(^{43}\) Kinzie, "Merton Rimpoche," 12.

\(^{44}\) Furlong, 339.
just a separation from the world and a vague sense of serving God, but rather a means of the “transformation of consciousness.”

Buddhism offered insights on a lifestyle that could do that. Merton “was a convinced Catholic to the end,” Costello wrote, “Yet he would certainly have wanted to move deeply into the transcendent freedom that all the great religions propose as an ideal.”

So if Merton did not undergo a second conversion to Buddhism, how do we explain the significant changes that did occur in his life in the late 1950s? Alexander Lipski’s 1983 study *Thomas Merton in Asia: His Quest for Utopia* offered some answers, though they prove unsatisfying when viewed in the context of Merton’s overall spirituality. Lipski saw Merton’s interest in Asia as an extension of his concern for social change. He portrayed Merton as a romantic idealist who longed for a peaceful and just society in which all people are treated with fairness and equality. Merton was “seeking a more perfect society either in the past, the European Middle Ages, or in the non-Western world, Asia.” Unfortunately, Lipski made no effort to trace the psychological or biographical factors for this tendency in Merton’s thinking, but he built his study around it and painted a particularly unflattering picture of the eclectic monk.

Lipski claimed that Merton was disgusted with the world around him because of its violence and immorality. It “filled him with abhorrence,” Lipski wrote, and this disgust is what drove him to the monastery in the first place. Merton had experimented

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46 Ibid., 82.
47 Lipski, 1.
48 Ibid., 2.
with communism as an undergraduate, but quickly soured on it when he learned of the harsh realities of life under the Soviet regime. So he turned to Gethsemani, and not finding it to be a peaceful or perfect society, finally looked to the East. According to Lipski, Merton began to idealize Asia, believing it was not yet thoroughly corrupted by Western influences, and saw at its heart the deep philosophical experiences described in the ancient wisdom of Taoism and Zen. Merton concluded, Lipski claimed, that the personal transformation suggested by Asian religions would bring the kind of just social order he was looking for. Lipski was harshly critical of Merton in this respect, pointing out again and again that “Merton conveniently ignored the fact that a truly contemplative civilization had never existed even in Asia.”

It is correct that Merton sometimes romanticized Asian religions in the same way he had once romanticized the Catholic Church and life at Gethsemani. And Merton was unquestionably concerned about social problems and a just social order, as witnessed by his voluminous writings on nonviolence, civil rights, and the war in Vietnam, which included letters to the president and the pope. But Lipski misplaced the priority of these concerns in Merton’s life. Costello pointed out that by 1967, Merton was deliberately turning away from some of his political concerns in order to devote more time to his spiritual life. He was seeking a spiritually-transformative experience, but this was simply a new chapter in Merton’s lifelong quest for meaning in his contradictory life. Merton’s social concerns were an outgrowth of his spiritual thinking, not the other way

49 Ibid., 11.

50 Costello, 72.
around. His understanding of the spiritual experience was not one that provided clear answers or political agendas. Rather, it brought darkness and mystery.

David Cooper’s intriguing book, *Thomas Merton’s Art of Denial: The Evolution of a Radical Humanist*, offered some interesting insights and is far more helpful than Lipski’s, though Cooper makes a similar mistake. He never directly addressed Merton’s Asian interests, but his theory did have some bearing on the issue.

As a young monk, Cooper wrote, Merton engaged in a good deal of denial, with the various definitions the word implies. For one thing, Merton wanted to deny that the secular, modern world outside the monastery had any legitimacy at all. Cooper saw this negation and denial most clearly in Merton’s disdain for art, especially literature. In Merton’s early Gethsemani poetry, the world is vilified, the sacred praised. Then for a time Merton stopped writing altogether, viewing it as an obstacle to the contemplative life. Merton’s denial of the world led to his denial of the depth of his vocation as a writer. Cooper went so far as to accuse Merton of hypocrisy in subtly and doggedly pursuing writing and publishing while at the same time bemoaning the limitations writing placed on his otherworldly pursuit of union with God.

And then, Cooper wrote, something changed, and Merton underwent a transformation, from world-denying monk to radical Christian humanist. Cooper traced this shift to two things. First, he claimed that Merton failed in his efforts to be a mystic. However, Cooper’s definition of mysticism was too limited. He evidently expected that Merton would experience a kind of spiritual ecstasy that would leave him with a pure heart and an unshakable faith. This idea of ecstasy is clearly not the mysticism described by Merton’s hero, St. John of the Cross, but nevertheless Cooper saw in Merton a failure
to achieve this experience. Merton remained, after all the success of his books on spirituality, full of self-doubt and acutely aware of his failures as a monk. This doubt, Cooper wrote, caused Merton to eventually give up his pious self-righteousness and to finally view the human person in more realistic terms. Fulfillment comes not necessarily in God, Merton discovered, but in living more completely as a human. Secondly, Cooper said that Merton was undergoing a steady process of secularization. He gradually gave up the narrow, cloistered perspective of a monk and rediscovered voices outside Gethsemani who could not only speak to his personal spiritual situation but also to the deepening crises of the larger society.

The Merton who emerged, in Cooper’s view, was still a Christian, but now a radically humanist Christian. In renewing his love for the art and poetry that could speak of the sanctity of the human spirit independent of any organized religion, Merton found his true voice and became a champion of social transformation, not spiritual transformation. Though Cooper did not address Merton’s passion for Buddhism, we could conclude from his line of thinking that this passion, too, was not so much a discovery of Buddhism’s uniqueness, but a manifestation of Merton’s new willingness to look for truth wherever he could find it. Cooper even interpreted the dramatic experience at Polonnaruwa as Merton’s appreciation of the statues for their artistic value: “Merton’s doctrinal depth of field had broadened, to say the least, considerably . . . the ‘essences’ he discovered in the rock carvings could not be contained by any doctrine—aesthetic, religious, or otherwise.”

Cooper’s theory is insightful. Certainly Merton did continue to be plagued with
doubts and feelings of unworthiness in his spiritual life. But the mysticism Merton was seeking even in those early years made no promises of ecstatic experience. St. John of the Cross, on whose ideas Merton based much of *Ascent to Truth*, spoke of the “dark night of the soul.” His was an apophatic mysticism, in which the believer does not experience ecstasies, but *nothingness*. God is the “Unknowable.” Perhaps rather than failing in his mystical efforts, Merton *succeeded* in breaking through to this darkness and discovered a reality that made his pious, self-righteous attitudes towards the world seem petty and foolish. Perhaps he finally realized that God could not be contained in a monastery, or in a church, or religion, or any doctrine, while yet being paradoxically present in them all. Lipski and Cooper’s presentations of Merton went astray. Merton certainly remained a humanist, with all the love for art, psychology and literature that Cooper described, and he certainly was a social activist, always seeking to discern what life lived humbly and in the spirit might entail, but he could not be beholden to any program of political action or vision of social structures because Merton’s experience of mysticism revealed the truth as the unknowable and undefinable. Merton learned that to be attached to any conception of an ideal human institution would be contrary to that apophatic wisdom he had discovered in St. John of the Cross, Eckhart, and the Zen Masters.

This understanding is what Christopher Nugent meant by the “coincidence of opposites” and Merton’s exemplification of this principle. Though Merton was a “radical,” Nugent insisted, “you will labor in vain to pin a label on him” because the

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52 *Ascent to Truth*, 26.
mystical experience transcends all labels and categories. Nugent identified the coincidence of opposites as the universal principle in all the wisdom traditions both East and West, and argued that this is the best and only appropriate way to understand the many seeming contradictions and paradoxes in Merton’s life. Merton himself could not resolve the paradox of his life, first directly identified in *Sign of Jonas*. Rather, he recognized that it was in the embracing of opposites that both truth and personal healing were found. As Nugent wrote,

> With the coincidence of opposites—and not by accident the coincidence of opposites—this is the stable reality of his life from *The Seven Storey Mountain* to his last completed book, *Contemplative Prayer*. The work is anchored in St. John of the Cross, first discovered thirty years earlier, and recapitulates the great ironies of luminosity and the dark night...  

This understanding of Merton as an exemplification of the paradoxical nature of spiritual life was the theme of Anthony Padovano’s fine work, *The Human Journey: Thomas Merton, Symbol of a Century*. Padovano presented Merton as a kind of archetype for the character of the twentieth century—a “century marked by a tension of forces that appear contradictory.” Merton “explored in his own life the convergence of authority and conscience, of sacred commitments and secular options, of Western ideas and oriental beliefs, of medieval life-styles and modern forms of social protest.” According to Padovano, on some level, Merton recognized contradiction was his destiny,

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53 Nugent, 266.

54 Ibid., 263.

55 Padovano, xv-xvi.
and “wanted to transcend arbitrary human limitations and thereby become a universal symbol. He wanted to harmonize East and West, past and present, secular and sacred.”

Merton’s journey is the story of this self-discovery. Padovano traced Merton’s understanding from his “narrow and crude” attitudes towards the world, represented in his early hagiographies like *Exile Ends in Glory*, to his gradual transformation that coincided with his first real discovery of Eastern wisdom. And then the coincidence of opposites is everywhere he looks: in ancient Greek philosophy (especially Herakleitos), in the Bible, in medieval Christian mysticism, and in Asian religion, especially in Taoism, and in the very practical level of spiritual discipline, Zen. By the time Merton left for Asia, Padovano pointed out, what mattered was not certainty, but being “marginal,” deliberately living in a way that does not fit the categories and expectations of conventional thinking:

It is not arrival but pilgrimage that counts, he comes to the East not to teach but to learn, not to intellectualize but to participate in “vision and experience.” He is excited not by doctrinal definition but by the possibility that he might attain complete Buddhahood, not after death, but even “in this life.”

Merton transcended all definitions and descriptions. As Padovano pointed out, that is the leitmotif of Thomas Merton’s life.

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56 Ibid., 14.


58 Padovano, 60-64.

59 Ibid., 29.

60 Padovano, 2.
Chapter Two:  
From “Brahma to the Beats”  
The Historical Background of Merton’s Journey

In his introductory notes to Thomas Merton’s *Asian Journal*, James Laughlin pointed out that Merton was not merely interested in the kind of vague inter-religious dialogue that had for the most part defined the ecumenical movement from its beginnings. Polite, educated ministers always seemed willing to meet with the polite, educated ministers of other traditions for coffee and to chat about how to help the poor, but Merton was after something more. According to Laughlin, “Merton’s ecumenism was total.”¹ He was not interested in finding areas of commonality in doctrine or shared social philosophy, but in plumbing the depths of each religion’s spiritual *experience*, which he believed would transcend all doctrines and philosophies. As he stated in a talk delivered in India just weeks before his death:

[T]he deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words, and it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity. My dear brothers, we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are.²

A perfect example of Merton’s legacy in the field of inter-faith dialogue took place in July 1996, when Christian and Buddhist monastics from all over the world met at

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²Ibid., 308.
the Abbey of Gethsemani, home of Thomas Merton for twenty-seven years, to engage in an intensive, week-long session that became "a reference point for the future of interfaith dialogue." The Gethsemani Encounter was an outgrowth of work done by Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (MID), a Catholic organization dedicated to spiritual sharing with other monastic traditions. But Thomas Merton was repeatedly recognized throughout the week as the real founder of the encounter. His name was invoked repeatedly as a living example of the Gethsemani Encounter's mission. Cistercian monk James Conner, in a tribute to Merton at the end of the week, pointed to Merton’s Polonnaruwa epiphany as an example of what can happen when believers engage other faith traditions on a level of experience:

If our encounter here can bring us even remotely into such a realization, then this time will have been fruitful . . . The greatest tribute we could make to Thomas Merton is precisely by entering into this path of meditation in a way that brings us closer into the heart of each person here, of all others throughout the world, and of all creation and all reality.4

The Dalai Lama, leader of Tibetan Buddhists in exile, was also in attendance at the Gethsemani Encounter and offered his own reflections on his one-time meeting with Merton and the significance of his legacy:

Occasionally, just as at this meeting, I really have a deep satisfaction knowing that I have made some contribution regarding his wishes. And so for the rest of my life, the impact of meeting him will remain until my last breath. I really want to state that I make this commitment, and this will remain until my last breath.5

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4 Gethsemani Encounter, 259-260.

5 Ibid., 260-261.
Yet, despite Merton’s considerable achievements and contributions inter-religious dialogue, he was not the first American, Christian, or even monk, to attempt this. For a century and a half prior to Merton’s first notes on Zen, other spiritual pioneers were seeking ways to address the nation’s increasing religious pluralism and to enhance their own religious lives with the wisdom of the East. A broad spectrum of people laid the pavement for Merton’s journeys, and a Roman Catholic pope in particular, John XXIII, created a fresh climate for such dialogue when he convened the momentous Second Vatican Council in 1962, a meeting that resulted in the most generous statement toward non-Christian religions ever articulated by the Catholic ecclesial establishment. Though Merton was interested in Asian religions prior to Vatican II, he was delighted to be able to appeal to the Council’s spirit of aggiornamento, or “renewal,” in his later works on Zen. Vatican II both justified his “total ecumenism” and inspired him to go deeper.

The first modern “Westerners” to approach the religions of Asia on a serious, academic level were themselves Catholic priests. Jesuit missionaries arrived in Japan and China in the mid-1500s, bringing with them the Christian gospel and also a concern for and interest in the native traditions of Asia. Merton himself wrote in glowing admiration about the “farsighted originality of their apostolate” in China, where the Jesuits dressed in traditional Confucian scholars’ robes and actively studied the ancient Chinese philosophies. The Jesuits, Merton says, studied the Chinese classics not only to ingratiate themselves with the natives but also out of a genuine admiration for their depth of thought and systematic ethics. This original approach won many Chinese converts to

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Catholicism, and the Jesuits continued to improvise on the demands of the Church in this very different culture. They obtained papal permission to conduct Mass in vernacular Chinese, translated the scriptures into literary Chinese, and allowed the people to continue traditional practices such as paying homage to their ancestors.

In praising the virtues of Father Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), leader of the Jesuits in China, Merton argued that such an approach was perfectly in line with Christian values:

> Like a true missionary, he [Ricci] divested himself of all that belonged to his own country and his own race and adopted all the good customs and attitudes of the land to which he had been sent. Far from being a shrewd ‘natural’ tactic, this was a supernatural and Christian sacrifice, a stripping of himself in imitation of Christ, who ‘emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant,’ and of St. Paul becoming ‘all things to all men.’\(^7\)

Yet, after the Jesuits lost favor with Rome in the 1600s, the Chinese accommodations to liturgy and practice came under harsh scrutiny and were banned in 1704. They remained forbidden until 1939, when they were reinstated under the papacy of Pius XII.\(^8\)

Nevertheless, the Jesuits earned a reputation for themselves in Asia as being receptive to the wisdom of the Eastern traditions, and they did much of the early work in translating Asian languages that was critical for later generations seeking to bring these traditions to Europe and North America.

Among those later generations of seekers was the Englishman Sir William Jones (1736-1794), a member of the British Parliament, sympathizer with the American Revolution, friend of Benjamin Franklin, and translator of Asian languages. In his 1938 master’s thesis at Columbia, Thomas Merton pointed to Jones’ contributions in the field

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\(^7\) *Mystics and Zen Masters*, 83.

\(^8\) Ibid., 89. For more on the Jesuits’ conflict with the papacy, see Malachi Martin, *The Jesuits* (New York: Linden/Simon & Schuster, 1987).
of East-West dialogue, suggesting that Jones might have been a direct influence on the thought of Merton's beloved poet, William Blake.⁹ Rick Fields' monumental study, *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America* (1992), described Jones' contributions to the growing numbers of Europeans and Americans hungry for Eastern philosophy.¹⁰ After a colorful and controversial political career in Great Britain, William Jones embarked for India as a royally-appointed member of the colonial Supreme Court. But he devoted more of his time in India to his linguistic and cross-cultural studies than to law. Soon after his arrival in 1782, Jones gathered a number of other learned Europeans living in India to form the Asiatick Society, dedicated to the "systematic and scientific" study of Asian literature. His journal, *Asiatick Researches*, first appeared in 1788 and was quickly circulated throughout Britain and America. Jones published translations of ancient Hindu texts, articles on Asian art, culture, and mythology, and even reports from Jesuit priests living among lamas in Tibet. Although the actual number of Americans who read Jones' journals is unknown, it is clear that he influenced a group of New Englanders who had a broad impact on American thinking in the nineteenth century. In fact, Fields wrote that were it not for Jones, "the Oriental weave which would play so prominent a part of the tapestry of Transcendentalism would have formed a very different design, or quite possibly, been absent altogether."¹¹

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¹⁰ Rick Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America* (Boston: Shambhala, 1992), 35-33. Fields' study is the most complete work on American Buddhist history to date.

As the main leader of the American Transcendentalist movement, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) promoted the Asian religions as equal sisters with Christianity in his many essays, lectures, poems and chiefly through his journal, *The Dial*, which he edited with his young friend, Henry David Thoreau. Peter Turner, editor of *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Nature and Other Writings*, noted that "American students of Hinduism and Buddhism have come to regard Emerson as a midwife of sorts, helping to give an American birth to these traditions."12

Emerson had direct connections to the embryonic movement of comparative religions. His father, William Emerson, a Congregationalist minister and editor of *The Monthly Anthology and Boston Review*, published Sir William Jones' translation of the Hindu drama *Sacontala* for the first time in America. Emerson’s Aunt Mary was an avid collector of books on Asian philosophy, and he read a number of her books on Hinduism as a young man.13 Like his father, Emerson attended Harvard Divinity School and then served for a short time as pastor of Second Church (Unitarian) in Boston. Eventually he left the ministry altogether, feeling that he could not in good conscience deliver Holy Communion, a sacrament he came to believe was an empty ritual. Inspired by the Romantic poets and the deism always present in the Unitarian tradition, Emerson began exploring in his essays and poetry the idea of divinity revealed in nature. His philosophy of rationality, simplicity, individualism, and naturalistic religion came to be known as Transcendentalism, and Emerson saw many connections between this philosophy and the

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13 Fields, 55-56.
religions of Asia. His essay “The Over-Soul” presented a panentheistic view of nature inspired by his readings of Hinduism, and his poem “Brahma” celebrates the transcendence of opposites that would so deeply appeal to Thomas Merton a century later:

If the red slayer thinks he slays
Or if the slain thinks he is slain,
They know not well the subtle ways
I keep, and pass, and turn again.14

At the time even educated Americans understood little about Asia or its philosophical heritage [in 1843, Emerson received a copy of the Hindu classic Bhagavad Gita and mistakenly thought it was a Buddhist text].15 As editor of the Dial, which he took over in 1842, and with the help of Thoreau, Emerson attempted to address this ignorance, especially with the publication of the “Ethnical Scriptures,” a series of translations of classic Asian writings and articles on Asian thought, including Sir William Jones’ Laws of Manu. Later, after Thoreau took over the “Ethnical Scriptures,” he published excerpts of the Buddhist Lotus Sutra, one of the religion’s most sacred texts. This was the first appearance of the Lotus Sutra in the English language.16

Fields called Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) “the first American to explore the nontheistic mode of contemplation which is the distinguishing mark of Buddhism.”17

Eschewing much of Emerson’s abstract language about God and the Over-Soul, Thoreau went directly into the woods to observe his thoughts and the raw facts that nature

14 Turner, 181.
15 Fields, 59-60.
16 Ibid., 61.
17 Ibid., 62-63.
revealed, especially in his pseudo-monastic experiences at Walden Pond on Emerson’s land, in much the way Merton retreated to his Gethsemani hermitage. Thoreau could see the limitations of traditional religious teaching in an increasingly technological and pluralistic world and was not interested in developing theories for the lecture halls, but searching his own soul and discovering “the rock-bottom of existence.” It is not clear how much Thoreau understood about Buddhism, and it seems he never actually met an Asian face-to-face, but he did feel enough affinity for Buddhism to write in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*,

> I know that some will have hard thoughts of me, when they hear their Christ named beside my Buddha, yet I am sure that I am willing they should love their Christ more than my Buddha, for the love is the main thing.18

Also among the Concord Circle of Transcendentalists was William Henry Channing, whose son-in-law, Edwin Arnold, wrote *Light of Asia* in 1878. Arnold visited India and used a number of scholarly sources to write this work, an epic poem describing the life and teachings of the Buddha. Channing sent the book to his friend Bronson Alcott, director of the Concord Summer School of Philosophy, who had an avid interest in comparative religions. Alcott sent the book on to his friend F. B. Sanborn, who reviewed it favorably and created the first wave of publicity that drove the book to best-seller status. It was an enormous hit, eventually going through eighty editions and selling somewhere close to one million copies.19


19 Fields, 67-68.
Though not a part of the Transcendentalist movement himself, Walt Whitman (1819-1892) was heavily influenced by Emerson and took an interest in the Asian themes that appeared in his writings. Whitman’s robust, romantic poetry celebrated the divinity in all aspects of life, so it was no surprise that he rejoiced in the light he found within the world's various religious traditions. As he wrote in “Song of Myself,”

My faith is the greatest of faiths and the least of faiths,
Enclosing worship ancient and modern and all between ancient and modern . . .
Helping the lama or brahmin as he trims the lamps of the idols . . .
Drinking mead from the skull-cup, to Shastas and Vedas admirant
minding the Koran . . .

Immigrants from Asia arrived on the shores of America in large numbers in the mid-1800s, and they brought their religion with them. The earliest mass migrations of Chinese laborers came following the discovery of gold in California in 1849. Japanese immigrants came later and in smaller numbers. In both cases, prejudice eventually led to severe restrictions of further immigration and the new Asian Americans often faced harsh treatment from the white, largely Christian majority. The religion they practiced, for the most part, was a mixture of Confucian, Taoist, Buddhist, and in the case of the Japanese, Shinto traditions. Their Buddhism was of the Pure Land School, which stressed good morals, simple faith in Amida Buddha, and a rebirth in a Pure Land where enlightenment was possible for all. These early forms of American Buddhism drew little attention from European Americans.

21 Fields, 70-82.
Instead, like the Transcendentalists, most Americans who cared to study Asian
thought were simply looking for the texture it added to their personal philosophies and
identities as "outsiders." These seekers tended to be well-educated people, open to new
ideas, seeking the novelty that the mysterious traditions of the Orient had to offer.
According to historian Catherine Albanese, these well-read Westerners were looking for
a sense of "otherness" and that "these Eastern religions came to stand for and express to
some Americans the 'other' reality of a sacred world beyond this one."22 Two such
figures who emerged in the latter half of the nineteenth century were Madame Helen P.
Blavatsky (1831-1891) and Colonel Henry Olcott (1832-1907), who together formed the
Theosophical Society in 1875. But while their interest in Asian religion began as a
passion for the "spiritualism" fad of the Victorian era, it ended, at least for Olcott, with a
serious conversion to Buddhism.23

Olcott and Blavatsky met in 1874 at the Eddy farm in Chittenden, Vermont, site
of numerous alleged paranormal experiences. Olcott, like millions of other Americans,
had developed a fascination for what was loosely being termed "spiritualism," a hodge-
podge of psychic phenomena, occult practices and pseudo-oriental catchwords and
symbols. In Olcott's social circle, Christianity had been discredited by the scientific
developments of the industrial revolution, and believing in spiritualism and anything that
challenged the traditional teachings of the church was in vogue. Madam Blavatsky, a

22 Catherine Albanese, America: Religion and Religions (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1992), 284-
285.
23 Fields, 83-118. See also Howard Murphet, When Daylight Comes: A Biography of Helen Petrovna
Blavatsky (Wheaton: Illinois, Theosophical Publishing House, 1975), and Howard Murphet, Hammer on
mysterious, well-traveled Russian immigrant, became a close friend and eventually a companion to Olcott. Blavatsky claimed to have been instructed by Asian wise men who knew the secrets of psychic powers and spiritual awakening. Under the supposed tutelage of the wise men, Olcott and Blavatsky united to create the Theosophical Society, dedicated to exploring the teachings of the ancient wisdom traditions, and mixing an unorthodox blend of Hinduism and spiritualism. Within a few years, chapters of the society sprang up throughout the United States and Great Britain. Olcott was the administrative leader of the organization and its public spokesman, while Blavatsky remained elusive and silent, delivering periodic messages from the Indian “Adepts” who supposedly instructed her by some psychic means. In 1878, Olcott received a message from these teachers that he and Blavatsky were to travel to Asia to continue their studies.

After spending a brief time in India, Olcott and Blavatsky traveled to Ceylon, where they became convinced that Sinhalese Buddhism was the highest manifestation of the ancient teachings. On May 25, 1879, Olcott and Blavatsky participated in a ceremony performed by a Buddhist priest, in which they accepted the five basic precepts of Buddhism, becoming the first known Americans ever to formally convert to the Buddhist religion. What emerged from this event shaped the course of inter-religious dialogue for many years to come. Blavatsky left Asia soon after and moved to England where she continued to write on Eastern thought from a decidedly unorthodox viewpoint. Olcott stayed in Asia however, becoming a tireless advocate for ecumenical Buddhism. Olcott’s brand of Buddhism, the Mahabodhi Society, tried to unite the various schools of

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24 Albanese, 268.

25 Fields, 97.
Buddhist thought around issues of education and the preservation of traditional Buddhist historical sites and shrines. He visited Japan, Burma and India again, where some of his followers took a keen interest in the restoration of the site at Bodh Gaya where the Buddha reportedly achieved enlightenment. Chief among Olcott’s lieutenants in this endeavor was Anagarika Dharmapala (b. 1864), a young Sinhalese Buddhist who was emphatically dedicated to Olcott and to Buddhism, and who made a deep impression on the United States when he spoke at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago.26

The four hundredth anniversary of Columbus’ voyage to North America was in 1892, and to mark the occasion, President Benjamin Harrison selected Chicago as the site of the Columbian Exposition, a world’s fair celebrating the greatest achievements of western civilization. It was to be the grandest affair the city had ever seen, and Chicago’s South Side was transformed into the gleaming White City, so named for the elaborate stonework in the 1,037-acre exposition center built for the occasion. Ultimately, over 27 million people from seventy-two countries attended the event.27 But the most peculiar and historically important chapter of the Columbian Exposition was the World Parliament of Religions, held in September of 1893. It was, according to Edwin Gaustad “the most dramatic manifestation of religion’s variety in the final quarter of the nineteenth century” and one that would have an indirect but profound influence on Thomas Merton.28

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26 Ibid., 114-118. See also Bhiksu Sangarakshita, Anagarika Dharmapala: A Biographical Sketch (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1964).

27 Albanese, 283.

28 Gaustad, 195.
Congregationalist minister John Henry Barrows organized the Parliament with an intent that fit with the theme of the larger Columbian Exposition. Barrows’ theory was that by bringing together all the world’s religions, it would be evident that Christianity, the crowning achievement of Western civilization, was the fulfillment of all creeds and philosophies. Also, the Parliament reflected the optimistic attitude of Americans at the end of the century, and their hope for more tolerance, peace and social justice. However, the most significant result of the Parliament was not the triumph of Christianity, but the opening of a floodgate of Eastern and non-Christian ideas into the American spiritual milieu. The World Parliament of Religions marked the beginning of real inter-religious activity in America.

Over 150,000 spectators attended the seventeen-day event. The vast majority of the 400 or so delegates were themselves Christians of nearly every denomination, but also in attendance were Sikhs, Jains, Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists from dozens of countries. Among the Asians were a number of notable figures. Colonel Henry Olcott’s primary Buddhist companion, Anagarika Dharmapala, came from India to speak on behalf of his particular brand of internationalist Buddhism, along with Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), disciple of the Bengali mystic Sri Ramakrishna (1836-1886), who taught a form of monistic religion based on the Hindu philosophy of Vedanta. And from Japan came Zen Master Soyen Shaku (1859-1919), the university-educated abbot of Engakuji, a Rinzai monastery. He was the first Zen Master to set foot on American soil. Both his letter of acceptance to attend the Parliament and the speech he wrote for it were

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translated into English by one of his students, D. T. Suzuki (1870-1966), who later became a dear friend and teacher to Thomas Merton.

The Parliament was a media bonanza, and the Asian delegates were much sought after for conversations and interviews. The speeches actually delivered at the Parliament, while important, had little lasting significance. Dharmapala, one of the few Asians at the event who spoke English, gave a fiery speech denouncing the narrowness with which Christian missionaries had traditionally treated Asian religions, and argued that Buddhism itself reflected the “universal” vision of Christianity five hundred years before the birth of Jesus. Later, he argued that Buddhism was better equipped to deal with the apparent conflict between science and religion than was Christianity. Other speakers addressed the treatment of Japanese Americans, the difficulties of understanding Asian ideas with Western concepts, and the features of their particular religious traditions. Zen Master Soyen Shaku, whose papers were read for him in English, gave a philosophical talk on “The Law of Cause and Effect, as Taught by Buddha” and later spoke about the need for the religions to unite in support of peace. But it was the after-effects of the Parliament that most altered America’s religious landscape. Fifty years later, in 1933, it continued to do so when a Hindu monk named Brahmachari came to the anniversary celebration of the World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago and ended up staying in America, where he met Thomas Merton, then a young writer and student at Columbia University. Merton later remembered Brahmachari fondly as a man “so influential” in

30 Fields, 119-129.
his spiritual life and development.  

The immediate effects of the World Parliament of Religions were felt when many of the Asian participants stayed in the United States, or at least made a commitment to keep coming back. Dharmapala continued to lecture in Chicago following the Parliament, and at the end of a speech to the Theosophical Society, a man named C. T. Strauss came forward and asked to become a Buddhist, the first known American to convert to Buddhism on American soil. Many Americans who discovered Buddhism through Dharmapala went on to found Mahabodhi Societies throughout the U.S. Dharmapala went back to India, but returned to America in 1896 at the invitation of Paul Carus, a writer, publisher and supporter of the Mahabodhi Society. On this trip, Dharmapala toured the entire country, speaking to packed audiences eager to hear him discuss the teachings of Buddhism.

Swami Vivekananda also stayed in the United States, touring the country and lecturing on Vedanta. In New York in 1894 he established the Vedanta Society to help spread the Hindu teachings of his master Sri Ramakrishna. The Vedanta Society divorced Hinduism of much of its devotional features and stressed a more philosophical approach to spirituality. It appealed to the kind of educated, liberal Americans who had always been interested in Eastern philosophy. As Albanese explained,

Teaching that the real nature of people was divine and that it was each person’s duty to develop the Godhead within, Vedanta offered ideas that

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32 Fields, 129.

33 Ibid., 132-135.
blended with liberal Protestant teachings about the immanence of God and the goodness of human nature. Moreover, with its belief that truth was universal, it agreed with the mood of many Americans seeking a common center beneath the pluralism of sects and denominations.  

Building on the principals of Vedanta, Swami Paramahansa Yogananda (1893-1952) arrived in the United States in 1920. In the spirit of the 1893 Parliament of Religions, a Unitarian group in Boston convened the International Congress of Religious Liberals, with Yogananda as one of the guests. He stayed for thirty years and introduced Americans for the first time to the ancient Hindu art of yoga, blending meditation and physical exercises. Yogananda set up Self Realization Fellowships around the country, teaching a combination of meditational mantra practices and *hatha* and *kundalini* yoga. By the 1960s, there were around 200,000 people participating in American Self Realization Fellowships.  

But perhaps the greatest influence of the World Parliament of Religions on Thomas Merton was the legacy of Zen Buddhism brought by Zen Master Soyen Shaku. Following the Parliament in 1893, Soyen spent a week in LaSalle, Illinois with writer and publisher Paul Carus, who also was close to Dharmapala. Carus, who operated Open Court Publishing, was interested in sharply increasing the rate of translation of classic Buddhist and Hindu texts. Soyen was committed to promoting Zen in the U.S., and after returning to Japan, decided to send his student D. T. Suzuki to work with Carus. Suzuki, who was later to become mentor to Thomas Merton, arrived in Illinois in 1897, at the age of twenty-seven. Suzuki had taught himself English in grammar school,

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34 Albanese, 304.

35 Ibid., 306.
attended Imperial University in Tokyo, and studied Zen first under Zen Master Kosen, Soyen’s teacher, and then under Soyen himself after Kosen’s death. Suzuki stayed in Illinois for seven years and began writing his own books about Zen in English. Meanwhile, Soyen Shaku visited the U.S. again in 1897, and brought along one of his students, Nyogen Senzaki (d. 1958), who stayed in America after Soyen’s departure. Senzaki led a quiet life in San Francisco for many years, learning English and studying Zen. In 1922, in a rented lecture hall, Senzaki began giving talks on Buddhism and instructing Americans in the methods of Zen meditation. The small group meditated in chairs and became Senzaki’s “floating Zendo,” moving from a lecture hall to someone’s apartment to rented rooms. In 1931, Senzaki’s zendo moved to Los Angeles, where his group became the center of the Zen community of the American West Coast. Several of Senzaki’s Japanese friends and students later came to America and in the 1960s and became influential teachers to American Zen students.

On the other side of the continent, in New York City, Sokei-an Sasaki (1882-1945), another of Soyen Shaku’s students, began teaching Zen meditation to Americans. Sokei-an first arrived in the U.S. in 1906, and after several trips back to Japan to complete his Zen training, he settled in New York. In 1931 he and three students organized the First Zen Institute of New York. By 1938, thirty Americans were studying meditation under Sokei-an’s guidance. Among them was a woman named Ruth Fuller Everett, whose son-in-law was a restless young Englishman named Alan Watts (1917-

36 Among Suzuki’s early works in English were Essays in Zen Buddhism (New York: Grove Press, 1961); The Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism (New York: Schocken Books, 1963); and An Introduction to Zen Buddhism (New York: Grove Press, 1964).

37 Fields, 168-194.
1973), who for a short time had studied for the Episcopal priesthood. Everett introduced Watts to Sokei-an; though Watts’ formal Zen practice remained sporadic, he would go on to become one of the most influential authors of American Zen, with works that include *The Spirit of Zen*, *The Way of Liberation in Zen Buddhism* and *Beat Zen, Square Zen and Zen*.  

By the 1950s, the ground was fertile for a widespread awakening to Zen. D. T. Suzuki returned to the United States in 1950 and took up a regular lecture schedule at Columbia University in New York. Suzuki’s talks and books helped the growing popularity of Zen on both the East and West Coasts. Among the many prominent dabblers in Zen was a clique of writers and poets who became known as the “Beats.” This group, which included Gary Snyder (b. 1930), Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997) and Jack Kerouac (1922-1969), embodied a kind of twentieth-century Transcendentalist mentality, stressing freedom, individualism and a breaking away from what they considered a stifling American culture. They embraced the liberating spirit of Zen, even though (except for Snyder, and then Ginsberg in later years) they did not necessarily endorse its formal practice. As Albanese wrote, “they drew on the side of Rinzai teaching that stressed the suddenness of enlightenment and made it into an exaltation of emotional release and freedom.” These poets and writers opened new doors for the Zen movement, especially to those with literary interests like Thomas Merton. Throughout

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his correspondence in the 1950’s and 1960’s, Merton often mentioned his mixed admiration for the offbeat poetry of Allen Ginsberg. But the influence may have also been mutual. In 1966, in a one-time exchange of letters, Beat poet Gary Snyder actually credited Merton’s *Seven Storey Mountain* with inspiring Snyder’s interest in Eastern religion because it “crystallized my determination to go to Japan and study Zen.”

But unlike the Beats, others were interested not just in the social liberation Zen offered, but in the deep spiritual awakening it promised. Beginning in the late 1950’s and early 1960’s, and coinciding with Merton’s growing passion for Eastern philosophy, a number of Catholic priests and monks began exploring similar paths. English-born Benedictine Dom Aelred Graham, headmaster of Portsmouth Priory School in Rhode Island and later abbot of the Monastery of Christ in the Desert in New Mexico, was introduced to Zen by Gary Snyder and the literature of the Beats. Like his friend and correspondent Thomas Merton, Graham was interested in the convergence of Zen and Christian meditation. In the early 1960’s, much to Merton’s envy, Graham was allowed to visit Japan and study and practice in Zen monasteries. The result was his best-selling 1963 book, *Zen Catholicism*, for which Merton wrote glowing reviews.

Taking a very serious and academic approach to Buddhism was German-born Jesuit Heinrich Dumoulin, with whom Merton began a correspondence in 1964. Educated in Japan, Dumoulin was a professor at Tokyo’s Sophia University, where he wrote *A*

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41 Gary Snyder to Thomas Merton, October 1966, Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine College, Louisville, Kentucky (hereinafter cited as “Merton Center”).

42 Dom Aelred Graham, *Zen Catholicism* (New York: Crossroad, 1963). See also Graham’s correspondence with Merton throughout *School of Charity*. 
History of Zen Buddhism in 1963, considered for many years a definitive study. Merton and Dumoulin exchanged letters debating some of the finer points of distinction among the Zen schools, and in 1964 Dumoulin invited Merton to Japan to study Zen first hand in the monasteries, but Merton’s request for permission was denied by his superiors. One of Dumoulin’s students, Father William Johnston, was also a correspondent of Merton’s. Johnston and other Jesuits in Japan formally studied Zen, living for a time like traditional Zen monks in a Japanese monastery. In 1967 Johnston wrote Mysticism and the Cloud of Unknowing, which explored the connections between Zen teaching and an anonymously written thirteenth-century treatise on Christian mysticism, with a preface by Thomas Merton.

Maverick clerics like Graham and Dumoulin were pushing for a broader interpretation of the word “Catholic.” But when they began their studies of Eastern religion in the late 1950’s, such an interpretation was not in line with the traditional teachings of the Catholic Church. For centuries, the magisterium had taken a hard-line stance against both non-Christian and non-Catholic religions: extra Ecclesiam nulla salus (no salvation outside the Church). But in 1959, when John XXIII (papacy 1959-1963) became pope, the Catholic world began a dramatic shift toward a greater openness toward both non-Catholics and the world’s non-Christian religions, culminating the pope’s call for a Second Vatican Council in 1961. Merton and his friends did not need the changes

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44 See Merton’s correspondence with Johnston in The Hidden Ground of Love, 440-443.

45 For an outstanding discussion of pre-conciliar Catholic views on non-Christians, see Mikka Ruokanen, The Catholic Doctrine of Non-Christiant Religions (New York: E. J. Brill, 1992), 11-34.
brought by the pope to justify what they were doing, but they did rejoice in the greater freedom Vatican II gave them to study and master the teachings of the East. Merton was a kind of living symbol of the Church’s Vatican II spirit. As James Baker explained in *Thomas Merton, Social Critic*,

In the brief five years of his reign, Pope John radically altered the course of church history, converting the attitude of the church from one of smug self-assurance in the face of world conditions that might have destroyed it and mankind to one of openness and concern about the needs of modern man, an attitude clearly mirrored in the writings of the best-known Trappist.\(^{46}\)

The Second Vatican Council convened in 1962, and though Pope John XXIII died before the Council’s meetings could be completed, his successor Paul VI (papacy 1963-1978) faithfully carried out his predecessor’s dreams for the Council. By the end of the Council in 1965, the Church’s bishops issued sweeping changes in Catholic liturgy, declared unequivocal support for religious freedom (the first formal recognition), and issued a serious invitation to begin dialogue with other Christian groups, following four and half centuries of isolation from their “separated brethren.”\(^{47}\) Pope John XXIII had expressed a desire to see the Council address the problem of past Christian discrimination against the Jews, and deliberations over the issue resulted in *Nostra Aetate* (“In our times”), issued in 1965 with the English title, “Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions.” In this broad statement, the Church Fathers expressed regret for the historic mistreatment of followers of other faiths and declared a new era of respect and mutual understanding:


The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions. She looks with sincere respect upon those ways of conduct and of life, those rules and teachings which, though differing in many particulars from what she holds and sets forth, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.  

The Declaration was, Claud Nelson explained in his commentary on *Nostra Aetate*, “not merely a formal statement for the record,” but rather “a new starting point for building brotherly spirit and practices between Christians and Jews” and, we might add, Buddhists and Hindus as well. Mikka Ruokanen called it “a watershed which signifies a totally new approach by the Church to other religions.” And while Ruokanen argued forcefully that the Declaration itself does not say that salvation is possible within other religions, Catholic theologians have felt comfortable to interpret it that way, and Thomas Merton was certainly one who drew on it for support of his work with Buddhism. In his last speech, delivered a few hours before he died, Merton cited the “climate of openness following Vatican II” as a justification for his being in Asia and studying other religious paths. However, Merton also felt bitter over the failed promises of Vatican II. He lamented to a friend when one of his articles for a non-Christian journal was rejected by the Trappist censors:

> The usual. Has the Council affected us yet? I seem to have heard strange mutters at one time about something called ecumenical dialogue, but of course, that must be something perilous and communistic.

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48 Ibid., 662.

49 Ibid., 670.

50 Ruokanen, 8.

51 *Asian Journal*, 311.

52 *The School of Charity*, 303-304.
So again, Merton embodied the tensions and contradictions of his century, and especially within his Church. He was at once the instigator and beneficiary of Vatican II’s ecumenism. He celebrated the pluralistic triumph of *Nostra Aetate*, but also decried the Church’s failure to take it more seriously. He was both a child of his age and prophet of the next. According to Padovano,

Thomas Merton summed up an era. If one wishes to know where the Western world was in the second half of the twentieth century, Thomas Merton offers considerable enlightenment. He showed us our spiritual potential in the midst of our secular endeavors. He made holiness equivalent with a life that seeks to be whole, honest, and free. He taught us that it was possible to be truly religious without being formally religious. He proved that contemplation could occur in the throes of restlessness and that it was permissible to be fully human.\(^{53}\)

\(^{53}\) Padovano, 170.
Chapter Three:
“The Madman Runs to the East”
1915-1961

Thomas Merton titled the last section of his book, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, “The Madman Runs to the East,” after a line in a Zen proverb. But William Shannon, author of *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story*, noted that for Merton, “Initially it was a matter, not of ‘running to the East,’ but of walking—very slowly—in that direction.”\(^1\) In tracing the Asian trajectory of Thomas Merton’s life, it is important to note that his fascination with the Orient did not emerge in any logical, orderly pattern. Like all people, Merton’s life was a mysterious unfolding of relationships and events. As Padovano wrote,

> An interpretation of Merton’s life and writing cannot be limited to a quest for logical connections. The fragments of his life provide a clue to the more substantive developments as surely as symbols of his poetry suggest larger levels of meaning. His biography is itself poetic, filled with portents and metaphors, laden with nuance and subtlety.\(^2\)

The story of Merton’s lifelong Asian journey emerges in such fragments, full of mystery and paradox.

Where to begin tracing Merton’s road to the East is difficult to determine. Perhaps there were psychological factors involving his parents’ early deaths and his nomadic childhood that drove him to the self-reflection so typical of Eastern spirituality. Robert

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\(^2\) Padovano, 104.
Gunn’s psychological study of emptiness and self-transformation suggested this connection:

The deep-seated uncertainty about who he was derived from the death of both of his parents, and from the perpetual dislocation he experienced throughout his childhood. Because he experienced his own identity as a problem—rather than something unquestioned—Merton was pushed to press the question of identity into spiritual significance.  

Lipski also drew a connection between the death of Owen Merton and the young Tom Merton’s overwhelming disaffection with the world. In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton reflected on his father’s death:

> And so I became the complete twentieth-century man. I now belonged to the world in which I lived. I became a true citizen of my own disgusting century: the century of poison gas and atomic bombs. A man living on the doorsill of the Apocalypse, a man with veins full of poison, living in death.  

Lipski concluded that this disgust with his century inspired Merton’s early interest in communism and utopian thinking that eventually flowered into a romanticizing of Asia as the perfect society.

Merton did confess that while a student at Oakham, just a short time after his father’s death, he decided he was a communist, “although I wasn’t quite sure what Communism was.” But Merton and Mott make it clear that his interest was more a matter of appearing to be a rebel than a commitment to political revolution. More

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4 *Seven Storey Mountain*, 85.

5 Lipski, 2.

6 *Seven Storey Mountain*, 92-93; Mott, 62.
significant to Merton’s Asian trajectory was the visit to London of an increasingly famous celebrity from India. Mohandas K. Gandhi attended an international conference in 1931 while Merton was at Oakham, speaking on Indian independence and nonviolence. Media coverage of the event later inspired Merton to defend Indian home rule in Oakham’s Debate Society. It was the beginning of a lifelong interest in Gandhi’s ideas of non-violent and spiritual living.

Neither the autobiography nor the secondary sources mention much of Merton’s political interests in his dark year at Cambridge, but his interest in communism was revived for a time as an undergraduate at Columbia. According to his own reckoning, his fling with communism lasted about three months, during which time he attended some meetings and a rather boring demonstration against fascism outside the Italian embassy in New York. This brief affiliation with communism Merton also credited to youthful foolishness. The next time Merton encountered Asian philosophy, it was via a book by Aldous Huxley. Though the book had political implications, Merton was more interested in its use of Eastern thought.

In November 1937, Merton and his friends were reading books on Catholic philosophy and developing a deeper interest in spirituality. Merton’s friend Bob Lax introduced him to Aldous Huxley’s *Ends and Means*. Merton had read Huxley’s novels, but *Ends and Means* was a different kind of work. In it Huxley condemned war and social injustice from a religious point of view. He argued that only by living a spiritual life could one truly learn to be non-violent. Huxley drew on several religious traditions,

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7 *Seeds of Destruction*, 222. Mott, 60.

8 *Seven Storey Mountain*, 131-148.
especially the teachings of medieval Christian mystics such as St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross, although Huxley heavily favored Hindu and Buddhist philosophy.\(^9\)

Merton was so impressed with the book he wrote an article on it for Columbia’s Review, in which he identified “Oriental” values as better expressions of “Love” than Western attitudes and ideals:

> But over against the values emphasized by Gautama, Confucius, Tsze-Sze, and Lao-Tsu, which combined to shelter most of China from disastrous wars for centuries at a time, we have all the varied Western systems of organized paranoia. . . . Here all political philosophies are based on gangsterdom or tyranny, and consequently, there seem to be no methods of achieving social change that do not rely on violence.\(^{10}\)

Merton’s interest in Huxley and his ideas about Eastern philosophy inspired him to go to the library and read everything he could absorb on Eastern religion.\(^{11}\) Merton spent much of the winter of 1937-38 lounging around his grandparents’ house on Long Island reading through “hundreds” of translations of Asian religious texts. But in The Seven Storey Mountain, Merton confessed that he did not read the books mindfully and understood none of them. The most he concluded about Eastern philosophy was the belief that the “Absolute Being was an infinite, timeless, peaceful, impersonal thing.”\(^{12}\)

The most helpful features of these books for the young Merton were some relaxation techniques that would help him sleep. When Merton wrote The Seven Storey Mountain in the mid-1940’s, it was clear he still did not completely understand or appreciate Asian religions. Like many Westerners, Merton mistook the Asian emphasis on emptiness as a

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\(^{10}\) *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, 460.

\(^{11}\) *Seven Storey Mountain*, 186-187; Mott, 109.

\(^{12}\) *Seven Storey Mountain*, 187.
kind of nihilism or gnosticism. In his reflections on Huxley's influence, Merton accused Huxley of following "the old Protestant groove back into heresies that make the material creation evil of itself."\textsuperscript{13}

Although his college reading did not improve Merton's understanding of Asian thought, his first encounter with a follower of an Asian religion made a distinct impression on him. Merton finished his bachelor's degree in the spring of 1938 and enrolled in graduate studies for the fall. That summer, he met a Hindu monk named Mahanambrata Brahmachari. Twenty-seven years later, Merton wrote to Brahmachari of his conviction that "there is no question that the mysterious ways of providence manifested themselves in our encounter" at Columbia.\textsuperscript{14} Merton devoted eight pages of \textit{The Seven Storey Mountain} to his friendship with Brahmachari.

His friend Seymour Freedgood introduced Merton to Brahmachari, who was a follower of the Hindu yogi Jagad-Bondhu, an early twentieth century mystic who created a new order of Hindu monastics. Brahmachari was sent to the United States to participate in the 1932 World Congress of Religions in Chicago, a commemoration of the 1893 World Parliament of Religions that first introduced orthodox Hinduism to America. But he arrived penniless and too late to participate in the Congress and then spent the next few years lecturing on Hinduism at American colleges and universities. In the process Brahmachari earned a doctorate from the University of Chicago, where he met Sy Freedgood's wife Helen, also a student there at the time. Eventually, Brahmachari came

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 186.

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Road to Joy}, 122-123.
to Long Island to stay with the Freedgoods. "He was very happy with Seymour," Merton wrote,

because he did not have to answer so many stupid questions and, after all, a lot of the people who befriended him were cranks and semi-maniacs and theosophists who thought they had a claim on him. They wearied him with their eccentricities, although he was a gentle and patient little man.\footnote{Seven Storey Mountain, 194.}

In the summer of 1938, Brahmachari came to New York City to stay with Sy Freedgood and Bob Lax at their Columbia apartment (Helen was still living on Long Island at the Freedgoods' permanent home). Merton went with Sy Freedgood to pick up the monk at the train station, and related the humorous sight of the little Indian in his robes, turban, and sneakers. Brahmachari stayed with Merton and his friends through the next year. Ed Rice, who was also a part of the group, pointed out that although all the friends were interested in religion and had read about Patanjali's system of yoga, Merton was the only one on whom Brahmachari made a significant impression at the time.\footnote{Rice, 27.}

Merton wrote of the Hindu monk,

I became very fond of Brahmachari, and he of me. We got along very well together, especially since he sensed that I was trying to feel my way into a settled religious conviction, and into some kind of life that was centered, as his was, on God.\footnote{Seven Storey Mountain, 195.}

What impressed Merton most was that Brahmachari never tried to convert him, though he was happy to answer questions that Merton asked. Especially, Merton was curious about the Hindu's perceptions of Western religion, but Brahmachari seemed fairly ambivalent about all forms of Christianity save one: Catholicism. It was only in
Catholic churches, Brahmachari told Merton, where “he really felt that people were praying.” Brahmachari gave Merton one piece of religious advice that Mott says proved to be “of the greatest importance in Merton’s life”: he encouraged Merton to read St. Augustine’s *Confessions* and *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis.

He repeated what he had said, not without a certain earnestness:

“Yes, you must read those books.”

It was not often that he spoke with that kind of emphasis.

Now that I look back on those days, it seems to me very probable that one of the reasons why God had brought him all the way from India, was that he might say just that.

The Asian paradox of Merton’s life emerged early: “So now I was told that I ought to turn to the Christian tradition, to St. Augustine—and told by a Hindu monk!”

Merton did read the books Brahmachari recommended, and they exerted an important influence on Merton’s ever-growing interest in Catholicism. On May 2, 1939, less than a year after meeting the Hindu monk, Merton made notes from his reading of Augustine’s “magnificent” *Confessions*. He marveled at the paradoxical thought that other people, perhaps non-Christian people unknown to him, had brought him to a Christian conversion through their prayers:

Or maybe Bramachari in some word to the Lord in his strange language moved the Lord to let me pray again! . . . How many have become

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18 Ibid., 197.

19 Mott, 113.

20 *Seven Storey Mountain*, 198.

21 Ibid.

Christians through the prayers of Jews and Hindus whom themselves find Christianity terribly hard.\textsuperscript{23}

And yet, Merton suggested that perhaps he would have come to Catholic Christianity even without Brahmachari, thanks to his master’s thesis on the poetry of William Blake.\textsuperscript{24}

Merton began working on his thesis late in the summer of 1938, just after meeting Brahmachari. Merton decided to explore the themes of nature and art in Blake’s poetry, using a Thomistic framework he had discovered in Jacques Maritain. Merton’s thesis argued that Blake did not value art for art’s sake, but because it was a sacramental manifestation of a life lived in communion with the divine spirit. From the first page of the thesis, the young Merton revealed his growing interest in Asian philosophy, and argued throughout the paper for an Eastern connection in the thought of William Blake:

\begin{quote}
I think that the affinities between Christian thinkers and Oriental mystics are interesting in themselves. To break them up into influences in one direction or another always encourages arbitrary, false, and pigheaded statements, without adding anything at all to our understanding of the way these thinkers and mystics looked at life.\textsuperscript{25}
\end{quote}

The true artist, according to Merton and, he believed, along with Blake, was a mystic whose art revealed the truth of God. “Blake saw that the artist and the mystic seemed to have the same kind of intuitions, for he himself, as mystic and artist, certainly did,” Merton wrote.\textsuperscript{26} His paper drew heavily on the writings of Indian intellectual A. K. Coomaraswamy and his book, \textit{Transformation of Nature in Art}. According to Lipski, “Under the influence of Coomaraswamy Merton concluded that Blake’s concept of art

\begin{footnotes}
\item[23] \textit{The Intimate Merton}, 24.
\item[24] \textit{Seven Storey Mountain}, 198.
\item[25] \textit{Literary Essays}, 391.
\item[26] Ibid., 445.
\end{footnotes}
was close to that of ancient India. The ideal Indian artist was a practicing yogi who used
the power of concentration to attain union between himself and his object.”27 Lipski saw
Coomaraswamy’s influence in many of Merton’s later beliefs and concerns, including
“Merton’s appreciation for non-christian religions, his guilt over western imperialism,
and his admiration for pre-modern value systems.”28 Mott found in Merton’s thesis
notebooks other Asian seeds that would later bear fruit, including notes on D. T. Suzuki
and Meister Eckhart and quotations from the ancient Taoist philosopher Chuang Tzu.
Although there is no evidence Merton actually read Suzuki at this point, the notes were
nevertheless “prophetic entries.”29

However, the immediate result of Merton’s thesis was not a flowering of interest
in Asia, but a profound turning toward Catholicism and a monastic vocation. Moved by
all he had read, Merton began attending Mass at Corpus Christi Church in New York in
September 1938 and was baptized there in November. Merton finished his master’s
thesis the following spring and registered for doctoral classes at Columbia, although his
mind had turned increasingly towards the possibility of a religious vocation. Mere
baptism into the faith was not enough for Merton, who perceived himself to be the
greatest sinner of all:

A man who has just come out of the hospital, having nearly died there, and
having been cut to pieces on the operating table, cannot immediately begin
to lead the life of an ordinary working man. And after the spiritual mangle
I have gone through, it will never be possible for me to do without the

27 Lipski, 43.

28 Ibid., 41.

29 Mott, 117.
sacraments daily, and without much prayer and penance and meditation
and mortification.\(^{30}\)

Thus, in the three years that followed, Merton flirted with the Franciscans, gave up his
dream of being a college professor and famous novelist, committed himself to the
Cistercians, and disappeared within the walls of Gethsemani in order to die to the world.
Thomas Merton’s interest in Asian ideas was all but destroyed along with everything else
that he once was.

Then a few years later came the paradox: a great writer emerged from the silent
monastery. After a book of poems and a number of translations and small, forgotten
books on Trappist history, *The Seven Storey Mountain* arrived and changed Merton and
his monastery forever. Its story of redemption evidently spoke to many readers weary
from a world at war and eager to grasp a holier way of life. But Merton’s theology in
those early monastic years was “narrow and crude,” and his writing reflected his limited
thinking.\(^{31}\) Merton’s God “seeks bitter austerity, grim isolation, discipline, pain.”\(^{32}\)
Were it not for the Roman Catholic Church and the graces dispensed by her sacraments,
Merton seemed to say, the world would utterly collapse from the weight of its
wickedness. This attitude extended to Merton’s views on Asia, which he associated with
the pagan world of his former life, and the world outside Mother Church. Padovano
found Merton’s expression of this attitude toward the Japanese in *Exile Ends in Glory*
(1948), a biography of Trappistine nun Mother Berchmans, who lived in Japan.\(^{33}\) By the

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\(^{30}\) *Seven Storey Mountain*, 232.

\(^{31}\) Padovano, 19.

\(^{32}\) Ibid.

\(^{33}\) Ibid. See also, Thomas Merton, *Exile Ends in Glory* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1948).
end of his life and his last book on Asia, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, Merton came to believe that Japanese culture was indispensable to a full understanding of Christianity.

But in *Exile*, twenty years earlier, Merton described the Japanese,

\[ \ldots \text{crippled by appalling pagan hatreds and lusts and envies and dark superstitions and despairs from which they had no way of freeing themselves. All their movements, all their attempts, only seemed to entangle them more in the great web of sins woven by centuries of paganism and idolatry.}^{34} \]

Merton’s biggest concern with the Japanese seemed to be that they are not Christians. But he also found little intrinsic value in their philosophical ideas. In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, just after he accused Aldous Huxley of heresy, Merton dismissed Asian religions as mere relaxation techniques, and hinted that they could even be sinister under certain situations. He wrote,

\[ \text{Ultimately, I suppose all Oriental mysticism can be reduced to techniques that do the same thing, but in a far more subtle and advanced fashion: and if that is true, it is not mysticism at all. It remains purely in the natural order. That does not make it evil, } \textit{per se}, \text{ according to Christian standards: but it does not make it good, in relation to the supernatural. It is simply more or less useless, except when it is mixed up with elements that are strictly diabolical: and then of course these dreams and annihilations are designed to wipe out all vital moral activity, while leaving the personality in control of some nefarious principle, either of his own, or from outside himself.}^{35} \]

Such attitudes indicate that at this point, Merton still misunderstood Eastern religion, mistaking its teachings on “emptiness” for some kind of amoral nihilism.

Another paradox was emerging, however. If Merton attempted through his writings to show that Catholicism had an exclusive hold on the truth, his fame as a writer

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34 *Exile Ends in Glory*, 142.

35 *Seven Storey Mountain*, 188.
opened him up to people of broad and diverse backgrounds who challenged all his ideas about truth. Readers of The Seven Storey Mountain wrote letters to him, and a few took him to task for his narrow attitudes. In his journal in May 1949, Merton wrote about a letter in which a reader criticized him for “belittling oriental mysticism.” The letter writer took exception to his comments in the autobiography and to Merton’s criticism of Sufi Muslims in the original version of Seeds of Contemplation. Merton was suddenly painfully aware of how brash some of his statements had been, and he admitted to his journal that he knew nothing about Sufism and that his comments were made in total ignorance. Later that year, a Hindu wrote a supportive letter to Merton about Seven Storey Mountain, and they began a correspondence in which they discussed Patanjali’s system of yoga, which Merton had first encountered in college. But Merton was still interpreting Hinduism through a narrow Christian framework. According to Ed Rice, Merton wrote to him about his correspondence with the Hindu and expressed his belief that “there isn’t anything in Patanjali that isn’t in St. John of the Cross.” Merton said that someone needed to “baptize yoga the way St. Thomas baptized Aristotle . . . and to leave the deep breathing for the people in California.” In his retelling of this exchange, Rice added that, “Ten years later, of course, [Merton] didn’t want to baptize anything.”

But Merton was finally opening up to the possibility that Eastern philosophy might have something to offer his contemplative quest as a monk. A significant step


37 Sign of Jonas, 243.

38 Rice, 76-77.

39 Ibid., 77.
occurred in 1951, when Merton published *The Ascent to Truth*, his most theological book. In it, he outlined the Christian mysticism of St. John of the Cross and tried to present contemplative prayer as a relevant pathway for modern people. The *contemptus mundi* of *The Seven Storey Mountain* was still present in Merton’s writing in 1951, as he vilified the artist as irrelevant to the search for God. But Merton was writing the journals that would become *The Sign of Jonas* at the same time he was writing *The Ascent to Truth*, and the idea of paradox was becoming more important to his sense of identity. In *The Sign of Jonas*, he wrote that his vocation of both writer and monk had made him feel as though he was “traveling in the belly of a paradox.” And in *Ascent to Truth*, Merton began loosening his rigid interpretations of God and exploring the idea of divine truth as understood through the coincidence of opposites. Merton advocated both “affirmation” and “denial” as pathways to understanding God. He wrote:

> We have to take both. We must affirm and deny at the same time. We have to start with a concept of God, but we have to simultaneously know that it is inadequate as a description of him.

For the first time since his master’s thesis, Merton drew on the wisdom of the East to elucidate his points on Christianity. Perhaps it was his correspondence with the Hindu or Merton’s opening to the apophatic wisdom of St. John, but Merton wrote with a newfound sense of respect for Eastern thought. He recanted his earlier statements on the value of Asian philosophy, especially Hinduism, writing,

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40 Furlong, 195.

41 *Sign of Jonas*, 11.

42 Furlong, 196.
It is a mistake to think that yoga seeks absorption into the Absolute by a mere relaxation of the mind and stoppage of activity. The techniques and disciplines of meditation practiced in the Orient are far more laborious and exacting than anything known in the West.\(^{43}\)

Merton compared St. John of the Cross’s contemplative path with “Oriental mysticism” and pointed out how the Christian mystics use of the term “nothingness” may be analogous to the teachings of Zen Buddhism and Patanjali’s Yoga.\(^{44}\) He also wrote that just as there are various stages of spiritual movement in yoga, there are ascending stages of growth in Christian mysticism also.\(^{45}\) But he still maintained a safe intellectual distance from the Asian traditions and treated them as inferior paths. He criticized Eastern philosophy, stating,

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\ldots \text{it tends to depend too exclusively on the work of man’s own intelligence and on human techniques, leaves too little place for love, and has only a hesitant, uncertain knowledge of the supreme work of God’s grace in mystical prayer.}\(^{46}\)
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The comment on love seemed all too ironic when Merton met his hero, Zen scholar D. T. Suzuki, thirteen years later. Suzuki’s parting comment to him: “The thing he insisted on most—in Christianity and Buddhism—love more than enlightenment.”\(^{47}\)

Much of Merton’s journey to the East lay ahead of him, but in 1951 he was on his way. He still harbored feelings of disgust toward the world outside Gethsemani when he went to Ohio on business for the monastery, and standing in the Cincinnati airport, felt as

\(^{43}\) Ascent to Truth, 66.

\(^{44}\) Ibid., 26.

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 244.

\(^{46}\) Ibid., 67.

though the people were “infected with some moral corruption brought in by the plane from New York.”

But the mystical insight he gained through his studies of St. John of the Cross were opening him up to the preciousness in things he once dismissed and the possibility of truth in places he had not bothered to look. Perhaps too, Merton had begun to forgive himself for his past transgressions and accept the goodness in himself. In the final pages of The Sign of Jonas, which ends with his journal in the summer of 1952, he reflected,

The hand lies open. The heart is dumb. The soul that held my substance together, like a hard gem in the hollow of my own power, will one day totally give in. Although I see the stars, I no longer pretend to know them. Although I have walked in those woods, how can I claim to love them? One by one I shall forget the names of things... The Voice of God is heard in Paradise: “What was vile has become precious. What is now precious was never vile. I have always known the vile as precious: for what is vile I know not at all...”

The years that followed the writing of these words were difficult times for Merton, times of conflict and change. His studies of the contemplative tradition within Christianity led him to crave more time alone, more time for prayer and meditation. But his writing commitments were considerable, he was Master of Scholastics, and in 1955, was appointed Master of Novices. While Merton had begun to resolve himself to the contradiction of his vocation as both writer and monk, and while he loved the teaching and spiritual direction involved in his work with the novitiate, he was convinced something was missing. Throughout the 1950s, Merton struggled with his superiors for

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49 Sign of Jonas, 361-362.
permission to leave the Cistercians altogether for the Carthusians or Calmodese monks, who stressed the solitary life. Merton’s journals during this period indicated his anguish:

How I need solitude! And yet—I seem to become less and less fit for it the more I need it. And this is getting inexorably more and more terrible. I honestly begin to wonder whether my being bound by vows to this situation is not in some way a great mistake. . . . The burden is no longer merely juridical, it is something in the very depths of my being.\(^{50}\)

Merton’s letters and journal entries also suggested that he was reading a little on Zen Buddhism during this time.\(^{51}\) There was no indication of what exactly the books were, but he did find in them some insights helpful to his struggle for solitude. In his journal on November 15, 1957, Merton reflected on the many contradictions of his life, asking himself “the unanswerable question: ‘What on earth am I doing here?’” He continued and suddenly stumbled into a kind of realization about both himself and Zen:

I think the only hope for me is to pile contradiction upon contradiction and push myself into the middle of all contradictions . . . There is no solution in withdrawal. No solution in conforming.

A Koan! What sound is made by one hand clapping against itself? That is where I think Zen is smart: in its absolute fundamental psychological honesty. This honesty is inseparable from the interior poverty and sincerity which Christ asked for when He said: “Can you believe?”\(^{52}\)

There was a gradual settling in Merton’s life in the late 1950s. He slowly resolved himself to living at Gethsemani for the rest of his life, spending a little time now and then in a tool shed he had obtained permission to use as a mini-hermitage, teaching the novices the Trappist way of life, and writing his books. He was becoming a different

\(^{50}\) Search for Solitude, 240-241.

\(^{51}\) See, for example, Merton’s letter to Mark Van Doren of July 3, 1956 in Road to Joy, 29.

\(^{52}\) Search for Solitude, 137-139.
person than the brooding young man who entered the monastery nearly two decades before, and the new Merton found solace in the wisdom of the East. According to George Woodcock,

[Merton] was so different a person from the young bigot who wrote *The Seven Storey Mountain* that one has to mark a second turning point in his life, round about 1957, and give it equal importance to his conversion of 1938.\(^{53}\)

It is not possible to mark an exact moment for this “second conversion.”

Merton’s process of self-discovery was too gradual. However, one event does stand out as having significance. On March 18, 1958 Merton went to Louisville to take care of business at a printer’s office. Such trips were never enjoyable for Merton (usually his journeys to Louisville involved visits to the doctor for his numerous ailments), and as a younger monk, the sight of the city filled him with disgust. “Never since I have entered religion have I ever had the slightest desire to go back to the world,” he wrote in *The Seven Storey Mountain*.\(^{54}\) But on this day, something was different. Perhaps the amalgamation of experiences and thoughtful readings of his last seventeen years as a monk had brought him to a special point. When Merton retold this story in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* in 1966, he made the event even more poetic, but his first journal entry of March 19, 1958 indicated the power of the original experience:

Yesterday, in Louisville, at the corner of 4th and Walnut, 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 my 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... Thank God! Thank God! I am only

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\(^{53}\) Woodcock, 103-104.

\(^{54}\) *Seven Storey Mountain*, 383.
another member of the human race, like all the rest of them. I have the immense joy of being a man!\(^{55}\)

When Merton wrote about the Fourth and Walnut experience in *Conjectures*, he was even more forceful in his conviction that his separateness from the world was "complete illusion" and seemed joyful at the realization that Gethsemani was no more special than downtown Louisville:

> It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, a world of renunciation and supposed holiness... This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy that I almost laughed out loud.\(^{56}\)

In *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, Mott cautioned against making too much of the "Vision in Louisville," arguing that the revision was influenced by Merton's later readings in the 1960s.\(^{57}\) But that Merton chose to write about the experience again and elaborate on it so many years later indicates that he did consider it a moment of special significance to him.

Almost certainly, the "Vision in Louisville" represented the new qualities of openness and earthiness in Merton's attitude and writings. Lipski seemed to think that Merton's "second conversion" was motivated by a loss of faith in the monastery's claim to be a special place. A better interpretation is that Merton began to see a specialness outside the monastery *as well as within it* (and perhaps within himself as well). This realization made it possible for him to turn toward Asia with increasing passion: not in running away from the West, but in now seeing something sacred where before he had

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\(^{55}\) *Search for Solitude*, 181-182.

\(^{56}\) *Conjectures*, 156-157.

\(^{57}\) Mott, 312.
been blind. In the months immediately after the experience, his reading began to
concentrate increasingly on books of Asian thought. Earlier in the year, Merton took
notes in his journal on insights from Gandhi’s letters on service to others and non-
attachment. In the fall, he wrote in his journal that he read “some Zen” while on retreat
and heard its wisdom speak directly to his own sense of disorganization and restlessness,
writing that, “Whatever problems I have are on the level where Zen can hit them
squarely.” The next month, he mentioned specifically that he was reading a book on
Zen by D. T. Suzuki and how it made him think of the “meaninglessness of any life that
is not lived in the face of death.” The next spring, Merton wrote a letter to Suzuki, and
took a major step on his Eastern journey.

One of the greatest influences on Merton’s Asian trajectory was his friendship
with D. T. Suzuki. In 1959 the scholar of Zen Buddhism was nearly 90 years old and
living again in Japan after several years of lecturing at Columbia. His talks and
continuous stream of books helped drive the growth of “Beat” Zen that was becoming
increasingly popular through the writings of Jack Kerouac and Allan Watts. Merton was
working on a new book about the fourth century “desert fathers,” Christian monks who
retreated to the wastelands of Egypt to practice their faith away from the increasingly
institutionalized churches. Their teachings were passed down in the form of brief sayings
and stories that resemble in many ways the proverbs and koans of the Zen Masters.
Merton began editing a collection of these sayings in the winter of 1959, and finding

58 *Search for Solitude*, 156.
59 Ibid., 224.
60 Ibid., 232.
many parallels in Zen, sent a letter to Suzuki asking him to write a preface for the book.

Merton’s letter to Suzuki of March 15, 1959 reveals just how important Zen had become to his spirituality and sense of identity. Merton approached Suzuki as a student approaches a new Master, with reverence and humility. But the letter quickly took on a kind of breathless, excited style that indicated Merton’s strong feelings about the subject:

I will not pretend to you that I understand Zen. To be frank, I hardly understand Christianity... All I know is that when I read your books... I feel a profound and intimate agreement. Time after time, as I read your pages, something in me says, “That’s it!” Don’t ask me what. I have no desire to explain it to anybody... I have my own way to walk and for some reason or other Zen is right in the middle of wherever I go... If I could not breathe Zen I would probably die of spiritual asphyxiation.61

Perhaps Merton was engaging in hyperbole, but his enthusiasm was equally high when he received a reply from Suzuki in a letter dated April 11, 1959. Suzuki liked the quotations from the desert fathers Merton had sent him and eagerly agreed to write an introduction for the book. Then he confided that he was working on his own interpretation of Christianity and shared some of his ideas with Merton.62 In his journal, Merton recorded his delight with Suzuki’s agreement to collaborate with him. Merton was moved by Suzuki’s ideas about Christianity (many of which were not particularly orthodox). Merton confessed his belief that he and Suzuki “speak the same language” and that he shared more with the Zen scholar than he did with “the average American businessman.”63 Interestingly, Merton anticipated that some people would be suspicious


62 Ibid., 11-13.

63 *Search for Solitude*, 273.
of his collaboration with a non-Christian, especially when he noted that Suzuki's ideas about Christianity "would make theologians fall over in a dead faint." Merton interpreted Zen through a Christian framework. He insisted that he would not try to convert Suzuki to Christianity—"not that he does not need the Sacraments"—because he believed that by sharing their mutual experiences, "Christ would be present and glorified in us both and this would lead to a conversion of us both."64

Merton's attitude toward Zen Buddhism at this point in his life reflected what Paul Knitter called the theory of "Anonymous Christianity." Knitter's work *No Other Name?* explored the varieties of interpretations modern Christians have applied toward other faith traditions. "Anonymous Christianity" is a popular theory that Knitter associated with Catholic theologian Karl Rahner (a contemporary of Merton's and a central figure of the Second Vatican Council). According to this theory, if believers in other religions earnestly seek spiritual truth and moral conduct, they will be subject to the salvation offered by Christianity whether they realize it or not.65 Merton's comments at the beginning of his friendship with Suzuki suggested that he was himself interpreting Buddhism in this way, although his attitude would obviously change over time.

During the summer of 1959 Merton waited for Suzuki's introduction and continued his reading about Asian philosophy, including Erich Fromm's *Zen and Psychoanalysis* and books on yoga from the Bardstown library. Based on his reading of psychologist Boris Pasternak, Merton began to study the ancient Chinese divination

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64 Ibid.

Merton continued to be self-conscious about his Asian studies, and was careful to qualify his work in order to make it acceptable for a Christian. For example, he called his study of the *I Ching* an "experiment . . . Much as one might take a Rorshach [sic] test, for instance." This concern was evident when Merton finally received Suzuki’s essay in October 1959, and though he liked it, he felt as though it would confuse Western readers. Merton suggested that he write a follow-up piece to discuss Suzuki’s ideas from a Christian perspective. Merton tried hard to show how Zen categories like emptiness could be interpreted in Christian terms as well, but Suzuki was unconvinced of some of Merton’s correlations. He was especially uncomfortable with Merton’s efforts to make a Creator God fit into Zen’s non-theistic framework. Their exchange was cordial and academic, but Suzuki felt that their theological differences, while probably semantic, were nevertheless unresolvable. “The only thing we can do under the circumstances is to be tolerant toward each other,” he wrote.

Merton continued his efforts to publish the sayings of the desert fathers, titled *Wisdom of the Desert*, with his co-written introduction with Suzuki. But Merton was a few short years too early to engage in inter-religious dialogue. Pope John XXIII became head of the Catholic Church in the same year Merton initiated his correspondence with Suzuki, and the pope promised a new attitude of aggiornamento, or renewal, throughout the Church. But in 1960, at least for the Trappists, this new openness did not extend to,

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66 *Search for Solitude*, 320, 377.
67 Ibid., 266-267.
69 *Encounter*, 47.
in Merton's words, "communicating with pagans and unbelievers!" The order's censors in Rome refused to grant permission to the book with Suzuki's introduction, deeming it "inappropriate." Merton bitterly complained about the decision in his private correspondence and recruited famous French philosopher Jacques Maritain to write a letter on his behalf to the Vatican, but the decision remained the same. "This shows what wonderful confidence we have in our faith, doesn't it?" Merton mused ruefully.

*Wisdom of the Desert* was published the following year without Suzuki's introduction. It would be seven years later, with the publication of *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, before Merton succeeded in putting his dialogue with Suzuki in print. But Merton was being converted to "total ecumenism" whether his Trappist superiors let him write about it or not. Aldhelm Cameron-Brown noted that Merton's heavily-revised *New Seeds of Contemplation*, which appeared in 1961 along with *Wisdom of the Desert*, indicated just how far he had come. On the last page of *New Seeds*, the famous frog from Matsuo Basho's best-known haiku poem made an appearance. Basho, considered the originator and master of the form, wrote what is still one of the most famous haiku:

> the old pond—
> a frog jumps in:

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71 Mott, 347-348.


73 *School of Charity*, 128.


75 Haiku are brief, three line nature poems that attempt to convey the Buddhist sense of oneness in every moment of existence.
the sound of water

In *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton understood the perfect awareness revealed by Basho's frog to be the same as the oneness with Christ described in Christian mysticism.

Such moments reveal what Merton called "the cosmic dance":

> When, like the Japanese poet Basho we hear on old frog land in a quiet pond with a solitary splash—at such times the awakening, the turning inside out of all values, the "newness," the emptiness and the purity of vision that make themselves evident, provide a glimpse of the cosmic dance.

With these words, the door to the East was fully opened.

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77 *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 297. Merton once called Basho's travel diary "One of the most beautiful books I have ever read in my life." See *The Intimate Merton*, 316.
Chapter Four:
"Going Home"
1961-1968

By 1961, Thomas Merton's "second conversion" was nearly complete. The rest of his life—his friendships, his monastic activities, and his writing—was heavily influenced by Asian thought and personalities. By the early 1960s, Merton viewed his Asian trajectory not as a new hobby, but as a long-standing theme of his life. In a letter written on April 18, 1961 to Joseph Tjo Tchel-oung, translator of the Korean edition of *Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton said that he owed "a great debt to the Orient," adding,

> Even before I became a Christian myself I took a deep interest in Oriental philosophy, and I believe that interest certainly helped to prepare me to understand Christianity... We must never forget that Christianity came to the west from the Orient.¹

It is arguable whether Merton's interest in Asian thought before his conversion to Catholicism was "deep." By his own admission in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he understood nothing of what he read about Eastern philosophy and concluded that it was only good for relaxation techniques. And to say that Christianity is a product of the Orient is a stretch. In the twentieth century, Palestine does not qualify as the Far East. But this passage is indicative of Merton's enthusiasm for Asia at the beginning of the 1960s and the effort he planned to make in studying Eastern thought. The narrow views of his early monastic days were replaced by an irrepressible desire to learn and absorb

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¹ *Road to Joy*, 319.
everything he could about the Asian philosophical traditions. This passion was evident in his friendships, his writings on society and politics, his attitudes toward ecumenism and the Second Vatican Council, and culminated in his one and only trip to the East in 1968.

A central factor in Merton’s Asian journey from the early 1960’s forward was his many new friendships with both natives and scholars of the East. His correspondence with D. T. Suzuki began in 1959 and blossomed into a warm friendship. Their one face-to-face meeting was in 1964, but Merton was nurturing other friendships that lasted until his death.

In January 1961, at the end of a retreat, Merton wrote in his journal that he had been meditating on the idea of the divine that is revealed in nature “—the summit reached by so many non-Christian contemplatives (would that it were reached by a few Christians!).” A few days later, Merton made up his mind to dedicate himself to a more serious study of the Chinese language so he could pursue his interest in the ancient Taoist philosopher Chuang Tzu, whom he first encountered while writing his master’s thesis at Columbia. Merton wanted to edit and translate a collection of Chuang Tzu’s sayings, but needed the support of a more learned scholar to help him get started.

On February 3, 1961, Merton wrote to Chinese Archbishop Paul Yu-Pin for help, recalling Yu-Pin’s visit to Gethsemani in June 1949, not long after the publication of Seven Storey Mountain. In The Sign of Jonas, Merton wrote about the archbishop, calling him “one of the most impressive people I have ever seen.”

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3 Sign of Jonas, 197-198.
delivered during his visit, he mentioned the millions of Buddhist monks living in China and their criticism of Christianity's lack of emphasis on contemplation. Twelve years later, Merton remembered how much he had been moved by Yu-Pin and in his letter he asked for the archbishop's suggestions on who could best help him with his studies of Taoism. Merton indicated his enthusiasm for the Chuang Tzu project, claiming that, "I am as much a Chinese Buddhist by temperament and spirit as I am a Christian."  

Yu-Pin's assistant, Father Paul Chan, wrote Merton and suggested he contact Dr. John C. Wu, professor of Asian studies at Seton Hall University. Wu was a native of China and a Catholic who had served as Chinese ambassador to the Vatican. Merton wrote to Wu on March 13, 1961, seeking his help with the Chuang Tzu translations. Merton stated that he had "been persuaded for some time of the immense importance of a prudent study of Oriental philosophy . . . particularly in the kind of perspective that guided some of the early Church Fathers in their use of Platonism, and St. Thomas in his use of Aristotle." Merton asked to learn from Wu "like any Chinese schoolboy of the old days." On March 20, Wu sent an enthusiastic reply, indicating his interest in Merton's project. Already familiar with Merton's writings, Wu told him, "Only a man like yourself steeped in the works of the great Christian mystics can know what Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu were pointing at, and how utterly honest and correct they were."  

The friendship that grew out of this correspondence was probably more important to Merton's developing appreciation for Asian wisdom than any other relationship or

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4 Merton to Paul Yu-Pin, February 3, 1961, (Merton Center).
5 *Hidden Ground of Love*, 611-612.
6 Ibid., 612-613.
experience. While his correspondence with Suzuki was friendly, it focused almost entirely around their discussion of theological topics. Merton’s relationship with Wu, however, was deeply personal and mutually enriching. They met at Gethsemani on more than one occasion, and their letters often involved discussions of Wu’s family (his son became a priest in 1967). Their friendship helped Merton define his identity as a kind of marginal Christian. In one letter, he confessed to Wu that “whatever I may have been in previous lives, I think more than half of them were Chinese and eremitical.” On April 1, 1961, Merton wrote to Wu, thanking God for their new friendship and the project growing between them. In his letter, Merton contrasted he and Wu with the generations of Christians who have rejected the teachings of other religious traditions, insisting that, by rejecting those wonderful natural wisdoms that came before Christ and cried out for fulfillment in the Gospel, they set aside the challenging demands which would make us Christians strive for the highest purity of our own spiritual wisdom.

Their correspondence revealed the deep and lively friendship that was emerging from their shared scholarly interests. A warm bond developed between them throughout 1961 and 1962. Merton and Wu often joked and teased one another in their letters. Wu, though Merton’s senior by some years, signed an undated letter of December 1962, “Your good for nothing son in Christ.” But Wu also perceived that Merton’s spiritual awareness was taking him to places that transcended religious barriers. Wu often spoke of Merton in ways that foreshadowed the praises Merton later received from the Dalai Lama.

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7 Ibid., 618. “Eremitical” refers to the life of a hermit.
8 Ibid., 613.
9 Wu to Merton, December 1962 (Merton Center).
Lama and others he met during his 1968 trip to Asia. In a letter of October 21, 1961, Wu wrote, “My theory is that all genuine mystics feel and see the same things which are no things. Chuang Tzu is one, and you, Father, are one.” The following month, Wu called Merton’s latest book, The New Man, a “living synthesis of East and West . . . Father, I honestly think you are a prophet of this age. You need not bother improving your Chinese. You are Chinese because you are universal.”

Wu sent Merton four translations of Chuang Tzu to use in the preparation of his book on the Taoist sage, and helped by making his own translations of difficult passages Merton wanted to use. The Way of Chuang Tzu was published in 1965, and Merton dedicated the book to Wu. In his preface to the book, perhaps recalling the fuss made over his proposed dialogue with Suzuki in Wisdom of the Desert, Merton at first refused to offer a justification for why a Trappist monk should spend his time translating Chinese philosopher, stating flatly, “I simply like Chuang Tzu because he is what he is and I feel no need to justify this liking to myself or to anyone else. He is far too great to need any apologies from me.” Then, should this statement not satisfy some readers, Merton went on to claim the mantle of other Catholic thinkers who utilized non-Christian writings:

If St. Augustine could read Plotinus, if St. Thomas could read Aristotle and Averroes (both of them certainly a long way further from Christianity than Chuang Tzu ever was!), and if Teilhard de Chardin could make copious use of Marx and Engels in his synthesis, I think I may be pardoned for consorting with a Chinese recluse who shares the climate and peace of my own kind of solitude, and who is my own kind of person.

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10 Wu to Merton, October 21, 1961 (Merton Center).
11 Wu to Merton, November 28, 1961 (Merton Center).
12 Way of Chuang Tzu, 10-11.
Wu was delighted with the book, and he perceived that Merton had achieved a level of wisdom comparable to the Chinese sages. His comments suggest the coincidence of opposites inherent in Taoist thought:

I swear that I am not flattering when I say that this is exactly what Chuang Tzu would write had he learned English... You are a true man of the Tao just as he is. You have met in that eternal place which is no place and you look at each other and laugh.\(^\text{13}\)

With *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, Merton became to think consciously about the coincidence of opposites as the focal point of spiritual life. “The key to Chuang Tzu’s thought is the complementarity of opposites,” Merton wrote in the book. “Life is a continual development.”\(^\text{14}\)

Merton’s Asian trajectory continued to develop as well. He had kept up a sporadic correspondence with his aging Zen mentor, D. T. Suzuki and in 1964, an extraordinary turn of events allowed them their only face-to-face meeting. In June, Merton received a letter from Suzuki’s secretary informing him that Suzuki would be in New York City later in the month and wondered if it would be possible for Merton to come up for a visit. To Merton’s surprise, Dom James gave his permission, with the strict condition that the trip be a complete secret. Merton was somewhat hesitant about the trip, despite the opportunity to meet Suzuki. “I can think of nowhere I would less rather go than New York,” he wrote in his journal, perhaps reflecting remorse he still held toward his pre-monastic life in that city. Yet, Merton also thought this meeting might be God’s will for him: “For some reason I should go, not only for my own

\(^{13}\) Hidden Ground of Love, 623 and 631.

\(^{14}\) Way of Chuang Tzu, 30.
Indeed, Merton’s trip to New York became an import chapter in his Asian trajectory. According to Padovano, Merton’s meeting with Suzuki, was a perfect paradox. The first long trip outside the monastery, the first return to New York, was made in circumstances he would have thought impossible when he entered the Abbey. He traveled east from Kentucky for a meeting that culminated long years of thinking and writing about the East.\(^{16}\)

Although Merton’s visit with Suzuki was hardly a culmination, it was an important event and cherished memory. On June 15, 1964, Merton flew to New York where he roamed familiar streets near Columbia University and said Mass alone at Corpus Christi Church where he was baptized nearly twenty-six years earlier. His description of his meetings with Suzuki on June 16 - 18 were full of warmth and affection. The very combination of the two personalities appeared contradictory. Suzuki, then ninety-four, was nearly deaf. He was a Japanese lay Zen Buddhist scholar. Merton, on the other hand, was forty-nine, an American, and a Catholic monk. But Merton’s journal revealed his feelings of deep connection with Suzuki as they shared their mutual love of Chuang Tzu, poetry, Zen, and their appreciation for the other’s work. Later, Merton reflected on the meeting:

> These talks were very pleasant, and profoundly important to me—to see and experience the fact that there really is a deep understanding between myself and this ordinary and simple man whom I have been reading for about ten years with great attention.\(^{17}\)

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\(^{15}\) *Dancing in the Water of Life*, 219.

\(^{16}\) Padovano, 74.

\(^{17}\) *Dancing in the Water of Life*, 116.
The meeting with Suzuki heightened Merton’s desire to further his studies of Asian philosophy. The trip outside the monastery, his first long trip in twenty-three years of monastic life, may have kindled a desire for more roaming in Merton. The temptation finally made a concrete appearance just a few months after his meeting with Suzuki.

Earlier in the year, Merton wrote a favorable review of a book by Father Heinrich Dumoulin, a Jesuit priest and professor at Sophia University in Japan. Dumoulin, following the Jesuit tradition of openness towards other religions, was a recognized authority on Zen Buddhism. In June 1964, Dumoulin wrote Merton to thank him for the glowing review of his book *Zen Buddhism: A History*. Merton was interested in Dumoulin’s work because some of the Catholic priests living in Japan were engaged in face-to-face dialogue with their Buddhist counterparts. Some of them, like Dumoulin’s colleague Father William Johnston, had actually lived for short periods of time in Japanese Zen monasteries, practicing the Buddhist spiritual disciplines with the other monks.

In September, 1964, Dumoulin, knowing well Merton’s interests in Asian religion, wrote to Merton with the suggestion that he come to Japan to visit the Zen monasteries himself. Dumoulin had already cleared the visit with the Cistercian officials in Japan and encouraged Merton to seek permission from his superiors. Merton was envious of friends like Dom Aelred Graham, a Benedictine monk and author of *Zen*

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18 Heinrich Dumoulin to Thomas Merton, June 6, 1964 (Merton Center).

19 Johnston and Merton were themselves correspondents. See *Hidden Ground of Love*, 443. Merton was already familiar with Johnston via John Wu, who met Johnston at Seton Hall (see John Wu to Thomas Merton, August 3, 1961, Merton Center). Johnston and Merton met at Gethsemani in 1965. See Merton to Wu, December 3, 1965 (Merton Center).
Catholicism, who had spent time in Asia furthering his own studies. Merton wrote directly to Dom Ignace Gillet, the Abbot General of the Cistercian Order. In his letter, he wrote passionately of his love for Asian philosophy. A trip to Asia was something that “my life and my labor have been preparing me for years.” He went on to appeal to the recent statements of the Second Vatican Council calling for more dialogue with non-Christian traditions.

I seek this permission therefore not as an exemption or deviation from my contemplative life, but as something that leads directly to a completion of what I have been called to the monastery to seek.

Dumoulin himself wrote to the abbot general on Merton’s behalf, noting his own involvement with Vatican II’s Secretariate for Non-Christian Religions. Dumoulin argued that the problem with most Christians who wrote about Eastern religions is that they had no direct personal experience with Asian spiritual practices. If Merton could gain such personal experience,

[it] would enhance greatly the value of his literary works on mysticism and enable him to do a great service to the Church in the important task of incorporating the values of Eastern religion into Christianity.

Ultimately, the Trappist superiors denied Merton permission to go. His journals do not mention what happened, but in another letter to Dumoulin, Merton expressed his disappointment:

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20 Merton and Graham met for the first time in early 1964, though their correspondence had been ongoing since 1953. See Aelred Graham to Thomas Merton, March 10, 1964 (Merton Center).

21 School of Charity, 237.

22 Thomas Merton to Dom Ignace Gillet, September 24, 1964 (Merton Center).

23 Dumoulin to Dom Ignace Gillet, October 17, 1964 (Merton Center).
I would of course have profited much by the experience, but I naturally renounce it willingly and without afterthought. What troubles me more is the failure of understanding, which I seem to be able less easily to forget. . . I must admit it is rather wounding to be told that such a project ‘is not from God.’ Paradoxically, it is Zen itself which gives the most practical perspective by which to see and accept all this: So with this final element of humor, I put the whole thing aside, not without once more thanking you for having such a kind and brilliant idea. Perhaps someday it will still become realizable, who can say?  

Indeed, it was realized in 1968. Until then, Merton had to be content with continuing his studies from the Gethsemani hermitage. John Wu, ever the friend and admirer, was supportive when he wrote to Merton that in some sense he did not need to go to Asia. “You may be shocked by this statement of mine,” Wu wrote, “but Father, the truth is that there is more Zen in your hermitage than in any of the Zen halls [in Japan].”

The physical trip to Asia would have to wait, but the interior journey continued uninterrupted. After the publication of *The Way of Chuang Tzu* in 1965, Merton and Wu both turned their attention to Zen Buddhism. Merton began working on *Mystics and Zen Masters*, a collection of essays on Zen and contemplative Christianity, and Wu was writing the historical study *The Golden Age of Zen*, for which Merton wrote a preface. In December 1965, Wu told him that Merton’s name in Chinese was Mei Teng, which means “silent lamp.” Merton was pleased “to be ‘baptized’ in Chinese” and felt an obligation to live up to the meaning the name implied:

> After all, a name indicates a divine demand. Hence I must be Mei Teng, a silent lamp, not a sputtering one. Over these quiet feast days . . . I have been in the woods just staying quiet. And since the earth is one, I think I have plenty of Asia under my feet.  

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25 Wu to Merton, December 27, 1964 (Merton Center).

26 *Hidden Ground of Love*, 632.
Throughout the 1960’s, Merton continued to nurture friendships with Asians and others who shared his love of things Asian. Perhaps this was his way to have vicarious experiences of Asia that his Cistercian vows of stability and obedience did not allow. Merton’s correspondence with these friends indicated how he was moving toward an even deeper appreciation of the Eastern traditions, even going so far as to suggest that these traditions were means of grace and salvation.

In 1965, Merton corresponded with Phillip Griggs, who used the Hindu name Yogeshananda and who was affiliated with a Rama Krishna group in California. Although Merton was more interested in Buddhism, his reading of Gandhi and classics of Indian literature (and perhaps the memory of his old friend Brahmachari) helped maintain his interest in Hinduism as well. Merton credited his parents’ love of the Hindu poet Tagore as an influence on him, noting that Owen and Ruth Merton were “open to the East without knowing precisely what they were open to.” In his correspondence with Griggs, Merton made it clear that he thought, despite Catholicism’s claim to be a more direct means of grace, non-Catholics could participate as fully, even more fully, in the life of God, than many Catholics themselves:

God is not bound to confine His gifts to the framework of these external means, and in the end we are sanctified not merely by the instrumentality of doctrines and sacraments but by the Holy Spirit. And I repeat my conviction as a Catholic that the Holy Spirit may perfectly well be more active in the heart of a Hindu monk than in my own.


28 *Hidden Ground of Love*, 338-339.
In a June 1965 letter to Tibetan Buddhist scholar Marco Pallis, Merton described himself as a child of all religions:

I think, that for ourselves, we must consider at once a deeper penetration and fidelity to the great wisdom of our fathers, all our fathers, with a deeper awareness of our unique responsibility to the wisdom of the ancients, including the hidden and prehistoric ones.\(^{29}\)

Perhaps the further deepening of appreciation for the independent validity of these Eastern religions lay in the influence of Pope John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council. Merton indicated a real enthusiasm and excitement for the reforms that began under John XXIII, and appealed to Vatican II’s spirit of aggiornamento to justify his own interests in inter-religious dialogue.

Merton held a great personal admiration for John XXIII, considering the pope “one whom I personally love and revere as a true Father, and indeed I may say that there is no man on earth for whom I have a deeper veneration, not only because of his personal office but also because of his personal qualities.”\(^{30}\) Merton considered John XXIII’s calling of the Second Vatican Council a monumental event in the history of the church. Vatican II “has got to fulfill great hopes or be a disaster,” Merton wrote.\(^{31}\)

The Council did articulate some of the broadest changes in the history of the Church, especially in regard to dialogue with other religions. George Woodcock, author of *Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet*, saw Vatican II as a kind of by-product of the progressive work completed by Merton, Dumoulin and others, rather than as a true

\(^{29}\) Ibid., 471.

\(^{30}\) *Witness to Freedom*, 102-103.

\(^{31}\) Ibid., 45.
catalyst for inter-religious conversation. Merton did not need the Council to justify his studies of Eastern religion, but he did find the new spirit of openness in the Church useful for helping explain the relevance and importance of what he was doing. In his journal on December 22, 1964, Merton wrote that “the best thing that has come out of the Council is the Declaration on Ecumenism, particularly the part on oriental theology.” And in his preface to *Mystics and Zen Masters* (1966), Merton appealed directly to Vatican II’s statements on the value of non-Christian religions. “It is in this spirit that the present essays dealing with Oriental religion have been written,” Merton declared, and he suggested that a door had been open to a new kind of ecumenism.

Popular ecumenism had often been an academic effort to identify commonalities of doctrine or belief among the world’s religions, something Merton once referred to as a “time-wasting and hairsplitting concern with trivialities.” Rather, Merton was seeking a unity of religious experience, which, according to William Shannon, “is something that can never be adequately expressed in doctrinal formulations.” This ability to share the faith experience, rather than merely theological belief, “the ‘way’ which leads to the highest levels of religious or of metaphysical awareness,” was what Merton praised when he invoked Vatican II in his preface to *Mystics and Zen Masters*. However, it was also

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32 Woodcock, 101-102.

33 *Dancing in the Waters of Life*, 181.

34 *Mystics and Zen Masters*, x.

35 *Witness to Freedom*, 296.

36 William Shannon, in the preface to *Hidden Ground of Love*, x.

37 *Mystics and Zen Masters*, x.
the promise of Vatican II that Merton used as a measure of the Church’s failure to realize that spirit. In 1966, complaining about the rejection by Church officials of one of his articles for a non-Christian French magazine, Merton wondered, “Has the Council affected us yet? I seem to have heard strange mutters at one time or other about something called ecumenical dialogue, but of course that must be something perilous and communistic.” It was typical of Merton to recognize the paradox that the Council both inspired inter-religious explorations, at the same time that it stood in contrast to the positive work that people like him were doing.

In June 1966, in a letter to Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, Merton again played the role of Church critic. “I think your problems with conservative and formalist religious are very much the same as ours in the Catholic Church,” Merton wrote; “It is the same everywhere. A new mentality is needed, and this implies above all a recovery of ancient and original wisdom.” Merton’s friendship with Nhat Hanh, reflected several of Merton’s interests, including Zen, the peace movement, and social activism. Nhat Hanh was active in Vietnam’s domestic peace movement, and Martin Luther King, Jr., nominated the Zen monk for a Nobel Peace Prize the same year he met Merton during a speaking tour of the U.S. in which he visited Gethsemani. The Cistercian was most impressed with the Buddhist: “Nhat Hanh is first of all a true monk; very quiet, gently, modest, humble, and you can see his Zen at work.” Merton eventually wrote a preface for Nhat Hanh’s Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire, and wrote an anti-war essay called “Nhat Hanh is My Brother” for Jubilee magazine later that year.

38 School of Charity, 303-304.
39 Learning to Love, 73.
The increase of Asian contacts and the openings heralded by Vatican II increased Merton’s desire for a trip to Asia at the same time that he was becoming more settled as a hermit.

Though he could not know it, by 1967 Merton was entering the final phase of his life. And the central theme of this phase was his actual, long-hoped-for trip to Asia. The relationship with “M” was over by late 1966 (“[T]he inanities of last year!! Grief!” he wrote in his journal\textsuperscript{40} and Merton took a permanent vow to live as a hermit for as long as his health allowed. There was a kind of settling going on in Merton’s life in 1967, as he read more and more Eastern thinkers and worked on what would become his personal \textit{magnum opus} of Asian philosophy, \textit{Zen and the Birds of Appetite}. By early 1968, Merton’s focus shifted away from social and political concerns (although he continued to make observations about such things in his journal) and more toward prayer and inner reflection.\textsuperscript{41} “Realize more and more that what really matters to me is meditation—and whatever creative work really springs from it,” he wrote in his journal.\textsuperscript{42}

Dom James Fox announced his retirement as abbot in late 1967, and Merton fiercely fought suggestions that he should take the job. He insisted on maintaining his eremitical vow, arranged the Merton Legacy Trust to look after any posthumous publications, and spoke ominously of his own death: “I have no guarantee of many more years. Perhaps five, perhaps ten.”\textsuperscript{43} Merton fretted in his journal over the election of a

\textsuperscript{40} Other Side of the Mountain, 9.

\textsuperscript{41} See Mott, 527-528.

\textsuperscript{42} Other Side of the Mountain, 132.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 11.
new abbot, fearing that he might have to deal with someone even more difficult that Dom James, but was delighted when Flavian Burns, also a hermit and a friend, was elected on January 15, 1968—“a real sense of liberation,” Merton wrote. Indeed, Dom Flavian proved to be highly supportive of Merton’s growing interest in travel outside the monastery.

In early 1968, Merton was receiving invitations to speaking engagements and retreats on a near-daily basis. He was leaving the monastery frequently, going to Louisville and Bardstown to see doctors, take care of Trust business, and visit with friends. He felt as though most of these activities were distractions from his focus as a hermit, and turned many of the travel invitations down without a second thought. There were a few exceptions: Merton agreed to lead a retreat in May at a Trappistine convent in California, and before returning to Kentucky, to visit his old friend, Dom Aelred Graham, at his Monastery of Christ in the Desert in New Mexico. But one invitation intrigued him the most. Merton’s friend, Dom Jean Leclerq, wrote that Merton should attend a conference in Bangkok, Thailand, to be held in December 1968, on the subject of monastic renewal in both the East and West. Merton felt that he “should” attend this conference, and made mention of it in his journals several times throughout the winter and spring of 1968, while Dom Flavian took it under advisement. The trip to California and New Mexico in May seemed to move Merton deeply, and he began actively contemplating the possibility of establishing a hermitage somewhere out west. But in June 1968, Dom Falvian not only gave Merton permission to visit Asia—and to stay.

44 Ibid., 41.

for up to six months—but also encouraged the possibility of establishing a West Coast hermitage under Gethsemani’s care.\textsuperscript{46}

The plans for a new hermitage quickly took a back seat to Merton’s preparations for the Asian trip. He spent July and August obtaining passports and vaccinations, shopping for the journey, and making contacts with those who could get him to the people and places he wanted to see in Thailand, Japan, Singapore, Indonesia, and perhaps Burma.\textsuperscript{47} He made plans to meet with the Dalai Lama, and hoped to be able to find his old friend Bramachari in Calcutta.\textsuperscript{48} An invitation to speak at a conference in Darjeeling, India, in October was also approved by Dom Flavian, and so Merton’s departure was moved up further still. His journal entries from the late summer of 1968 indicate Merton’s intense excitement about the trip, and about the possibilities for a new life situation:

In eight weeks I am to leave here. And who knows—I may not come back. Not that I expect anything to go wrong—though it might—but I might conceivably settle in California to start the hermit thing Fr. Flavian spoke of . . . Really I don’t care one way or another if I never come back. On an evening like this the place is certainly beautiful . . . But if I can find somewhere to disappear to, I will. And if I am to begin a relatively wandering life with no fixed abode, that’s all right too.\textsuperscript{49}

In August, shortly before his planned departure, Merton received an invitation to lead a retreat for contemplative nuns in Alaska on his way to Asia. Dom Flavian approved, and in the ensuing correspondence with the Archbishop of Alaska, Merton got

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 132, 139.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 141.
\textsuperscript{48} \textit{Witness to Freedom}, 256-258.
\textsuperscript{49} \textit{Other Side of the Mountain}, 147-148.
the idea of establishing a hermitage there, which the archbishop eagerly supported. In his September 1968 Circular Letter to Friends, Merton explained his reason for going to Asia as being primarily a function of his interest in monastic renewal. “Our real journey is interior,” he wrote; “[I]t is a matter of growth, deepening, and of an ever greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts.”

But on his last day at the Gethsemani hermitage, September 9, 1968, Merton wrote in his journal with a calm confidence that his trip to Asia was nothing less than the work of God:

I go with a completely open mind, I hope without special illusions. My hope is simply to enjoy the long journey, profit by it, learn, change, and perhaps find something or someone who will help me advance in my own spiritual quest. I am not starting out with a firm plan never to return or with an absolute determination to return at all costs. I do feel there is not much for me here at the moment and that I need to be open to lots of new possibilities. I hope I shall be! But I remain a monk of Gethsemani. Whether or not I end my days here, I don’t know—and perhaps it is not so important. The great thing is to respond to God’s Will in this providential opportunity, whatever it may bring.

Merton’s trip first began with a stop in New Mexico to see Dom Aelred Graham and friends at the Monastery of Christ in the Desert, and then to Alaska where Merton led a retreat and kept his eye out for potential hermitage locations. He was fascinated with Alaska, remarking of Eyak Lake near Cordova, that it “seemed perfect in many ways—for a place to live.” Along the way, Merton was reading the Tibetan Book of the Dead and works on Hinduism in preparation for his arrival in Asia. First he made a brief stop in California to see the nuns at Redwood again, and to speak in Santa Barbara to the

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50 *Asian Journal*, 296.

51 *Other Side of the Mountain*, 166.

52 Ibid., 189.
Society for the Study of Democratic Institutions, directed by his long-time friend, Wilbur “Ping” Ferry. It was Merton’s first address to a mostly-academic audience, and he spoke of his purpose in visiting Asia and the possibility of learning from the experience of Eastern monasticism. Merton emphasized to the group that his interest in monastic renewal had little to do with doctrines or church structures. Rather, it was the spiritual potential of monastic life that was Merton’s main focus. This experience was one that transcended all doctrines:

> The real essence of monasticism is the handing down from master to disciple of an uncommunicable experience. . . . It can only be communicated on the deepest possible level. And this, it seems to me, with all due respect to everything else that’s going on [regarding monastic renewal], this to me is the most important thing. . . . [T]here is nothing else that seems to have the same kind of primary importance.  

According to Walter Capps, editor of *Preview of the Asian Journey*, a transcript of Merton’s lectures in Santa Barbara, Merton’s Asian trip was clearly the culmination of his interest the experience promised by true monasticism. Merton believed that Asian monks were light years ahead of Western monks and had much to offer the discussion of monasticism’s future. In essence, this was “the next essential step in his [Merton’s] own spiritual journey.”  

Finally, on October 15, Merton left by plane from San Francisco, bound for Asia. “May I not come back without having settled the great affair,” he wrote in his journal, indicating the depth of significance with which Merton viewed his trip.  

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53 Merton, quoted in Capps, 35.

54 Capps, 4.

55 *Other Side of the Mountain*, 205.
Honolulu and Hong Kong, Merton finally arrived in Bangkok, where he immediately began seeking out teachers of Eastern wisdom. His first visit was with Phra Khantipalo, an English monk at Wat Bonivares, a Theravadan Buddhist temple. He also met with Chao Khun Sasana Sobhana, the abbot of the temple. The monks had a “fruitful” conversation on a variety of topics related to Buddhist meditation and philosophy, and especially on the ascending stages of spiritual awakening.\(^{56}\)

Khantipalo acted as Merton’s guide for a tour of local Buddhist shrines, and then on October 19, Merton left for Calcutta, where he attended the Spiritual Summit Conference at the Temple of Understanding, an organization established in 1960 to foster inter-religious dialogue. While there, Merton had a chance meeting with Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, one of the *tulkus*, or reincarnated teachers of Tibetan Buddhism. Trungpa would eventually become one of the most important interpreters of Tibetan Buddhism for Westerners, especially in the United States.\(^{57}\) At the time, he was residing in Great Britain, where he had attended college and was teaching Buddhism to lay people, but he happened to be back in India to visit with the exiled Tibetan Buddhist community. Merton was most impressed with the young man, calling him “a completely marvelous person . . . He is also a genuine spiritual master.”\(^{58}\)

Trungpa gave Merton a tour of Calcutta, and inspired Merton with the idea of editing a book on Buddhist meditation, with all of the various schools of the tradition represented, giving an

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\(^{56}\) Ibid., 211.


\(^{58}\) *Other Side of the Mountain*, 219.
indication of the direction his writing may have gone had he been able to continue his journey. At the conference at the Temple of Understanding, Merton spoke about the monk as a "marginal man," one who deliberately stands against society by living without status and worldly authority, totally at the will of Divine Powers. Merton argued that these powers took one to a place beyond the discriminating categories of society, and beyond the distinctions between various religious traditions. His comments point to the deep level of universality Merton was approaching in his thinking:

And the deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words, and it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity. My dear brothers, we are already one.  

From Calcutta, Merton flew to New Delhi on October 28, where he met up with Harold Talbott, an old friend and mutual acquaintance of Dom Aelred Graham. Talbott, who became a Catholic and was confirmed at Gethsemani in 1959, had gone to India to study Buddhism with the exiled Tibetan teachers, and acted as Merton's guide for the next two weeks. Talbott introduced Merton to several Tibetan leaders and lamas, with whom he developed a friendly rapport. "The Tibetans seem to have a peculiar intentness, energy, silence, and also humor," Merton wrote after his meeting with monks of the Gelugpa and Nyingmapa Buddhist lineages; "Their laughter is wonderful." The monks emphasized the need for a guru, or teacher, to assist one with the higher stages of meditation, and urged Merton to help Westerners appreciate the need for deepening their

59 Asian Journal, 308.

60 Other Side of the Mountain, 232. The Gelugpa and Nyingmapa schools are two of the four major sects of Tibetan Buddhism. The Gelugpa, to which the Dalai Lama belongs, trace their lineage back to the fourteenth century. The Nyingmapa school is older, dating back to the eighth century, and the arrival of Buddhism to Tibet from India. See Other Side of the Mountain, 332-333.
spiritual lives. Merton's long interest in Hinduism and Zen was being overshadowed, at least for a time, by a fascination with Tibetan Buddhism.\footnote{Ibid., 236.}

On October 31, Merton and Talbott traveled by train and jeep north from New Delhi toward the Himalayas and Dharamsala, headquarters of the Dalai Lama and the exiled Tibetan government. While on a walk in the foothills the next day, Merton met Sonam Kazi, a Sikkimese, Scottish-educated translator for the Tibetan leaders and a highly-trained Nyingmapa lay monk. Sonam Kazi encouraged Merton to further his Buddhist studies by seeking out a guru to train him in the esoteric \textit{dzogchen} form of Tibetan meditation.\footnote{\textit{Dzogchen}, or "great perfection," is considered the highest level of spiritual realization in Nyingmapa Tibetan Buddhism. See \textit{Other Side of the Mountain}, 332.} Merton, already contemplating the idea from earlier conversations with the Tibetan monks in New Delhi, seemed open, if a bit hesitant, to the suggestion, writing in his journal,

\begin{quote}
At least he asked me if I were willing to risk it and I said why not? The question is finding the right man. I am not exactly dizzy with the idea of looking for a magic master but I would certainly like to learn something by experience and it does seem that the Tibetan Buddhists are the only ones who, at present, have a really large number of people who have attained to extraordinary heights in meditation and contemplation. This does not exclude Zen. But I do feel very much at home with the Tibetans, even though much that appears in books about them seems bizarre if not sinister.\footnote{\textit{Other Side of the Mountain}, 239.}
\end{quote}

Merton spent much of the next two days with Sonam Kazi, discussing a variety of topics. From their talks, Merton began to consider the possibility of taking his Asian interests beyond reading and private study to a new level—actually apprenticing himself to a
Buddhist teacher and entering fully into the practice of a meditation discipline. Other Tibetan teachers Merton met through Sonam Kazi seconded the recommendation.64

It was with this possibility in mind that Merton gained an audience with the Dalai Lama on November 4. In his journal, Merton described the leader of Tibetan Buddhism, then thirty-three years old, as “most impressive as a person.”65 The Dalai Lama was familiar with Merton’s writings, but the conversation focused mostly on Merton’s personal interest in meditation. The Dalai Lama encouraged Merton to make sure he had a firm grasp of Buddhist philosophy before he moved into the higher realms of meditation, and recommended a Tibetan teacher, Geshe Sopa, who was affiliated with a Buddhist monastery in New Jersey, as a person who might assist Merton’s studies. He invited Merton back for further conversations on November 6 and 8. During the intervening days, Merton spent his time reading and meditating and reflecting on his situation. In his journal he wrote of how he was beginning to miss Gethsemani and appreciate it more now that he was away. But at the same time, he again mentioned the possibility of a hermitage in Alaska, where he would be close to both Asia and the continental United States.66 Merton seemed to be dwelling on his identity and place, even in his dreams. On November 5, Merton wrote in his journal:

Last night I dreamed that I was, temporarily, back at Gethsemani. I was dressed in a Buddhist monk’s habit, but with more black and red and gold, a “Zen habit,” in color more Tibetan than Zen. I was going to tell Brother Donald [Kane], the cook in the diet kitchen, that I would be there.

64 Among those Merton mentions in his journal were Khamtul Rinpoche; an unnamed teacher referred to as the Khempo of Namgyal Tra-Tsang; and Chhokling Rinpoche. See Other Side of the Mountain, 243, 246, and 249.

65 Other Side of the Mountain, 251.

66 Ibid., 252.
for supper. I met some women in the corridor, visitors and students of Asian religion, to whom I was explaining I was a kind of Zen monk and Gelugpa together, when I woke up.\textsuperscript{67}

On their second visit, the Dalai Lama demonstrated the traditional Tibetan sitting position for meditation and they discussed practical issues of contemplative disciplines. During their third meeting, the Dalai Lama seemed to ask most of the questions, mostly about the various features of Christian monasticism. On the whole, Merton was grateful for the Tibetan leader’s advice and friendship, declaring,

> It was a very warm and cordial discussion and at the end I felt we had become very good friends and were somehow quite close to one another. I feel a great respect and fondness for him as a person and believe, too, that there is a real spiritual bond between us. He remarked that I was a “Catholic geshe,” which, Harold [Talbott] said, was the highest possible praise from a Gelugpa, like an honorary doctorate!\textsuperscript{68}

As for the Dalai Lama’s impressions of Merton, he wrote in his 1990 autobiography, \textit{Exile to Freedom}, that his encounter with Merton was “one of my happiest moments.” Although Merton avoided wearing clerical attire during most of his trip, he wore his Cistercian habit and scapular for his visits with the Dalai Lama, who remembered being most impressed with the Trappist garments, especially the thick leather belt. He recalled that,

> [M]ore striking than his outward appearance, which was memorable in itself, was the inner life that he manifested. I could see he was a truly humble and deeply spiritual man. This was the first time that I had been struck by such a feeling in anyone who professed Christianity. Since then, I have come across others with similar qualities, but it was Merton who introduced me to the real meaning of the word “Christian.”\textsuperscript{69}

\textsuperscript{67}Ibid., 255.

\textsuperscript{68}Ibid., 266. \textit{Geshe} means, roughly, “learned teacher.” See definition, \textit{Other Side of the Mountain}, 332.

Merton wrote in his journal how pleasant his visits with all the Tibetan teachers had been, noting that “there has been full communication on a really deep level. We seem to recognize in one another a certain depth of spiritual experience, and it is unquestionable.” Merton found that these Buddhists appeared to have a “deeper attainment” than the Christians he knew, though among the Christians, “the desire is deep and genuine and so too is certain attainment, even though it is much less articulate.”

Merton was not quite fulfilled by what he learned from the Tibetans, and in a letter to Dom Flavian, confessed, “I am glad to have started here and glad I will see the Zen people only later, as I think that will be a step beyond what is here.”

However, Merton was yet to meet the Tibetan who would impress him the most. After a brief return to Calcutta for more sightseeing, he traveled to Darjeeling, with the hope of eventually obtaining permission to visit nearby Sikkhim. Merton visited with nuns at the Loretto Convent, and then drove to the Mim Tea Estate, where he had arranged to take a short retreat in a rented bungalow, with a spectacular view of snow-capped Mount Kanchenjunga. It was here that Merton met Chatral Rimpoche, “the greatest rimpoche I have met so far and a very impressive person.” Chatral was also a hermit, and the Tibetan and the Trappist made an instant connection. “We must have talked for two hours or more, covering all kinds of ground,” Merton wrote. They discussed dzogchen and various meeting points in Christian and Buddhist experience.

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70 Other Side of the Mountain, 265.

71 Asian Journal, 179.

72 Other Side of the Mountain, 278. Rimpoche, or rinpoche, is an honorary title given to spiritual masters in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. See also, Other Side of the Mountain, 333.
"He said he had meditated in solitude for thirty years or more and had not attained perfect emptiness and I said I hadn’t either," Merton wrote, adding,

The unspoken or half-spoken message of the talk was our complete understanding of each other as people who were somehow on the edge of great realization and knew it and were trying, somehow or other, to go out and get lost in it—and that it was a grace for us to meet one another. I wish I could see more of Chatral. He burst out and called me a rangjung Sangay (which apparently means a "natural Buddha")... He told me, seriously, that perhaps he and I would attain complete Buddhahood in our next lives, perhaps even in this life, and the parting note was a kind of compact that we would both do our best to make it in this life. 73

Reflecting on their meeting in his journal, Merton knew that if he were to apprentice himself to a single Buddhist teacher, he had found the one, though there was still hesitation with this idea. “If I were going to settle down with a Tibetan guru, I think Chatral would be the one I’d choose,” he wrote, “But I don’t know if that is what I’ll be able to do—or whether I need to.” 74 A quiet ambivalence settled on Merton in the days that immediately followed his visit with Chatral Rimpoche. He had a cold and sore throat, and spent the time resting at the Mim Tea Estate. Merton developed a dislike for the hulking Mount Kanchenjunga nearby, and began to question the purpose of his Asian journey. On November 18, he wrote in his journal:

Reassessment of this whole Indian experience in more critical terms. Too much movement. Too much “looking for” something: an answer, a vision, “something other.” And this breeds illusion. Illusion that there is something else. . . . I have a definite feeling it [coming to Asia] is a waste of time—something I didn’t need to do. However, if I have discovered I didn’t need to do it, it has not been a waste of time. 75

73 Asian Journal, 144.

74 Ibid.

75 Other Side of the Mountain, 281-282.
He continued to reflect on his destiny after the Asian trip, and seemed resigned to the idea that he ought to leave Gethsemani for a hermitage elsewhere. Yet, “I suppose I ought eventually to end my days there. I do in many ways miss it. There is no problem of my wanting to ‘leave Gethsemani.’ It is my monastery and being away has helped me see it in perspective and love it more.”

The next day, something profound seemed to happen. Much has been made of Merton’s vivid experience at Polonnaruwa on December 2. But from Merton’s journal writing, it appears that the true “awakening” took place at the Mim Tea Estate, in the shadow of Mount Kanchenjunga, two weeks earlier. A resolution of sorts appears following a dream Merton had the night of November 18, and the language of his journal rings with wisdom in the days that follow. Perhaps the realization of Polonnaruwa was merely an after-shock of what happened at Kanchenjunga. After several days of reflecting on Gethsemani and his future and feelings of distaste for the nearby mountain, Merton awoke on November 19 and made this entry:

Last night I had a curious dream about Kanchenjunga. I was looking at the mountain and it was pure white, absolutely pure, especially the peaks that lie to the west. And I saw the pure beauty of their shape and outline, all in white. And I heard a voice saying—or got the clear idea of: “There is another side to the mountain.” I realized that it was turned around and everything was lined up differently; I was seeing from the Tibetan side. This morning my quarrel with the mountain ended.

What did this dream mean for Merton, his search for solitude, or his Asian trajectory? He never said specifically, but his writing became deep and lucid in the passages that follow. He wrote of taking pictures of the mountain later in the day, and

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76 Ibid., 282.

77 Ibid., 284.
the poetic image of sitting in the warm sun and letting the gentle Himalayan bees crawl on his head and hands, but never stinging. He wrote long, philosophical paragraphs that breath with the wisdom of the East, the truth of paradox and coinciding opposites.

Merton did not just make peace with a particular mountain that day. He may well have made peace with the figurative mountain, an image that he lived with throughout his life, since his birth below France’s Mount Canigou, since his early struggles toward sainthood in The Seven Storey Mountain. And perhaps Mount Kanchenjunga was a symbol for this last great mountain in his life, the seemingly insurmountable quest for wisdom—Asian wisdom, paradoxical wisdom, a sense of identity with an ultimate reality. His inner conflicts of poet versus monk, traveler versus hermit, lover versus solitary, the question of whether to stay at Gethsemani or strike out for new territory, and especially his interior journey of seeking enlightenment and wondering by which path—Tibetan, Zen, Christian, or something else—all seemed to disappear like the snow mists of Kanchenjunga that vanished in the Himalayan sun. Perhaps Merton discovered that day that what he was seeking had been with him all along, that useful as travels and teachers and teachings could be, true wisdom was something that he had always possessed, not as a doctrine or method of realization, but as eternal wisdom, Buddha mind, the light of Christ that “enlightens everyone.”

That same day Merton wrote this mysterious passage on “three doors” in his journal:

The door of emptiness. Of no-place. Of no place for a self, which cannot be entered by a self. And therefore is of no use to someone who is going somewhere. . . . The door without sign, without indicator, without

78 John 1:9.
information. Not particularized. Hence no one can say of it "This is it! This is the door." . . . The door without wish. The undesired. The unplanned door. The door never expected. Never wanted. Not desirable as a door. Not a joke, not a trap door. Not select. Not exclusive. Not for a few. Not for many. Not for. Door without aim. Door without end. Does not respond to a key—so do not imagine you have a key. Do not have your hope on possession of the key.  

In a sense, Merton had been searching for the right "door" all his life. But the only door that was required was the "no-door." "Nothing remains to be done," Merton wrote. Gethsemani, Alaska, Zen, Christianity, monk, writer—it was all good and graced and perfect as it was. Each represented the other side of the mountain. All were the mountain, not just "the Tibetan side." His "quarrel with the mountain" had ended. His journey had not been pointless. The paradox that Merton discovered, that Merton was: one must seek, only to learn that there is nothing to be found in seeking; but seek nonetheless. His journal continued,

O Tantric Mother Mountain! Yin-yang palace of opposites in unity! Palace of anicca, impermanence and patience, solidity and nonbeing, existence and wisdom. A great consent to be and not-be, a compact to delude no one who does not first want to be deluded. The full beauty of the mountain is not seen until you too consent to the impossible paradox: it is and is not. When nothing more needs to be said, the smoke of ideas clears, the mountain is SEEN!


This blast of paradoxical realization proved to be the true peak of Merton's Asian trajectory. There were other experiences, of course, but the restless soul-searching

79 Other Side of the Mountain, 285.

80 Ibid.

81 Ibid., 286-287. In Theravada Buddhism, anicca refers to impermanence or change.
disappears from Merton’s journal after the dream of Kanchenjunga. Word came that visiting Sikkhim would be impossible because of bureaucratic difficulties, and so, on November 25, Merton left Darjeeling for Calcutta and then Madras, where he met a few more scholars and religious leaders and did lots of sightseeing, including visiting the ancient Indian ruins of Mahabalipuram. Then on November 29, he arrived in Ceylon, where on December 2 Merton encountered the stone Buddhas of Polonnaruwa. It was indeed a dramatic moment, even in light of his experience at Kanchenjunga. Perhaps Merton’s words should be seen as a final reflection on his Asian experiences, which actually culminated days earlier at the Mim Tea Estate:

Surely, with Mahabalipuram and Polonnaruwa my Asian pilgrimage has come clear and purified itself. I mean, I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for. I don’t know what else remains but I have now seen and have pierced through the surface and got beyond the shadow and the disguise.\(^2\)

Unfortunately, there was very little of his journey remaining. On December 5, Merton left Ceylon for two days in Singapore, and then arrived in Bangkok on December 7 for the conference of Eastern and Western monastics. On December 10, Merton delivered his speech, “Marxism and Monastic Perspectives;” and although his main point had to do with the monk as a living critique of contemporary culture, he made many references to his Asian reading and experiences, quoting from his conversations with the Dalai Lama, Chogyam Trungpa, and others. Above all, Merton stressed that monks of both East and West were seeking a spiritual realization that would carry them passed the boundaries of sacred and secular, monk and lay person, Christian and Buddhist. He asserted his belief that,

\(^2\) Other Side of the Mountain, 323.
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, because they have gone, from the natural point of view, so much deeper into this than we have. The combination of the natural techniques and the graces and the other things that have been manifested in Asia and the Christian liberty of the gospel should bring us all at last to that full and transcendent liberty which is beyond mere cultural differences and mere externals—and mere this or that.  

A few hours later, Thomas Merton stepped out of his shower and grabbed a faulty electric fan, dying from the electrocution of 220 volts. His body was flown back to Gethsemani on a military plane, where he was buried alongside other monks on the west side of the monastery. His Asian trajectory brought him full circle, back to his Gethsemani home. But his spirit remained in Asia, at Kanchenjunga, where “the sun sets in the East!”

83 *Asian Journal*, 343.
Conclusion:  
"The Strong Bridge"

Thomas Merton remains an icon for the twentieth century religious spirit.

According to Anthony Padovano,

There are people in every era who manage somehow to represent its character. It is not always the uniqueness of their thought or the singularity of their accomplishments that does this. They become symbols because they feel and personalize the forces of an age more deeply and comprehensively than others. Thomas Merton is such a man.¹

In a century that paradoxically saw the coming of an increasingly global culture and at the same time witnessed devastating conflicts along social, political, and religious lines, Merton stands as one who embodied division and difference within himself and brought them to resolution. He did so not by overcoming the contradictions of his life, but by embracing them. Merton sought to go beyond the differences of the world’s religious traditions on an experiential level, which does not demand compromising the integrity of the individual religion. To do so, he believed, would not only bring himself to a spiritual awakening, it could open doors for peace and solidarity among people of various cultures. According to the Dalai Lama, “Merton acted as a strong bridge between our two very different religious traditions. Above all, he helped me to realise that every major religion, with its teaching of love and compassion, can produce good human

¹ Padovano, xv.
beings.”

Central to Merton’s Asian trajectory was a faith that the world’s religions had much to teach each other on a practical level, what William Shannon called “the importance of experience as a locus for theological reflection.” Merton felt that after the great Spanish mystics, Christians had truly ceased to explore the great depths of spiritual experience promised by St. John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila and others. Christianity remained bound up in doctrines, dogmas and intellectual affirmations. But in the Asian religions, Merton saw a great emphasis on moving beyond the realm of religious theory into deep enlightenment experience. “How powerless most Christian writing and teaching is today, in this respect!” Merton wrote in 1964; “How lost, how far off the real target! The words are there, the doctrine is there, but the realization is absent!”

Merton believed that Asian religion, especially Zen Buddhism, provided what was missing from Christianity for so long. By rediscovering it, he did not think he was injecting something new into the Christian tradition. Rather, he was reclaiming something fundamental to Christianity that had been forgotten. He confessed a faith that,

Zen is beyond metaphysics and so, as far as I am concerned, is the kind of Christian experience that seems to me most relevant, and which is found in Eckhart and the Rhenish mystics and all the mystics for that matter. . . . It seems to me the Cross says just as much about Zen, or as little, as the serene face of the Buddha.

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2 Tenzin Gyatso, 189-190.
3 Shannon, 279.
4 Dancing in the Waters of Life, 130-131.
Merton sought to go beyond merely studying the Asian traditions on an intellectual level, as a kind of Christian "supplement." He believed that he must fully embrace the spiritual practices offered by all the world's religions, to the point of identifying himself as one of their followers. Yet, this did not contradict his identity as a Catholic:

I cannot be a Catholic unless it is made quite clear to the world that I am a Jew and a Moslem, unless I am execrated as a Buddhist and denounced for having undermined all that this comfortable and social Catholicism stands for.\(^6\)

Here Merton engaged in what Christopher Nugent called the "archaeology of Catholicity."\(^7\) Merton's deliberate identification with other religions did not diminish his faith as a Catholic; it enhanced it, to the extent that "catholic" is understood as "universal." By exploring the ancient roots of both Eastern and Western religion, Merton was living out what this holistic idea truly implied. Merton made this clear, and foreshadowed the language of the Second Vatican Council, in the original ending to his 1962 essay, "Christian Culture Needs Oriental Wisdom," where he wrote,

At least this much can be said: the "universality" and "catholicity" which are essential to the Church necessarily imply \textit{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.\(^8\)

In this the final paradox of Merton's life emerges. His Asian trajectory did not take him farther away from his Christian faith. In many ways, Asia took him deeper into

\(^6\) Ibid., 78-79.

\(^7\) Nugent, 265.

\(^8\) This essay originally appeared in the May 1962 issue of \textit{Catholic World}, and is quoted in Shannon, 283.
his own Catholic tradition. This paradox seemed to be the revelation of Kanchenjunga
and Polonnaruwa: that his role as a Christian monk was not a burden to his search—it
was the answer. As Amiya Chakravarty, editor of Merton's *Asian Journal*, pointed out:

The monk of Gethsemani did not desert his own indwelling heights when
he climbed to meet the Dalai Lama in the Himalayan mountains. In a way
his discipleship to Jesus grew as he gained the perspective of divine faith;
in Asia, he felt the need to return to his monastery in Kentucky with newly
affirmed experiences.\(^9\)

Christopher Nugent's question, *"Quo vadis Tome?"*—“Where are you going,
Thomas?” cannot be answered in any singular way. The nature of paradox, perhaps the
very nature of what Padovano called “the human journey,” is that it teaches a lesson
because of its very contradictions and seeming conflicts. As John Wu told Merton in a
1963 letter, “It was Goethe who said that the ideal thinker is one who can divide so
deeply that he can unite, and unite so deeply that he can divide. That’s you.”\(^10\) Thomas
Merton cannot be viewed as simply a monk or poet, a celibate or lover, a Christian or
Buddhist. Merton discovered that the truth of the journey, the truth of himself, was that
there are two sides to every mountain. As his journal revealed,

The full beauty of the mountain is not seen until you too consent to the
impossible paradox: it is and is not. When nothing more needs to be said,
the smoke of ideas clears, the mountain is SEEN.\(^11\)

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\(^9\) *Asian Journal*, viii.

\(^10\) Wu to Merton, March 31, 1963 (Merton Center).

\(^11\) *Other Side of the Mountain*, 286.
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