

Revisiting *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* after Twenty-five Years¹

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The decree of the Second Vatican Council on Non-Christian Religions is often hailed as an entirely new beginning in the relations between the Catholic Church and other world religions. But the majority of conciliar achievements, such as liturgical renewal, a new vision of the Church and the affirmation of religious freedom, were prepared for by prophetic forerunners: the liturgical movement of the late nineteenth century, the Nouvelle Theologie of the 1920s, and writers like John Courtney Murray on church-state relations.

The area of interfaith dialogue also witnessed such pioneers. The 1950 National Conference of Indian Bishops took initial and hesitating steps away from the unilateral condemnation of other religions, which had been a hallmark of much pre-Vatican II Catholicism. Visionary individuals like Dom Bede Griffiths, Father Henri Le Saux, and Dom Aelred Graham saw prophetically that the Catholic Church needed to engage in mutual and respectful interactions with the great faith traditions of the world. They believed that religious pluralism and intercooperation would become the norm of an emerging global community.

Thomas Merton could be included among this group of interfaith pioneers. His writings on the significance of interfaith awareness impacted greatly upon the popular mentality of American Catholics. In so many areas Merton became a measuring stick of spiritual attitudes among educated Catholics. A recent article charting the shifts

1. This is an expanded version of a paper delivered at the March 17-19, 1994 Merton Conference at Bellarmine College, Louisville.

in spirituality preferences over the last quarter century calls Merton perhaps the most influential of all spiritual authors in that period.²

There is, therefore, a value twenty-five years after his death in reviewing his seminal insights in interfaith dialogue, surveying his hopes for Zen and Christianity, and reappropriating his suggestions which may have been overlooked. This paper undertakes three tasks: first, to review the main themes in what is perhaps Merton's most deliberate effort to address directly the possibility of interfaith dialogue, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*;³ second, to compare Merton's views and hopes with the actual historical and ecclesiastical developments of the past quarter century; and third, to suggest ways in which Merton's ideas still possess value as guides into interfaith understanding and practice.

Main Themes in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*

Zen and the Birds of Appetite consists primarily of essays previously published between 1964-1967.⁴ However, the second part of the book, "Dialogue on Wisdom in Emptiness," co-written with D. T. Suzuki (1961), predates the Second Vatican Council. During his collegiate days at Columbia, Merton initiated many contacts with non-Christian religious traditions, but Zen developed a growing appeal for him during the 1960s.⁵ Merton was not a systematic theologian, but dealt with material in the literary style of an essayist. He did not like hard and fast definitions and thought a variety of descriptions better conveyed both the substance and feel of a subject. This makes it some-

2. Robert Hamma, "The Changing Style of Spirituality: 1968-1993," *America* 169 (November 27, 1993) 10.

3. I will not go into the genesis and evolution of Merton's interests in the East and Eastern religions. That task has been well done by others. See Bonnie Thurston, "Why Merton Looked East!" *Living Prayer* 21 (November-December 1988) 43-49; Chalmers MacCormick, "The Zen Catholicism of Thomas Merton," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 9 (Fall 1972) 802-818.

4. *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Direction Books, 1968). Henceforth referred to in the text as *ZBA*; numbers in parentheses are page references in *ZBA*.

5. Of all the Eastern religions Merton seemed most comfortable and knowledgeable with Zen, and Daisetz Suzuki seems to have been the major influence; see MacCormick, 804-805.

what difficult to select key topics, but the following issues seem to stand out.

1. In the enthusiasm surrounding the closing years of the Vatican Council, Merton was greatly concerned about the tenor of liberal Catholic attitudes toward Eastern religions. He felt that large numbers of American Catholics mistrusted Asian religions and their practices (16). The post-Vatican II Catholic was not drawn to contemplation (20), and actually disdained things metaphysical, Greek or mystical (28). Post-conciliar Catholics longed for activism, history, event, movement and progress (28–29). Perhaps such is the reason why Merton gave surprisingly little attention to the council or its decrees in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*. He mentions the council in several brief passages, but does not quote it at length or develop its basic points (15, 40). Perhaps the documents were still too fresh for him to recognize their potential impact. Or, maybe Merton believed that real dialogue proceeds through the leadership of committed individuals.

After twenty-five years this concern about American activism and the Catholic mind might seem “unfounded,” considering the many advances in dialogue, increased contacts between Buddhism and Christianity and especially in light of a Vatican letter warning against too much assimilation.⁶ Others, however, could argue that the general academic religious community and the large populace of American Catholics remain woefully ignorant of Eastern religions and the significance of interfaith dialogue.

2. The main thrust of Merton’s essays in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* seeks to convey a correct understanding and appreciation of Zen to Western Christian minds. Westerners find Zen puzzling in reference to their traditional ways of thinking. Merton stresses that there are two senses of Zen which must be kept separate, yet related: Zen as a religion of belief, piety and ritual, as traditionally understood, and Zen as a transconscious “consciousness” (3–4), a pure consciousness gained by pushing beyond the formal structures of religion. Merton believes that the great world religions, Islam, Christianity, or Buddhism, inevitably push beyond the formal structures of faith to a deeper level of awareness and experience (5).

This latter perspective of Zen attracts Merton profoundly, and he labors in most of the essays to articulate it through a variety of ap-

6. “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 11 (1991) 123–138.

proaches. Zen in this transconscious perspective describes a striving which explodes beyond the historical and cultural bounds of Buddhism. This Zen is not kerygma or revelation, but an experience of pure awareness (47). It seeks to attain an unarticulated and unexplained ground of direct experience, to grasp reality *without* logical verbalizing (36). In this “pure consciousness of Being” the perceiving subject as subject eventually disappears (23–24). The true purpose of Zen is “awakening a deep ontological awareness, a wisdom-intuition (Prajna) in the ground of being of the one awakened” (48). In his short essay on Kitaro Nishida, Merton approves the Japanese philosopher’s concern with “the primary structure of consciousness,” “a pure experience of undifferentiated unity,” and “the intuition of the basic unity of subject and object in being” “prior to all differentiations” (67–68).

Reaching this level of Zen consciousness smashes the mental and cultural preconceptions which so easily confine and distort our inherited or learned ways of perception and evaluation. The Zen attainment wants to just see, to wake up, to become aware . . . in the simplest and purest way possible (43). The Zen mind wants to look without any fetters; simply seeing becomes “the basic and fundamental exercise of Buddhist meditation” (53). Thus so many of the traditional Zen techniques (stories and koans) seek to explode accepted principles. Like the sudden ringing of an alarm clock, Zen tries to deliberately wake up the mind that thinks in ego-centered practicality and manipulation in order to lead that mind toward pure freedom and openness (50). This Zen escapes beyond its cultural religious boundaries and becomes a self-emptying experience found in all the great mystical traditions of the world.

3. Merton believes that this type of Zen consciousness bears a similarity to forms of Christian mysticism and has much to teach Christianity. While he does not hold all mysticisms to be identical, certain analogies and correspondences appear in widely diverse religious traditions (43). He finds one Christian analogy in the thought of Meister Eckhart and his theme of “going beyond God” (9–12).⁷ In still another passage he alludes to a Christian mysticism which apprehends God neither “as Immanent or as Transcendent but as grace and presence . . . as Freedom and Love” (25). In the essay attempting to describe the meaning of “Transcendent Experience,” Merton finds a basic

7. Merton’s appreciation of Eckhart grew substantially through the years: MacCormick, 815.

similarity between Sufism, Christianity, and Zen. Their mysticisms all pursue a radical and unconditional questioning of the human ego. Through this questioning the individual self-consciousness must disappear before (or perhaps into) the transcendent which confronts it. In Christian terms this is like that special awareness of Christ or the Spirit within the self, which in turn absorbs the self: "I live now not I but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20). Or again, quoting Eckhart: "We love God with His own love; awareness of it deifies us (75)."⁸ Merton maintains that in all higher religious traditions this path to transcendent realization follows the tasks of self-emptying, of negating the ego (76).

This ancient, yet modern perspective of Zen can be brought to enrich contemporary Christianity. Its nondoctrinal, concrete, direct and existential method reminds Christians of the crucial importance of regaining an immediate perception of spiritual things. Such an intuitive presence so easily gets covered over by anxieties and concern for doctrines, morality, and rituals. Zen challenges Christians to learn to pay attention, to develop a kind of consciousness that sees without preconceptions.⁹ One is tempted to say that Merton's natural bent of irreverence particularly appreciated Zen's cryptic, disconcerting, and irreligious character (34). As Zen jolted traditional Buddhist minds, so also might Christians benefit spiritually from a touch of reverent iconoclasm.

Even though Zen has no direct concern with a personal God or a transcendent revelation, it does seek a purification and expansion of the mind in which subject and object ultimately become One. In this way Buddhism definitely counts as a religious philosophy (79). Merton warns Westerners not to judge Buddhism as fundamentally negative or world-denying; it has produced too much vitality, joy, literature, and art in a wide range of human civilizations (80). There is a genuine sense in which Nirvana counts much more as pure presence than absence or negation (80).

4. Merton felt that a major mistake of Christians was to begin a dialogue with Buddhism on a doctrinal rather than an experiential

8. Merton notes that Dr. Suzuki approves of Eckhart's statement: ZBA, 75-76.

9. Perhaps Merton was thinking of the famous beginning of the Rule of St. Benedict, "Ausculta" (Listen). RB 1980: *The Rule of St. Benedict*, ed. Timothy Fry (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1981) 156-157.

basis. Catholics will find this hard to accept because doctrine has occupied such a large place in Catholic religiosity. Traditional Catholicism emphasized doctrine as the *fact* of revelation accepted in faith. In a similar vein, historical Catholicism revered the exact transmission and understanding of doctrine (39). These fundamental aspects of their religious mentality mean that Western Christians give primacy of place to "religious explanation" and concrete historical forms of religion (e.g., doctrine, moral laws, rituals) as the necessary foundations of faith. They want to begin religious dialogue right there. Zen, however, resists being easily communicable and prefers experience over explanation, which always remains secondary (46).

In Merton's view all great religions (in their inner reality) aspire to a direct confrontation with Absolute Being . . . Absolute Love . . . Absolute Mercy or Absolute Void (61). In Buddhism the highest level is reached when the individual is completely emptied of selfness and becomes "enlightened." Christians would do better to begin dialogue by discussing the nature of enlightenment and searching for analogies in Christian life.

5. The previous point leads to another of Merton's major ideas: to dialogue genuinely with Buddhism, the faith of Catholicism must be recaptured as a living experience. Too often Catholicism exalts historical doctrine over present practice. But what is desperately needed is a practical experience of faith, different from doctrine, morality and worship; the heart of the Catholic faith must be grasped as a living experience of unity in Christ, a taste of eternal life (39). The spiritual practice that Merton describes is not like following the instruction of a blueprint. He intends spiritual practice to mean the way an artist delves into the material of the craft—creatively, lovingly and with an openness of purpose. The latter practice possesses a personal immediacy which the former does not have.

Merton elaborates this notion of a living spiritual experience through several dynamic images. He notes that the Bible often emphasizes themes of direct experience, such as the Old Testament notion of "knowing" and the New Testament emphasis on "Life in the Spirit" (52). He points to Paul's two kinds of wisdom: (1) rational and dialectical and (2) the spiritual wisdom of the Cross. Here the Cross symbolizes a stark, existential experience of union with Christ in human pain, suffering, tragedy and emptiness. Through such experiential symbols Christianity becomes more than an intellectual acceptance of a

religious message by a submissive faith; it is uniquely a deep, personal experience of inner spirit that gives strength and power in meeting the immediate challenges of human life (55).

6. A last major point suggested by Merton is a question: can a Christian practice Zen? In what was surely a shocking statement even for the immediate post-Vatican II world, Merton answers affirmatively. But he means Zen as a quest for pure and direct experience on a metaphysical level, free from verbal formula and linguistic preconceptions. This Zen can help Christians recapture their own spiritual paths. Soon after *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, Merton expressed this thought more clearly:

. . . I think we have now reached a stage of (long-overdue) religious maturity at which it may be possible for someone to remain perfectly faithful to a Christian and Western monastic commitment, and yet to learn in depth from, say, a Buddhist or Hindu discipline and experience. I believe that some of us need to do this in order to improve the quality of our own monastic life. . . .¹⁰

Merton and the Last Quarter Century

Thus, in the late 1960s Merton was writing about the need for Catholics to have an accurate understanding of Zen, the possibility of being in dialogue with and learning from Zen, and making the startling suggestion that a faithful, believing Christian might actually practice Zen for religious improvement. Few people were probably listening. In the full flush of those activist years, not many were ready to turn in an easterly direction or even to look inward and nurture contemplation.¹¹

But times change and the practical encounters between Christianity and Buddhism mushroomed in the decades after Merton's death. Much was due to a great influx of Buddhists into the United States. The wars in Southeast Asia brought Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian immigrants; the Japanese economic miracle significantly increased their presence in the United States, and the conquest of Tibet by China eventually brought many Tibetan Buddhist leaders to the

10. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1973) 313.

11. There were very few reviews of *ZBA* in the years following its publication.

Western world. They did not arrive only to be displaced immigrants; they have become a growing and influential presence, initiating university programs in Oriental and East Asian studies and establishing national centers for the study and practice of Buddhism (e.g., the Naropa Institute, Zen Mountain Monastery). They have also demonstrated a marvelous flexibility in adapting ancient religious teachings and practices to fit a modern, technological western culture.¹² They have made a significant and growing number of American converts to Buddhism.

All this has provided increased opportunity for contacts between Buddhism and Christianity. And while this intermingling is not widespread through the general American religious population, it is surely far more than people would have imagined when Merton was writing twenty-five years ago.

The professional theological encounter has taken major steps forward. One need only survey religious publishing houses to see the number of publications, both specialized and popular, which explore the relationships between Christian and Buddhist beliefs and practices.¹³ Independent study groups of Buddhist and Christian scholars have been working together for years in trying to establish better mutual understandings.¹⁴ Since 1980 there have been four International Buddhist-Christian Dialogue conferences which have drawn participants from all over the world.¹⁵ The Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies recently became a participant in the Council of Societies for the Study of Religion, and its journal, *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, provides further evidence of ongoing research and professional standing in American academic circles.

12. A fine example of modernized Buddhism can be found in the works of Thich Nhat Hanh: *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, trans. Mobi Ho (Boston: Beacon, 1975) 1987; *Peace Is Every Step* (New York: Bantam, 1992).

13. A handy tool is: Educational Resources Committee of the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies, *Resources for Buddhist-Christian Encounter: An Annotated Bibliography* (Wofford Heights, Calif.: Multifaith Resources, 1993).

14. The John Cobb-Masao Abe study group has circulated papers and held working sessions for almost fourteen years. As an example of their sharings, see Roger Corless and Paul Knitter, eds. *Buddist Emptiness and Christian Trinity* (Mahwah: Paulist, 1990).

15. International Conferences have been held at the University of Hawaii (1980, 1984), Berkeley, California (1987), and Boston University (1992). The Boston meeting drew over three hundred participants from seventeen countries.

However, the dialogue has by no means been an easy one, either in theory or practice. Roger Corless, in his introduction to *Buddhist Emptiness and Christian Trinity*, wrote some of the most honest words ever penned by one looking back over his own contributions to a collection:

These essays . . . are exploratory and tentative, confusing, and even (speaking as much for myself as for my fellow contributors) confused. When I reread what I have written, I find that I am not sure that I know what I am trying to say, and as I was editing the essays of my distinguished colleagues, I sometimes wondered if they might not have similar reactions to their own work.¹⁶

If true for professional academics, imagine the troubles of the average lay person—for example those involved in the official dialogue initiated by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles with the Buddhist Sangha Council of Southern California. Their initial report covering the first years of their joint venture describes the struggle: "First, we discovered that learning about each other's tradition was learning the vocabulary that it uses to express itself. This proved to be more difficult than we expected. . . . At times we spent an entire session on just one word or concept."¹⁷ But the dialogue continues, as well it should.

On still another level the practice of shared meditation by Christian and Buddhist monastics, as well as visits to each other's monasteries, has become a part of the landscape of American Catholic religious life. Delegations from the United States have visited and lived in Buddhist monasteries in India, Japan, Thailand, and other Eastern countries, and in return hosted groups of visiting Buddhist monks and nuns. Monastic organizations like Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (MID) seek to further and deepen these contacts. And program offerings in many American retreat houses frequently utilize Eastern methods of spiritual meditation and practice.

Merton raised the issue of a Catholic practicing Zen. Yet did he ever imagine that a major issue in the professional dialogue twenty-five years later would be whether it is possible to be a Catholic priest and ordained Zen master at one and the same time? Yet such is one

16. Corless, *Buddhist Emptiness*, 1.

17. The Los Angeles Interreligious Group, "Buddhist-Catholic Dialogue: An Early Journey," *Origins* 20 (April 11, 1991) 715.

of the major issues that the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies has been pursuing at recent meetings: What exactly is this "mixed religious practice?" Does it compromise the essential integrity of either Catholic Christianity or Zen Buddhism? Is it an entirely new kind of religion?¹⁸

Merton's Seminal Insights

Merton was writing at the very beginning of the modern dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism. Do his thoughts and suggestions in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* still have merit in the wake of the rapid expansion of the last quarter century? I believe they do, although not always positively. I would like to indicate several issues where a cue from Merton would facilitate the ongoing dialogue.

First, Merton's stress on religious experience as the basis for any sound and fruitful dialogue needs to be given greater attention. The recognition that Zen can best be understood in its actual practice was the turning point in his own developing understanding. In the "Postface" of *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* he acknowledges that several pages of his 1961 essay "Wisdom in Emptiness" (coauthored with Daisetz Suzuki), need to be radically changed.¹⁹ His initial approach relied too much upon theological understandings which were abstract and conceptual. Zen reveals its truth in concrete, actual experience and practice.

At this point we must deal with a serious lacuna in American Catholicism: its reluctance to articulate and communicate Catholic faith as a spiritual practice. That faith has been frequently spelled out in doctrinal, ritual, and institutional expressions, but less often as a spiritual discipline which incorporates a model and goal of human maturity on the way to its religious goals. Buddhism, on the other hand, possesses many practices of concentration, meditation, and physical posturing, and each can be explained in terms of the attitude sought by the practice, the religious conviction expressed, and the goal of human maturity sought. Catholics in general lag far behind in that kind

18. This topic was vigorously discussed at the 1992 International Buddhist-Christian Dialogue Conference and among the regular meetings of the Society for Buddhist-Christian studies. See *Newsletter of the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies* 11 (Spring 1993) 3.

19. ZBA, 139.

of experiential awareness. Even monastic participators in interfaith dialogue frequently mention how their discussions with Buddhists have thrown them back on their own (often flimsy) resources in trying to find experiential explanations for traditional monastic observances. To the extent that Catholic participants in interfaith dialogue emphasize, nurture, and articulate their faith as a living spiritual practice, the better will they be able to share with Buddhist counterparts.

Second, Merton never ceases to stress that pure experience lies at the heart of Buddhist meditation and Christian mysticism. The need to recapture this difficult notion becomes ever more urgent as an "age of prejudice or cultural boundedness" seems to be descending upon the American mentality, both popular and academic. Increasingly ethnic groups, churches and special interest organizations seem to exalt their own particular biases and even make intolerance a virtue. Scholars proclaim with increasing insistence the impossibility of getting completely behind one's inherited cultural and experiential patterns; human beings are innately and irrevocably culturally determined. They may purify those thought patterns partially, but a transconscious consciousness is not even considered in much of today's scholarly discourse. To return to Merton is to revisit the possibility of exploding beyond one's inherited perspective. It would be extremely valuable for religious scholars to reexamine three kinds of experience and the interactions between them: (1) a transcendent metaphysical experience; (2) a religious mystical experience; and (3) religious experiences within culturally embedded forms.

Third, a minor point in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, but one which connects with issues raised by the recent Vatican letter,²⁰ deserves further exploration: whether a regular Christian life (that is, a life of basic doctrinal belief, ritual worship and affective prayer) is religiously inferior to the kind of deep interior experience stressed by Buddhists and contemplative Christians? In *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* Merton at times seems to incline in that direction. He intimates that there are different levels of religious experience or practice (72). He acknowledges a place for I-Thou religious practices (e.g., in liturgy and morals) at the beginning of one's faith, but in these ordinary religious experiences the subject remains conscious as a subject. The progressive

20. Op. cit., "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation."

religious practitioner, however, relaxes any grasp on a religious goal and contemplates in pure presence.

The Ratzinger letter²¹ raises a genuine concern, one that has been longstanding in Christian tradition. Historically the basic religious measure of spiritual practice has been *loving service*. How does this loving service relate to deep, interior experiences of meditation and mystical presence, and vice versa? This is surely an issue to be explored in our expanding spiritual supermarket of Zen-Christian meditation retreats, centering prayer, and New Age spiritual happenings.

When *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* first appeared in the late 1960s, it was not hailed as a significant work. But the dialogue with Buddhism and other world religions had hardly begun. In the following years a tremendous explosion in interfaith relations has occurred. Nevertheless *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* twenty-five years later still possesses fresh and revealing insights.

21. Ibid.