

"Those Going Among the Saracens and Other Nonbelievers": Thomas Merton and Franciscan Interreligious Dialogue¹

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Introduction

Hidden within Thomas Merton's 1966 text, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, stands a telling passage only seven paragraphs long that presents perhaps the most succinct expression of his model and inspiration for interreligious dialogue. He begins this section with a quote from Eulogius, an Orthodox Metropolitan, and notes its significance in his life.

'Men like the Seraphic Saint, Saint Francis of Assisi, and many others, accomplished in their life the union of the churches.' This profound and simple statement...gives the key to ecumenism for monks, and indeed for everyone.²

In the last two decades much has been published regarding the latent, and at times more explicit, Franciscan influence on the writing and spirituality of Merton.³ However, exploration of the particular way the Franciscan charism affected, and perhaps directed, Merton's approach to interreligious dialogue has been overlooked. What's more striking is the similarity in methodology and praxis utilized by both Francis of Assisi and Merton. It is clear from the quote above and elsewhere in his writings that Merton held Francis as a paragon of interreligious dialogue in the forefront of his interreligious and ecumenical consciousness.

Having applied, been initially accepted and later rejected by the Order of Friars Minor (Franciscan friars) in 1939,⁴ Franciscan spirituality influenced Merton significantly during a formative period in his life. Merton's admiration for, and desire to emulate, Francis is a reoccurring theme in his writing. As we also will see, Merton adopted Francis's approach to interreligious dialogue and made it his own.

This paper will explore the connection between the nearly eight-hundred-year-old Franciscan tradition of peaceful interre-

ligious dialogue and its impact on the twentieth-century monk, while illuminating the present-day implications for hearing "the voice of the stranger." The methodological approach for this study will include a threefold examination of Francis's, Merton's and our experiences as they relate to interreligious dialogue.

First, we will look at Franciscan interreligious dialogue. Since every interreligious experience is rooted in a particular historical setting, I will present a brief historical context. Without an appreciation for the ecclesiastical and socio-political world serving as a backdrop to the interreligious experience of Francis, the full significance of hearing the other is lost. Next, I will present a summary of Francis's interreligious encounter with the Sultan in Egypt. The most famous of Francis's interreligious encounters, this will serve as a case study. From our examination of Francis's encounter with the Sultan, I will suggest three characteristics that arise from our methodological reflection that will allow us to locate the operative hermeneutic in the work of Francis.

Second, I will use the three characteristics of Franciscan interreligious dialogue identified in the first section as a lens through which to examine the interreligious work of Merton. As we will see, Merton's interreligious encounters bear a strong resemblance to Francis's meeting with the Sultan. Through his own words and action, Merton expresses the Franciscan spirit of peaceful and authentic encounter with the "stranger."

In closing, I will suggest considering our present time as not unlike those of Francis and Merton, examine the contemporary relevance of the model for interreligious dialogue that Francis and Merton leave us, and show how an adoption of the method of Francis and Merton might open new pathways for interreligious dialogue today. As twenty-first century citizens, we are inheritors of a rich tradition shaped by these two prophetic voices that continue to speak with great pertinence today. We are better able to hear the voice of the stranger in our own day aided by their wisdom and guided by their example.

Franciscan Interreligious Dialogue

Historical Context

In April of 1213 Pope Innocent III released his encyclical *Quia maior*, which introduced his plan for the fifth crusade (1217-1221). The second crusade to be called by Innocent III – his first was from

1202-1204—was seen as the final step in recapturing the Holy Land and was doubtless the talk of the town. The two hallmarks of *Quia maior* were the general call for everyone in Christendom to support the effort and the encyclical's great detail concerning the manner in which this fifth crusade was to be launched. Whereas the preceding crusades had been launched largely due to the activity of the emperors, the fifth crusade was completely an effort of Innocent III.

In addition to the unique nature of the crusade being called by the pope, its announcement through a papal encyclical presented a new theological dimension to understanding the purpose of the crusade. No longer was a crusade to be interpreted, however superficially, as an act of civil authority or aggression. Innocent III's encyclical placed the papacy and all of Christendom behind the effort.⁵ Innocent III set the plan in motion, but it would be ordinary Christians who would pay the bill, staff the army and pray for military success. Further developing a theological purpose for the crusade, he declared that this effort was part of God's divine command.⁶ Horrifically, this view was rooted in Innocent III's understanding that the Gospel call to 'love one's neighbor' compelled Christians to liberate their fellow Christians in the Holy Land, "who are being held in the hands of the perfidious Saracens in dire imprisonment and are weighed down by the yoke of most severe slavery."⁷ The operative hermeneutic of the time was one of fear, relegating Muslims to otherness. By excluding Muslim men and women from the Christian obligation to 'love one's neighbor,' they were dehumanized.

This attitude of the dehumanized-other had been developing for nearly a century by this time. Innocent III was greatly influenced by the theology and preaching of Bernard of Clairvaux who believed that while God could easily liberate the Holy Land from the Saracens, God had provided an opportunity for all Christians to prove themselves faithful to Christ by becoming involved in the crusade.⁸ Not only was the defeat of the Holy Land Muslims a matter of military strategy, it was also viewed as God's will. Evidence of similar disdain for Muslims exists among chroniclers of the time such as in the writing of Bishop Jacques de Vitry, who, in addition to providing a personal account of Francis's encounter with the Sultan, describes the Saracens as "sacrilegious disciples of [the] Antichrist."⁹ The general attitude of the time was one of great hostility toward Muslims.

Interreligious Dialogue

Revolutionary in lifestyle and ambitious in scope, Francis of Assisi's first rule of life for the Order of Friars Minor, tentatively approved by Pope Innocent III, included a chapter dedicated solely to the way the friars were to engage non-Christians. Francis's desire, articulated in summary at the onset of his Rule, was simply to live the Gospel of Jesus Christ.¹⁰ It is clear that the experience of Gospel living informed the lens through which Francis viewed his world. Beginning with the famous encounter with the leper, when Francis himself recognized his own need for conversion, and continuing throughout his earthly journey, Francis set an example for Christian engagement with "the stranger." Nowhere in his writings is this example more clear than in the chapter of his way of life that instructs his followers on how to encounter the strangers of his time: the Muslims and other nonbelievers.

Chapter sixteen of the *Regula non bullata*, titled "Those who are going among the Saracens and other nonbelievers,"¹¹ resulted from the experience of Francis and his companions in their peaceful mission among the Saracens in 1219.¹² At a time when the Christian world was rallying support for and contributing to the efforts of the fifth crusade, Francis – initially motivated by zeal for the gift of martyrdom, and later inspired to promote peaceful resolution to war¹³—traveled to Egypt with a few of his companions to preach to the Muslims and oppose the crusade.¹⁴

His journey began in 1212, prior to the formal launching of the fifth crusade. Strongly moved to preach the message of the Gospel to the Muslims, Francis set out on a journey to Syria and shortly afterward to Morocco, but his mission was cut short due to travel complications and poor health.¹⁵ Francis would eventually succeed with his plan and reach Damietta. Upon arriving, having traveled to Egypt with Italian crusaders, Francis saw the devastation of battle and the inevitable defeat that lay ahead for the Christian army. While staying in the crusaders' camp, Francis challenged the crusaders to consider whether their engagement in battle with the Saracens was really the will of God. Francis's most famous biographer, Thomas of Celano, suggests that the crusaders were warned by the Saint that their losses in battle were the result of their disregard for the true will of God, that of peacemaking and not war. Francis's espousal of nonviolence and his efforts to dissuade violent action by the crusaders speaks volumes of the

countercultural position embraced by this man from Assisi. According to scholar Jan Hoeberichts, "Francis occupied an exceptional position among his contemporaries with regard to the crusades and the attitude they expressed towards the Saracens and Islam. This is all the more striking since virtually the entire church from high to low was committed to the crusade."¹⁶ Francis DeBeer suggests that, "Francis's attitude appears strange, to say the least."¹⁷ Certainly Francis's opposition to the direction the Church and the political world was moving was seen as odd, considering his loyalty to the Church and its leadership. However, his commitment to following the Gospel trumped even his steadfast fidelity to the Church.

Francis, having preached to the crusaders, left the protection of their camp to go among the Saracens. His vision of universal fraternity and connectedness as children of God allowed him to approach the Saracens, viewing them not as "enemy" but as friend, remembering the call of Christ to "love your enemies and do good to those who hate you."¹⁸ Jesus' command to love was for Francis a central truth, and by radically adhering to this truth, he was an example to his followers of what it meant to follow Christ by living as a *frater minor* (lesser brother). Becoming vulnerable to the point of risking his very life, Francis humbly lived as a brother to all.

Along with his companion, Brother Illuminato, Francis crossed the Saracen threshold and requested permission to see the Sultan. They were at first denied but after persistent request, they were siezed and beaten and eventually taken to Sultan Malek-al-Kamil. The Saracens most likely thought Francis and Illuminato were negotiators sent by the crusaders in response to the Sultan's earlier attempt at calling a truce.¹⁹ However, Francis had come on his own with his own agenda: a message of peace.

This message included the preaching of the Gospel to the Sultan in a way that was respectful and inviting. Francis never insulted or denigrated Islam—as his contemporaries were known to do—but his disarming approach created an atmosphere of conversation and dialogue. It is believed that Francis and his companion spent up to three weeks with the Sultan and his advisors discussing religious matters and sharing their experiences.

Malek al-Kamil was known to be a kind and just man in his own right. His attentive listening to Francis, and graciously allowing a Christian to preach in his court, demonstrates the openness to dialogue the Sultan had toward a humble man who posed no

threat and sought peace amid violence. Jacques de Vitry chronicles this experience of openness as he notes,

When the cruel beast [the Sultan] saw Francis, he recognized him as a man of God and changed his attitude into one of gentleness, and for some days he listened very attentively to Francis as he preached the faith of Christ to him and his followers...At the end he said to Francis: 'Pray for me, that God may deign to reveal to me the law and the faith which is more pleasing to Him.'²⁰

When the time had come for Francis and his companion to depart from the Sultan's court, Malek al-Kamil showed his admiration and affection for the *poverello* in a personal request for a prayer. As Kathleen Warren notes, the Sultan was sincerely moved by Francis's goodness and sincere desire to promote peace and truth among the Christians and Saracens.²¹ The Sultan was surely aware that Francis saw the Muslims as children of God and his brothers and sisters. Francis DeBeer identifies this encounter, signified by the Sultan's prayer request, as a moment when Francis transcended "the cloister of Christianity," and invites the Sultan to likewise transcend his own boundaries.²² While the Sultan is not yet ready to make that move, it was clear that a seed was planted and, "a dialogue was initiated which transcended all quarrels, discussions, and arguments. And no one could go any further: neither Francis nor the Sultan. One must wait for the hour of the Spirit. And the suspense has lasted for centuries."²³

Methodological Reflection

A question naturally arises concerning the manner with which Francis was able to engage in such peaceful dialogue: how did Francis do this? To appreciate the significance of Francis's encounter with the Sultan, and his entire interreligious attitude, we must first explore his method and primary hermeneutic. In the interest of brevity, I suggest three factors that operate concurrently throughout Francis's interreligious encounter with the Sultan that form the foundation of what we might today call "Franciscan interreligious dialogue." These factors are:

1. The radical adhering to the evangelical value of solidarity.

2. The preferential option for the discovery of common faith.
3. The position of minority rooted in a commitment to lifelong conversion.

While the person and charisma of Francis of Assisi can not be limited to these three attributes, by naming them we might establish a starting point from which an analysis of Franciscan interreligious dialogue can advance.

The Franciscan movement, rooted in Gospel living, has always collectively embodied the notion of fraternity. The quintessential expression of this principle is found in Francis's most famous writing, "The Canticle of the Creatures."²⁴ Here Francis expresses his radical worldview of the interconnectedness of all creation stemming from the One, Loving God. While this Franciscan expression has often been diluted to a caricature of the *poverello* and a birdbath, its most honest reading suggests an intense appreciation for the gift of life and existence shared by all. Beyond the poetry of "The Canticle of the Creatures," this view is found in the living example of Christian charity of Francis encountering the Sultan. From prayer to praxis, Francis saw himself as another blessed creature of God, in many ways no different from the Sultan and the Saracens. In understanding himself as brother to all, Francis transcended the boundary of "us" versus "them" categories and embraced the marginalized and abused outcasts of his day.

There is a strong temptation to romanticize this encounter and neglect the sacrifice and vulnerability of Francis. His decision to welcome the Sultan and other Muslims into his life as brothers and sisters was in stark contrast to the policies and practice of the Church and the social order of his day. In choosing to stand in solidarity beside the Muslims, he moved outside the comfort of inclusion to the live at the margins and became better able to "hear the voice of the stranger," because he had become a stranger to his own culture.

Our second characteristic, the preferential option for the discovery of common faith, is found explicitly in Francis's Rule of life. The recent work of Franciscan scholar Laurent Gallant has shed a great deal of light on the true meaning of Francis's 16th Chapter of the *Regula non bullata*. The text has always been interpreted to have an ecumenical tone and understood as the product of the experiences of Francis and his brothers' mission among the Saracens.²⁵ Take for

example verse 6 concerning how the friars are to live spiritually among the Saracens, "One way is not to engage in arguments or disputes, but to be subject to every human creature for God's sake and to acknowledge that they are Christians."²⁶ The significance of Gallant's study is the extent to which Francis's directive expresses a preferential option for the discovery of common faith. While previously acknowledged as explicit instructions for his followers to encounter the stranger, the method of dialogue seems to have been skewed over time.

The traditional translation, influenced by the proliferation of copied manuscripts that include the addition of the word *in* (*ut credant in Deum omnipotentem*),²⁷ has been understood as instructing evangelization efforts to promote Christianity among the Muslims. This verse has been read as,

The other way is to announce the Word of God, when they see it pleases the Lord, in order that [unbelievers] may believe *in* *almighty God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the Creator of all...*²⁸

This reading suggests an exclusively Christian approach toward encountering the other. Gallant believes that this is a copyist error that dates back to at least the seventeenth century and has reoccurred in every major edition since. Gallant posits that this error was easily overlooked and replicated because of the possible influence of and resemblance to the Christian Creed.²⁹ The familiarity of the copyists with the Christian Creed (which begins *Credo in Deum omnipotentem*) would naturally lead them to "correct" the written Rule of Francis by inserting the word "in." Subsequently, this copying error has led to the diminishing of the radical example of interreligious dialogue over several centuries.

Serious textual criticism of the manuscript tradition has only been explored since the middle of the twentieth century, beginning with the work of scholars like David Flood and Thadee Matura.³⁰ Gallant's re-visiting of the *Regula non bullata* text is the most recent contribution to this field. His reading of the text suggests a more radical expression of Francis's desire that the friars meet the stranger on common ground. Gallant asserts that Francis's instruction in verse 7 be read as follows:

...in order that they may believe

- (1) that almighty God [in which they already believe] is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
 (2) that the Creator of all [in which they also already believe] is the Son [i.e., God's creating Word], who is Redeemer and Savior.³¹

This interpretation suggests an effort to unite the Muslim and Christian through doctrinal agreement as a starting point. The establishment of common doctrinal ground is the first step of a two-tiered enterprise. The second step is the explication of the Christian conception of "Almighty God" as Trinity, and that "Creator of All" includes the Son. This second step is only possible built on the foundation of the preferential option for the discovery of common faith. Francis's goal here was not to preach exclusive Christian dogma to the Muslims and other nonbelievers. Rather, by discovering articles of faith shared by both groups, a peaceful conversation can begin rooted in solidarity. Gallant also observes that historians and theologians of the Franciscan movement often emphasize Francis's "acute conscience of the presence of God and of the working of the Spirit in all human beings. This shared Christian-Muslim belief in ['Almighty God'] and 'Creator of all' would certainly be an example of common faith."³²

In many ways our third category suggests the most original and classically "Franciscan" of the three characteristics found in Francis's encounter and his vision which his brothers were to follow. The position of minority rooted in a commitment to lifelong conversion is also the most organic and dynamic of the three, which further complicates a systematic analysis of his interreligious approach.

Francis held that in order to live a truly authentic form of Gospel life, one was never to place one's self above another. In Chapter 6 of the *Regula non bullata* Francis remarks that this attitude is to be held even among the brothers: "Let no one be called 'prior,' but let everyone in general be called a lesser brother. Let one wash the feet of the other."³³

Minority is not synonymous with passivity. Rather, Francis viewed a life as minor when one courageously stood against the power differentials that divided the people of his day. A product of his time, Francis was all too familiar with the medieval authoritarian structures that made up his world. Even with the rise of the merchant class in the 13th century, Francis could not escape the

social pressure to achieve some sort of noble status. As a young man both he and his father desired that Francis become a successful knight. It was not until the beginning of his conversion in 1206 that Francis began seeking a life of minority. Thomas of Celano describes his outward change in appearance, "He who once enjoyed wearing scarlet robes now traveled about half-clothed."³⁴

The humility that naturally accompanies such a state of living helped to create a non-threatening space for dialogue. If one is not interested in winning, being correct or ranking above another, then he or she is not a threat. The Sultan had nothing to fear of Francis. The way Francis lived his life demonstrated his willingness to be subordinate to every other person for God's sake. Francis recognized himself as a sinner and therefore knew of his own need for continued conversion, garnering a great deal of patience for those who he encountered. While considering what was so non-threatening about Francis, Franciscan theologian Kenneth Himes said, "It was the fact that no one ever had to fear Francis. Francis never sought to dominate, manipulate, or coerce anyone. No person ever looked into the eyes of Francis and saw a lust for power or control."³⁵

In many ways these characteristics of "Franciscan interreligious dialogue" show but a snapshot of the complex and inspiring charism they aim to convey. It is my hope that by articulating these factors, we might better appreciate the Franciscan spirit that so touched and influenced Thomas Merton.

Thomas Merton's Interreligious Dialogue

Ascertaining the explicit moments of Franciscan influence in Merton is a nebulous task. The truth is, human beings are influenced and informed by many people, principles, ideas, places and events, which blend together to form an eclectic composite. However, even as complex and unique individuals, we can still trace significant factors of our intellectual, emotional and spiritual formation. Such is the case with Thomas Merton and his Franciscan influence. In a letter to a staff writer at the Catholic periodical *Magnificat* dated February 12, 1966, Merton closes with this admission, "[I] will always feel that I am still in some secret way a son of St. Francis. There is no saint in the Church whom I admire more than St. Francis."³⁶

The occurrence of Merton's frequent and direct references to Francis of Assisi throughout his written corpus alone testifies to

the conscious reflection of this twentieth-century monk on the medieval saint. However, what's more is the strong resemblance of Merton's implicit worldview to that of Francis. While their historic contexts are separated by centuries, their core principles remain powerfully parallel. Simply put, the lifelong significance of Francis and Franciscan spirituality for Merton helped shape the way he viewed those of other faiths. Similarly, we see this in other areas of his life. His prayer and poetry often maintain a style that reflects Franciscan views of Christology, environmental theology, Trinity, human relationship, poverty, and humility, to name a few. It seems appropriate to name Franciscan interreligious dialogue as a major source of Merton's own interreligious approach. Here we will explore some of the interreligious work of Merton through the lens of Franciscan interreligious dialogue as outlined above. It is my hope that after careful consideration we can affirm the resemblance to and likely influence of Franciscan interreligious dialogue in Merton's life and work.

The Radical Adhering to the Evangelical Value of Solidarity

For Francis, fraternity summarized his radical living in solidarity with all of humanity and creation. Abstracted in the vernacular poetry and prayer of the "Canticle of the Creatures" and exemplified in the encounter with the Sultan, Francis's starting point rested in the faithful recognition of his relationship to the other. Merton shares a similar starting point for his interreligious encounters. Best articulated as openness and eremitical prayerfulness, Merton's radical adherence to solidarity with the 'other' stood as a foundation for his interreligious work.

Authentic Gospel living is not based on building up the toleration of and emphasis on individuality, as was the emerging tendency at the dawn of postmodernity toward the end of Merton's life. Rather, Merton asserted the need for unity and end of division, envisioning a community like the Acts of the Apostles describes, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers...all who believed were together and had all things in common."³⁷ It is this ardent faithfulness to the Gospel that we can describe as radical adherence to solidarity.

If we look at Merton's essay, "A Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra Concerning Giants,"³⁸ we see an assertive critique of those unwill-

ing to stand in solidarity with the rest of humanity. He names the affluent antagonist the "tourist." Merton opines,

He cannot possibly realize that the stranger has something very valuable, something irreplaceable to give him...the tourist lacks nothing except brothers. For him these do not exist. The tourist never meets anyone, never encounters anyone, never finds the brother in the stranger.³⁹

While this is an explicit polemic aimed at the United States, it is perhaps an implicit reference to when the young Merton was something of a globetrotter himself and much less open to the 'stranger.' Rooted in his own experience, Merton can empathize with – and in turn criticize – the "tourist," challenging the Western citizen to growth in the evangelical life.

Merton's own spiritual maturation led to his identification with the rest of humanity. Seeking a life of solidarity in which he might live in a way other than the "society of isolated individuals," Merton recognized that Christians are called to build communities of persons and not collections of individuals.⁴⁰ Concerning the world of isolated individuals, Merton explains, "[that] they do not know that reality is to be sought not in division but in unity, for we are 'members one of another'...the [one] who lives in division is not a person but only an 'individual.'"⁴¹

Solidarity appears as a recurring theme throughout Merton's work. For Merton, solidarity is seen as openness to both God and humanity. William Apel describes this feature as one of the greatest lessons we can gather from Merton's life.⁴² What's more, placing Merton's response of solidarity within the context of his time we see, as Allan McMillan put so well, "Merton had insights not typical to the times in which they occurred and his learning had an experiential base."⁴³ McMillan goes on to suggest "seven lessons" learned by Merton during his interreligious encounters. The fourth such lesson is that of solidarity.

That one cannot understand the depth of feelings and faith experiences of another person unless one has experienced and wrestled with them in his or her own life. This compassion, this willingness to 'suffer with' *the other* opens us to the appreciation of the greatness of how other people respond to the Divine call.⁴⁴

This position of solidarity, while not necessarily present in the behavior and writing of the young Merton, is a recurring characteristic of the later Merton's interreligious *modus operandi*.

Merton's interreligious efforts were made at a time marked by great suspicion of outsiders. Long before the Second Vatican Council's "Declaration on Religious Freedom" (*Dignitatis Humanæ*) and the "Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" (*Gaudium et Spes*), Merton chose to stand with the "stranger" and to engage the "other," setting himself outside the popular limit of any interreligious encounter endorsed by his peers, culture and Church. His decision to embrace a position of solidarity risked the rejection of some, to be open to all. Merton knew his own identity was inescapably intertwined with the rest of humanity. He says in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, "I must look for my identity, somehow, not only in God but in other men [and women]. I will never be able to find myself if I isolate myself from the rest of [hu]mankind as if I were a different kind of being."⁴⁵

The Preferential Option for the Discovery of Common Faith

With a worldview shaped by the desire to form a community of persons as opposed to a collection of individuals, Merton moves from a foundation of solidarity with the "other" or "stranger" to engage in interreligious encounters. At this point the preferential option for the discovery of common faith emerges with force. Returning to *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, we observe Merton's explicit expression of this characteristic.

The more I am able to affirm others, to say 'yes' to them in myself, by discovering them in myself and myself in them, the more real I am. I am fully real if my own heart says *yes* to *everyone*. I will be a better Catholic, not if I can *refute* every shade of Protestantism [or other faiths], but if I can affirm the truth in it and still go further.⁴⁶

Merton, like Francis, recognized that true dialogue could never be based on proselytizing or evangelization in the narrow sense. Both Francis and Merton reflect the truth that God dwells in each person, and each saw the need to affirm that truth in the "stranger" as paramount to fruitful dialogue.

Merton's relationship with D.T. Suzuki illustrates this well. In a journal entry dated April 11, 1959, Merton reflects on the experience of a spiritual encounter with Suzuki.

Thus if I tried badly and bluntly to 'convert' Suzuki, that is, make him 'accept' formulas regarding the faith that are accepted by the average American Catholic, I would, in fact, not 'convert' him at all, but simply confuse and (in a cultural sense) degrade him. Not that he does not need the Sacraments, etc. but that is an entirely different question. On the contrary – if I can meet him on a common ground of spiritual Truth, where we share a real and deep experience of God, and where we know in humility our own deepest selves...then I certainly think Christ would be present and glorified in both of us and this would lead to a *conversion of us both*.⁴⁷

Those who knew Merton, such as Amuya Chakravarty, Glenn Hinson, D.T. Suzuki and John Wu, have commented on his ability to engage with members of other faiths through his openness to their experience. Merton expresses in *Mystics and Zen Masters* that the true meaning of "catholic" includes "a readiness to enter into dialogue with all that is pure, wise, profound and humane in every kind of culture."⁴⁸ He spends much of this volume drawing connections between Christianity and Zen Buddhism, which remains one of his most explicit examples of the preferential option for the discovery of common faith.

Mystics and Zen Masters chronicles Merton's step-by-step exploration of eastern spirituality through the lens of common faith. His discovery of existential similarities among Christians and "the stranger" has led me to lightheartedly rename this volume "A Treatise on Interreligious Parallels." Merton cannot help but identify the ways that Zen Buddhism corresponds to Christianity. He compares the tea ceremony with Franciscan simplicity;⁴⁹ "Buddhahood" with passages in 1 Corinthians;⁵⁰ the Zen notion that "zero equals infinity" with John of the Cross's "*todo y nada*" (all and nothing);⁵¹ the tradition of Kung Tzu with the tradition of St. Benedict;⁵² the wisdom of the *Tao Te Ching* as resembling the Sermon on the Mount;⁵³ the philosophical insights of *Hsiao Ching* reflecting Christian Neoplatonic thought like that of Pseudo-Dionysius;⁵⁴ and so on. Following Francis, Merton's *modus operandi* is that of a preference for the discovery of that which unites humanity in God, or as Merton often described it, "The Hidden Ground of love."

This ongoing quest to identify with those of other beliefs through the discovery of common faith led Merton to return to the polemical metaphor of "the Tourist." Like Merton's own growth

from naïve Catholic convert to interreligious ambassador *par excellence*, he calls the “tourists” of the world to find themselves in the “other” and “strangers” who are most unlike them. In doing so, they will have made a successful pilgrimage. Merton says, “It was in this spirit that St. Francis went on pilgrimage—on his own original kind of ‘crusade’—to meet the [Sultan]; as a messenger not of violence, not of arrogant power, but of humility, simplicity and love.”⁵⁵ Merton refers us to his pilgrimage guide and model with the hope that we too emulate St. Francis.

The Position of Minority Rooted in a Commitment to Lifelong Conversion

Finally, we examine how Merton emulated Francis’s position of minority rooted in a commitment to lifelong conversion. Lawrence Cunningham suggests that Merton’s most radical conversion, or “series of conversions,” occurred through the 1950s and reached a climax with the 1966 publication of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.⁵⁶ Any reader of his life work will notice the gradual shift in emphasis from internal reflection to include external action. One struggle that remained constant for Merton was discerning the relationship between his vocation to the eremitical life and the call to engage the world. Eventually, and most explicitly, the nexus of monk and prophet became manifest in his strong interreligious interest and peace activism of the 1960s.

Like Francis, who was something of a “playboy” in his youth, Merton lived a rather pleasure-seeking life during his early years. Outlined in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton’s initial conversion to Catholic Christianity took shape in a manner much like Francis’s own. A clear liminal experience marked the beginning of the conversions of Francis and Merton. I say beginning because both men saw this process as an ongoing experience of reorientation upward toward God and outward toward the rest of humanity after the pattern of the Gospel. As Cunningham noted, this experience of conversion will continue to shape Merton’s life and lead him toward the “stranger” through interreligious dialogue.

Those familiar with Merton’s life and work know of his struggles with ego. In a strikingly honest passage in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton prays, “Give me humility in which alone is rest, and deliver me from pride which is the heaviest of burdens. And possess my whole heart and soul with the simplicity of love.”⁵⁷ The almost instant fame resulting from the best-selling success of

his autobiography early in his religious life, and his subsequent battle with egotism, is an example of his struggle to find balance, humility and vocational clarity. Merton discovered the answer to his dilemma in the full embrace of his vocation to solitude.

Contemplation is many things for Merton. Much of his writing expresses his struggle to specifically identify its meaning. Merton describes contemplation as that which is beyond all other forms of experience, as that which reaches out to the inexpressible God, as an awareness of the gift of our contingent existence and finally as a response to God.⁵⁸ Contemplation is understood in varied ways, but every perspective views contemplation as an ongoing process. To experience contemplation, Merton tells us that continual divesting of our ego, self-centeredness and sinfulness is necessary to recognize that in our true poverty we are free to more perfectly follow Christ. This experience of humility beckons an awareness of the poverty and need of those around us. In turn, such a process of ongoing conversion, or contemplation, leads one upward to God and outward toward the rest of humanity.

Francis's mendicant life of minority is reflected in Merton's monastic life of contemplation. Minority encompasses those aspects of the *vita evangelica*, poverty, chastity and obedience, common to religious life. It is also a conscious renunciation of power and status. It requires voluntary subordination of one's self for the sake of solidarity and communion with the "other." Reaching the state of minority is a process of ongoing conversion. Another way to appreciate Francis's minority and Merton's contemplation is to consider these terms as describing two sides of the same coin. Francis's minority most accurately describes the manifestation of the process of ongoing conversion whereas Merton's contemplation reflexively embodies the action (or lack thereof) of the process.

The dynamic result of this ongoing process of conversion is the discovery of one's true identity. In order to hear the "voice of the stranger" and authentically encounter the "other," I must know who I am. An oft-cited fruit of Merton's life of contemplation is the emergence of his conceptualization of "the true self." Merton finds the "true self" in God's image of him rather than his own skewed perception. To find who he is, Merton must find who God is.

In order to know and love God as He is, we must have God dwelling in us in a new way, not only in His creative power but in His mercy, not only in his greatness but in His littleness, by

which He empties Himself and comes down to us to be empty in our emptiness, and so fill us in His fullness.⁵⁹

The act of God's kenosis that Merton describes serves as a model for his own life. It is the Incarnation that articulates God's choice to live out a position of minority among us. Discovering and following this example, we live as our true selves. Through contemplation and openness to ongoing conversion from the false self, we discover who we really are in who God really is. To live the life of the Gospel is to live a life of self-emptying service, finding God in our emptiness and poverty. From that position of minority, we, like Merton and Francis, are able to authentically encounter "the stranger" to hear his or her voice.

Hearing the Voice of the Stranger Today

We live in a world of strangers. While technology, science, travel and other forms of discovery have shaped our contemporary culture to appear unlike Francis's 13th century Italy and even Merton's early 20th century United States, some aspects of life transcend the boundaries of geography and time. Unfortunately, we, like Francis and Merton, find ourselves in a world of broken humanity. The ongoing struggles of the human condition call us to help advance reconciliation and dialogue.

We are challenged daily by threats of violence, war, unrest, discrimination, inequality, racism and other forms of injustice. In an age marked by the overt presence religious pluralism and secular governments, openness to other people, cultures and religious expressions is surprisingly sparse. It is even difficult to recognize the faux form of acceptance Merton decries as a "society of isolated individuals," when violence erupts in the form of genocide in Sudan, authoritarian oppression and coercion in China, political unrest in Kenya, terrorist attacks in Britain and Spain, school shootings in the United States, utter chaos in Iraq, turbulence in Afghanistan and in manifold manifestations in every corner of the globe. As citizens of a postmodern, globalized, twenty-first-century world, we have much to learn about seeing, hearing and loving the "stranger."

I believe we can benefit greatly from Franciscan interreligious dialogue and Merton's model of and contribution to that tradition. Following the lead of Francis and Merton, and learning from their examples, we might move from living in a society of isolated indi-

viduals and strangers to living an expression of God's Kingdom with our sisters and brothers.

Models for Interreligious Dialogue

Both Francis and Merton speak a prophetic word to us today. Francis maps the path to hear the voice of the stranger, while Merton demonstrates that the path can still be traveled today. Both exemplars of interreligious dialogue embody the three characteristics outlined above, and our desire to emulate their model of interreligious dialogue must lead us to similar embodiment of these characteristics. If we hope to effect change in our world, we must first be willing to change ourselves.

The change required of us is essential to implementing Franciscan interreligious dialogue. This change is not a matter of exterior practice, political affiliation, social networking, branding or the use of fashionable and politically correct buzzwords. The change demanded of us is internal, foundational and spiritual. It is the adoption of a new way to live our lives; it is the willingness to rethink our worldview; and it is re-visioning the way we see God in our world and in one another.

The new way to live our lives is found in the embodiment of the position of minority rooted in a commitment to lifelong conversion. When capital gain and power over others are the measures of success, voluntarily embracing minority is indeed a novel way to live. Francis demonstrates that authentic Christian living is rooted in becoming subject to our brothers and sisters, and by doing so, avoid the pitfalls of power and unjust authority. Merton teaches us that it is God who models the greatest example of humility through the Incarnation, and it is through contemplation that we come to see this more clearly. The lives of Francis and Merton show us that this is not an overnight process. Rather, we must remain committed to the process of lifelong conversion that draws us nearer to God and each other.

The willingness to rethink our worldview is located in the embodiment of the preferential option for the discovery of common faith. When winning and advancing at the expense of another is broadly accepted and preferred in our society, seeking to form connections and identifying similarities with others is a radical paradigm shift. Francis started at the level of the other, wherever that might be. Instead of condemning the differences of the stranger, Francis embraced the shared faith and experiences of those he

encountered. Likewise, Merton saw a reflection of God in the faith and life of those different from him.

Re-visioning the way we see God in our world and in one another is manifest in the radical adherence to the evangelical value of solidarity. When our society defines our personal identities by what makes us different, we must uncover the truth of God's presence on earth – that all citizens of this world share our humanity. Francis saw his life as interdependent and connected to every other aspect of God's creation. This fraternal view of the universe marks a path for us toward a global community. Merton saw the intrinsic value of each person as an interrelated participant in God's creation. He walked Francis's path away from understanding society as a collection of individuals to the Christian experience of a community of persons.

The opportunity for the internal, foundational and spiritual transformation placed before us today is an invitation to radically change the way we encounter all we meet. Embodying the characteristics of Francis and Merton's method of interreligious dialogue will allow us to become the new prophetic voices our world so desperately needs. We can become the voices that announce the possibility of a world that welcomes, no longer strangers, but brothers and sisters all.

Conclusion

Scott Thomas makes the argument that Franciscan interreligious dialogue speaks a message to today's world that confirms tolerance and appreciation for the religious sensibilities and traditions of others is not based on, nor leads to, skepticism, relativism and syncretism. Rather, authentically hearing the voice of the stranger is the fruit of remaining firmly rooted in one's own religious tradition with a genuine openness to encountering another.⁶⁰

Thomas Merton's work in the middle part of the 20th Century demonstrates the life-giving nature of a tradition that speaks to our contemporary world as much as it did some 800 years ago. Merton saw the great need for valid religious renewal in order to maintain any semblance of relevance in our modern world.⁶¹ Franciscan interreligious dialogue provides a schema for ecumenical relevance in a broken and divided world. I believe that this powerful model of authentic encounter with "the other" informed the action of Merton over time and possesses the possibility to steer our interreligious efforts in a positive direction today.

Some will dismiss the work of Francis and Merton as irrelevant to their lives because of the extraordinary nature of the work of these two exceptional men. Some will suggest that both Francis and Merton lived and acted in another time, in another place and in another manner foreign to the time, locations and issues of today. Some will suggest that the challenge of engaging in authentic dialogue is too difficult.

The last objection is the most honest and accurate, if only a flaccid excuse. It is difficult to engage in authentic dialogue, to change our image of 'other' to 'brother or sister.' This experience demands a comprehensive change in lifestyle, worldview and communication. It is, as our third characteristic of Franciscan inter-religious dialogue suggests, truly a process of life-long conversion that requires our commitment to relationship.

Like Francis and Merton, we must answer the call to enter into this relationship wholeheartedly, risking much for the sake of another. We are shown a way of solidarity, seeking common faith and lifelong humility. We are asked to change and be God's instrument of change in the world. Only then will our ears be open to hear the voices of the strangers, and our hearts be open to love them.

Endnotes

1. This paper was first presented 5 April 2008 at the Seventh General Meeting and Conference of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland in Oakham, Rutland (U.K.).

2. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Image-Doubleday, 1966; 2000) p. 143. The translation of the quotation from Eulogius is mine from the original French, "*Des hommes comme Saint Seraphim, Saint François d'Assise et bien d'autres, ont accompli dans leur vie l'union des Eglises.*"

3. See Timothy J. Shaffer, "Thomas Merton's Franciscan Spirituality," *The Cord* 57 (January / February 2007) pp. 63-81; Kathleen Deignan, "Road to Rapture: Thomas Merton's *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*," *Franciscan Studies* 55 (1998) pp. 281-297; Michael Downey, "Merton's Franciscan Heart," *Franciscan Studies* 55 (1998) pp. 299-309; and Sean Edward Kinsella, "'Where the Grey Light Meets the Green Air': The Hermit as Pilgrim in the Franciscan Spirituality of Thomas Merton," *Franciscan Studies* 55 (1998) pp. 311-322.

4. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1998) pp. 289-298. Merton was later received into the Third Order of St. Francis (Secular Franciscans) on February 19, 1941. See Thomas Merton, *Run To The Mountains: The Journals of Thomas Merton*

Volume One 1939-1941, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: HarperCollins, 1995) p. 309.

5. Kathleen Warren, *Daring to Cross the Threshold: Francis of Assisi Encounters Sultan Malek al-Kamil* (Rochester, MN: Sisters of St. Francis, 2003) pp. 22-23.

6. J. Hoeberichts, *Francis and Islam* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1997) p. 10.

7. Hoeberichts, *Francis and Islam*, p. 10.

8. Hoeberichts, *Francis and Islam*, p. 11.

9. Francis DeBeer, "St. Francis and Islam," in *Francis of Assisi Today*, eds. Christian Duquoc and Casiano Floristán, *Concilium* 149 (November 1981) pp. 11-12.

10. Chapter I of the *Regula non bullata* begins as follows: "The rule and life of these brothers is this, namely: 'to live in obedience, in chastity, and without anything of their own,' and to follow the teaching and footprints of our Lord Jesus Christ." Francis of Assisi, "The Earlier Rule," in *Francis of Assisi: The Early Documents*, Vol. 1, eds. R. Armstrong, W. Hellmann and W. Short (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1999) pp. 63-64. [Hereafter FAED 1]

11. FAED 1, p. 74.

12. There is some debate concerning the dating of Francis's encounter with Malek al-Kamil. Manselli places the entire trip within the time between May 9, 1218 and August 29, 1219; see Raoul Manselli, *St. Francis of Assisi*, trans. Paul Duggan (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1988) pp. 222-223. Walbert Bühlmann, developing his theory based on the creation of Chapter 16th of the *Rugula non bullata*, suggests that Francis and his companions stayed in Egypt between July 1219 and spring 1220. See Walbert Bühlmann as quoted in Hoeberichts, *Francis and Islam*, p. 45. Warren supports the dating between 1 and 16 September of 1219. See Warren, *Daring to Cross the Threshold*, p. 46.

13. DeBeer, "St. Francis and Islam," pp. 16-17.

14. While there is still some debate over whether Francis's mission to Egypt was in fact a peaceful opposition to the crusade, I concur with those scholars who believe this to be Francis's primary motive. For a list of those writers who agree with this theory, see Warren, *Daring to Cross the Threshold*, n.18, pp. 36-37.

15. Warren, *Daring to Cross the Threshold*, p. 33.

16. Hoeberichts, *Francis and Islam*, p. 5.

17. DeBeer, "St. Francis and Islam," p. 15.

18. Warren, *Daring to Cross the Threshold*, p. 42.

19. Warren, *Daring to Cross the Threshold*, pp. 44-45.

20. Jacques de Vitry, *Historia Occidentalis*, in FAED 1, p. 584.

21. Warren, *Daring to Cross the Threshold*, p. 49.

22. Warren, *Daring to Cross the Threshold*, p. 49.
23. Francis DeBeer, *We Saw Brother Francis*, trans. Despot and LaChance (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983) p. 88.
24. See Francis of Assisi, "The Canticle of the Creatures," in *FAED* 1, pp. 113-114.
25. Hoerberichts, *Francis and Islam*, p. 61.
26. Francis of Assisi, "The Earlier Rule" (*Regula non bullata*), ch. XVI, v. 6, in *FAED* 1, p. 74.
27. Laurent Gallant, "Francis of Assisi Forerunner of Interreligious Dialogue: Chapter 16 of the Earlier Rule Revisited," *Franciscan Studies* 64 (2006) pp. 58-59.
28. Francis of Assisi, "The Earlier Rule" (*Regula non bullata*), ch. XVI, v. 7, in *FAED* 1, p. 74. See also Gallant, "Francis of Assisi Forerunner of Interreligious Dialogue," p. 63 n.15. Emphasis added.
29. Gallant, "Francis of Assisi Forerunner of Interreligious Dialogue," pp. 59-60.
30. See David Flood and Thadee Matura, *The Birth of a Movement*, trans. Paul LaChance and Paul Schwartz (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1975), originally published David Flood and Thadee Matura, *La Naissance d'un Charisme* (Paris: Editions Franciscaines, 1973).
31. Diagram as presented by the author in Gallant, "Francis of Assisi Forerunner of Interreligious Dialogue," p. 61.
32. Gallant, "Francis of Assisi Forerunner of Interreligious Dialogue," p. 73.
33. Francis of Assisi, "The Earlier Rule" (*Regula non bullata*), ch. VI, vv. 3-4, in *FAED* 1, p. 68.
34. Thomas of Celano, *The Life of Saint Francis*, Ch. VII, v. 16, in *FAED* 1, p. 194.
35. Kenneth Himes, "The Inaugural Keynote Address on the Occasion of Inauguration of Fr. Kevin Mullen, O.F.M., Tenth President of Siena College," (1 October 2007), unpublished text, pp. 7-8.
36. Thomas Merton, *The Road To Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert Daggy (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1989) p. 298.
37. *NRSV Acts* 2:42,44.
38. Thomas Merton, "A Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra Concerning Giants," in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1977) pp. 372-391.
39. Merton, "A Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra," p. 387.
40. William H. Shannon, *Thomas Merton: An Introduction* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2005) p. 95.
41. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1962) pp. 47-48.
42. William Apel, *Signs of Peace: The Interfaith Letters of Thomas Merton*

(Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006) p. 105.

43. Allan McMillan, "Seven Lessons for Inter-faith Dialogue and Thomas Merton," *The Merton Annual* 15 (2002) p. 194.

44. McMillan, "Seven Lessons," p. 198. Emphasis added.

45. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 51.

46. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 144. Emphasis is Merton's.

47. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume Three 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence Cunningham (New York: HarperCollins, 1996) p. 273.

48. Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967) as quoted in Apel, *Signs of Peace*, pp. xiv-xv.

49. Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, p. 10.

50. Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, p. 17.

51. Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, p. 39.

52. Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, p. 65.

53. Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, p. 70.

54. Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, p. 79.

55. Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, p. 112.

56. Lawrence Cunningham, *Thomas Merton & The Monastic Vision* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999) pp. 51-52.

57. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 45.

58. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 2-3.

59. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 40.

60. Scott Thomas, "Franciscan Guide to Dialogue," *The Tablet* 260 (7 October 2006) pp. 8-9.

61. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999) pp. 182-183.