

Thomas Merton and Zen

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In the book *Contemplative Prayer*¹ Thomas Merton presents his mature thought on Christian contemplation. The problem is this: Merton's last and most important writing on contemplation can be, and often is, misunderstood. Contemplative prayer, as described by Merton in the book, can appear solipsistic, self-centered, taking the center of oneself as the object of contemplation, taking the same person contemplating as the subject to be contemplated. This, of course, has little or nothing to do with Christian contemplation, and would fall into a category sometimes denominated "natural mysticism." But, on the contrary, Merton has no intention of proposing a kind of natural mysticism. Nor does he propose some sort of solipsistic meditation, nor a contemplation that takes the form of just simple or heightened consciousness. *Contemplative Prayer* is about Christian contemplation, about real prayer in the Christian tradition and framework.

Unfortunately, even a close reading of the book can and sometimes does give a wrong impression. Personally, until 1992, I had trouble with *Contemplative Prayer*. I misinterpreted Merton's final theology of contemplative prayer, concluding that it had been badly influenced by his interest in, and perhaps practice of, Zen. I dropped my interest in Merton after a last rereading of *Contemplative Prayer*.

I came back to Merton, and particularly to *Contemplative Prayer*, after I examined, studied, and—most importantly—experienced Zen myself. I began to have an interest in Buddhist meditation, and particularly in Zen, in the late 1980s. I read everything I could. Over a

period of years I talked with Buddhists, with and without interpreters, as well as with Christian experts in Buddhist meditation, in Rome, Tokyo, Kyoto, Bangkok, and Seoul. Then, in 1992, I came across a book on Korean Zen. I do not have the patience for soto Zen. And I had dabbled in rinzai Zen, with the generous and kind help of K. T. Kadawoki at Sophia University in Tokyo; but I was a poor pupil, got nowhere, and gave up quickly.

I found Korean Zen, a form of rinzai, more aggressive; it insists on questioning. Sitting in the Loyola Marymount University library in Los Angeles, reading a book on Korean Zen, I experienced enlightenment. And it lasted. Later, my library experience was verified independently by two Korean Zen masters as an authentic Zen enlightenment experience.

In the spring of 1993, after several months of teaching as a visiting professor at Sogang University in Seoul, I went into the mountains not far inland from Korea's southern coast to a hermitage of the main monastery of the Chogye order, Songwang-sa, for three weeks of Zen meditation. It was an intensive and profound experience. Among other things, it brought me back to another reading of *Contemplative Prayer*. This time, I think I understood it.

What went wrong in the writing of the book? Why are not the ideas sufficiently clear? How can one read Merton's most important book on prayer with understanding? In this study, I would like to briefly answer those questions. We know that in the years when Merton was putting *Contemplative Prayer* together, he suffered from poor health (chronic dysentery, severe dermatitis—especially of the hands—bursitis, and a bad back), and he went through considerable turmoil concerning monastic obedience, his vocation, and his personal relationships. As if all this were not enough, a further problem comes from Merton's methodology in *Contemplative Prayer*. He describes contemplative prayer not in abstract categories, but according to the *experience* of contemplation.

I suggest that the book is confusing because of how Thomas Merton put it together and because of its unfinished nature,² and that the book must be read with the knowledge that Merton wrote it strongly influenced by how he understood Zen meditation. In conclusion, this paper sketches the main outlines of Merton's final theology of prayer.

1. New York: Doubleday Image, 1971. Further page references will be to this American edition of the book.

2. Basil Pennington gave me this information in June 1995.

The Lack of Clarity of the Book

Contemplative Prayer has nineteen chapters; it is really two books.³ Chapters one through five, eleven, fourteen, and sixteen through eighteen originally comprised a booklet called *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*, fifty-eight pages long, circulated privately, and then published in 1969 by Cistercian Publications. The booklet aimed at a monastic audience, professional monks. The other chapters—six through ten, twelve, thirteen, fifteen, and nineteen—come from a 1959 manuscript, never published as such, entitled *Prayer as Worship and Experience*. This second book or manuscript aims apparently at a broader audience than does the booklet *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*. Sometime after 1965, Merton broke up the manuscript *Prayer as Worship and Experience* and inserted the various parts of it into *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*. The resulting book was published in 1969 by Cistercian Publications as *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*, and by Herder and Herder as *Contemplative Prayer*.

Merton thought considerable revision necessary on the part of the publishing house editors at Herder and Herder to make the book accessible to the nonmonastic reader.⁴ *Contemplative Prayer's* principal editor agreed, but in fact almost no revising took place. Basil Pennington and Merton had the firm and planned intention to work together on *Contemplative Prayer* after Merton's Asian trip, to get the book in order and to clear up ambiguities. Merton died in Asia before he could really finish the book. The fact stands that Merton's theology of contemplative prayer, especially as presented in *Contemplative Prayer*, remains open to misinterpretation.⁵

Merton's Understanding of Zen

There are, of course, varieties of Zen Buddhism, and every kind of Zen opens itself to various ways of understanding it. Merton

3. This information comes from William Shannon, *Thomas Merton's Dark Path* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981); see especially ch. 7, "The Climate of Monastic Prayer (Contemplative Prayer)," 164–88.

4. Basil Pennington in June 1995 personally gave me the information in this paragraph.

5. Good examples of a theologian's complete misreading of Merton's theology of contemplative prayer are two articles by Catharina Stenqvist: "Thomas Merton and His View on Contemplation," *Studies in Spirituality* 2 (1993), and "Merton, Zen, and Phenomenology," *Studies in Spirituality* 4 (1994). Stenqvist finds

learned about Zen mainly through the writings of D. T. Suzuki.⁶ Not a Christian himself, Suzuki interprets Christianity in his own way, sees it from a thoroughly Zen perspective. He shows great appreciation for Meister Eckhart who, like Zen and therefore like Suzuki himself—and like Merton—has a principally noetic theology of contemplation.

Suzuki identifies the God of Christians with "the Absolute Present itself."⁷ Does Suzuki, from a Christian point of view, have an adequate idea of God? He naturally has no place for the incarnation and the cross and resurrection. But, as Suzuki himself realizes, his idea of God is close to, consonant with, the strongly noetic current in the Christian mystical tradition represented by Meister Eckhart.⁸

For Suzuki, *satori* means "seeing into one's own nature." And that means "seeing into the Buddha-Nature, or the Absolute." Merton will use the term "the true self" in a similar and quite parallel way to mean "the self as in Christ."⁹ When Suzuki writes about *satori*, does he

that Merton has a nonintentional idea of contemplation, that contemplation for him is simply a state of just being conscious. This shows how badly Merton can be misunderstood.

6. Some important titles by D. T. Suzuki that especially influenced Merton are: *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist* (New York: Macmillan, 1957); *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D. T. Suzuki*, ed. W. Barrett (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1956); *Manual of Zen Buddhism* (London: Rider, 1950). For Suzuki's notion of Christianity, see Roger Corless, "In Search of a Context for the Merton-Suzuki Dialogue," *The Merton Annual*, vol. 6 (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1993) 76–91. For another view of Suzuki on Zen, one that compares him with different members of the Kyoto school, see Fritz Buri, "The True Self in the Buddhist Philosophy of the Kyoto School," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 12 (1992) 83–102, esp. 88–90.

7. *Living by Zen*, ed. Christian Humphreys (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1972) 12.

8. See Suzuki, "Meister Eckhart and Buddhism," *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist*, 11–32. But is not Zen Buddhism atheistic? I suppose it can be. Suzuki's Zen is not. I have found Chinul, the founder of Korean Zen (numerically at least the most important current of Zen practice today), to have an idea of God (although Korean Zen refers not to "God" but to "True Mind" and "the Buddha Nature") not completely incompatible with and, although the metaphysical framework is entirely different, in some ways even similar to Thomas Aquinas' idea of God in *Summa Theologiae*. See Hee-Sung Keel, *Chinul: The Founder of the Korean Son Tradition*, Berkeley Buddhist Studies Series (Seoul: Po Chin Chai, 1984).

9. See Gal 2:20: "I live, not I, but Christ lives in me." See also Christopher Nugent, "Satori in St. John of the Cross," *Bulletin of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue*, n. 14, May 1993, 13–18.

think he is talking about what Christians talk about when they say infused contemplation? He seems to.¹⁰ One could think that Zen contemplation, when it occurs, necessarily falls into the category of natural mysticism or takes the shape of only a metaphysical intuition of being. Suzuki does not seem to think so.¹¹ Merton does not criticize Suzuki on these points. He seems to accept them; they concur with Merton's own views:

There is a natural metaphysical intuition of being, even of Absolute Being, or of the metaphysical ground of being. . . . There is no difficulty in relating this metaphysical intuition to the *satori* of Zen.

10. See Suzuki, *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist*, 63–72, on Eckhart's "divine spark" or "little point of light" in the soul. Suzuki compares hitting this "little point of light" to *satori*.

11. The point seems impossible to prove one way or the other. For different opinions, and for opinions other than mine of what Merton thought about this, see: Thomas King, *Merton: Mystic at the Center of America* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1994); and Annice Callahan's review of the same book in *The Merton Annual*, vol. 6, 205–8. See in particular William F. Healy, "Thomas Merton's Evaluation of Zen," *Angelicum* 52 (1975) 385–409. This article has as its basis the author's doctoral dissertation at the Collegium Pontificium Angelicum, defended in 1974. Healy writes in his dissertation that, for Merton, Zen cannot be contemplation in the normal Catholic sense, not even acquired contemplation, because "it is not supernatural contemplation" (400) and "it is not a matter of grace" (89).

As to the question of the difference between Christian contemplation and Zen meditation see: Heinrich Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism in the Twentieth Century*, trans. J. O'Leary (New York and Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1992); H. M. Enomiya Lasalle, *Zen Meditation for Christians*, trans. C. Maraldo (Lasalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1974), especially ch. 6 on Zen and Christian meditation. Dumoulin and Lasalle have the opinion that the main difference between Zen and Christian contemplation lies in the fact that Zen is impersonal—rather, apersonal—and Christian contemplation is personal, to a personal God; and, further, that Zen contemplation is a natural mysticism (Dumoulin) or acquired contemplation (Lasalle). See also J. K. Kadowaki, *Zen and the Bible*, trans. J. Rieck (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), although Kadowaki does not so much compare Zen and Christian contemplation as write about his own experience with both.

See William Johnston, *Christian Zen* (New York: Harper, 1971), where Johnston tries to show what Christians can learn from Zen. Also by Johnston, *The Mysticism of the Cloud of Unknowing* (New York: Desclee, 1967), where he shows how Christian contemplation and Zen differ. In *The Still Point* (New York: Fordham University, 1970) Johnston brilliantly compares Christian contemplation and Zen, and finds that the difference does not lie where so many (e.g., David Loy, "Comparing Zen Koan Practice with *The Cloud of Unknowing*," *Buddhist-Christian Studies*

Whether there is in non-Christian religions a truly mystical or supernatural vision of God may still be debated, but the best theologians have admitted its possibility. Nor is there any real difficulty about this, in theory, since we know that men of good will in all religions, who follow the dictates of an upright conscience, can certainly attain to holiness and union with God because they receive grace from Him to do so.¹²

Merton does not say that Zen's *satori* remains only a metaphysical intuition; he states that it is possible that Zen contemplation be truly supernatural contemplation, and that there is no real problem with this. Nor does Merton ever claim that Christian contemplation and Zen contemplation are the same. The Zen that influenced Merton was mainly the Japanese *rinzai* Zen of D. T. Suzuki. His belief that Zen and Christian contemplation are alike in an important way, that they both are or can be supernatural contemplative union with God, gives him a basis for working out a theology or theory of Christian contemplation that incorporates Zen insights.

Zen is not Kerygma but realization, not revelation but consciousness, not news from the Father who sends His Son into this world, but awareness of the ontological ground of our own being here and now. . . . The supernatural Kerygma and the intuition of the ground of being are far from being incompatible. . . . Zen is perfectly compatible with Christian belief and indeed with Christian mysticism (if we understand Zen in its pure state, as metaphysical intuition).¹³

Earlier, Merton had written about the question of Zen and supernaturalism: "In Christian terms, one can hardly help feeling that the illumination of the genuine Zen experience seems to open out into an unconscious demand for grace—a demand that is perhaps answered without being understood. Is it perhaps already grace?"¹⁴

9 [1989] 43–60, esp. 58) think it does: between the Zen void and the Christian necessity of clinging to a concept of God. On the contrary, the Christian mystic positively ought not to cling to any image or concept, especially of God.

12. Merton in the introduction to Johnston, *The Mysticism of the Cloud of Unknowing*, x.

13. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968) 47.

14. Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Dell, 1961) 228.

John Francis Teahan, in his doctoral dissertation "The Mysticism of Thomas Merton: Contemplation as a Way of Life," finds that Merton in his later years increasingly believed in the possible supernatural character of Eastern mysticism in general and of Zen in particular.¹⁵ Here is how Merton compares the experiences of Christian contemplation and of Zen:

In the Christian tradition, the focus of this "experience" is found not in the individual self as a separate, temporal, and limited ego, but in Christ . . . "within" this self. In Zen, it is Self with a capital S, that is to say precisely *not* the ego-self. This Self is the Void.¹⁶

And that Void is the ground of being, absolute being, what Christians call God. Since Jesus' act of existence is one, only, and divine, his human nature inheres in that one divine act of existence. In Zen terms, Christ is the Buddha-nature, he is the ground of being. Merton understood this.¹⁷

In 1993, while in Korea and Japan for several months, I asked the same question of four Catholic experts on Zen: "What do Zen adepts attain when they meditate? God, or themselves, or nothing, or what?" I asked Sister Kim, a Korean Sister of Charity who has a Harvard doctorate and who teaches comparative mysticism at Sogang University in Seoul; Heinrich Dumoulin, S.J., the foremost historian of Zen; William Johnston, S.J., author of books on Zen and on Christian mysticism; and K. T. Kadowaki, S.J., Zen master. These last three were all members of the Sophia University Jesuit community. The four experts all gave me the same answer: Those adept at Zen do attain, in some way, transcendent Truth. This, from a Christian point of view, we

15. Princeton University, 1976, 46. The whole section on Eastern religions (39–52) is good. To the best of my knowledge, this truly outstanding manuscript has never been published.

16. *Ibid.*, 74.

17. In one of his last conferences before his death in 1968, Merton said, "Even before the Lord dwells in us by his Spirit there is a deeper presence which comes in a certain sense from the fact that we are created in him, and, as we read in Colossians, live in him—our being is in Christ even ontologically. . . . Our true sense of who we are consists entirely in this response to Christ, but the most important thing is that this response is to someone we really do not know. We know him; yes, we know him and we don't know him. . . . We respond to someone unknown" ("Conference on Prayer," on the Feast of Christ the King [Conference of Religious of India, 1968] 2).

can identify with God. Do they pray when they meditate? Zen monks would say no. The four people I consulted with would say, from our Catholic point of view, yes. I agree with them.

Merton, however, never did really work out conceptually his later theology of contemplation, at least not fully. He recognized Zen as an authentic way of contemplative prayer. He tried to express what he understood about Zen in *Contemplative Prayer* in a Christian framework and as part of a Christian understanding of contemplative prayer.¹⁸

Merton's Theology of Contemplative Prayer in *Contemplative Prayer*

Parker Palmer, writing in the *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*,¹⁹ sums up Merton's theology of contemplation: "No matter how widely Merton reached in his spiritual search, he remained grounded in the personal experience of God in Christ. For Merton, the spiritual search is deeply inwards, towards the Christ in each of us who is also our True Self." This experience of God in Christ becomes, in contemplation, subjective. I am one with him. He is my most profound "I." "I-Thou" no longer has a place in the contemplative experience. Merton on contemplation evokes T. S. Eliot, who believes that contemplation is like "music heard so deeply / That it is not heard at all, but you are the music / While the music lasts."²⁰

Merton understands contemplative prayer as prayer of the heart. He understands the heart as "the deepest psychological ground of one's personality, the inner sanctuary where self-awareness goes beyond

18. Can Christian theology be separated out from the Greek metaphysics which it has, however imperfectly, assimilated? Can the egg be unscrambled? See J. Fredericks, "The Kyoto School: Modern Buddhist Philosophy and the Search for a Transcultural Theology," *Horizons* 15 (1988) 299–315, esp. 314. Merton, like others including Bede Griffiths and Henri Le Saux (Swami Abhishiktananda) in India, have tried to do just that for Christian mysticism, for the Christian theology of contemplation. Our positive appreciation should be that they have thus contributed to the true "catholicity" of Christian teaching on contemplation.

19. London: SCM Press, 1983, 265.

20. "The Dry Salvages," ll. 211–3, *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971) 44. Eliot refers to the point of intersection of the timeless with time, to incarnation, and the analogy with music can as well be applied to contemplative union with Christ.

analytical reflection and opens out into metaphysical and theological confrontation with the Abyss of the unknown yet present—the one who is more intimate to us than we are to ourselves.”²¹

The heart, for Merton, is not so much the seat of the affections; contemplation is not essentially a matter of felt love given and received. Like Meister Eckhart, like Suso and Tauler, the followers of Eckhart, like the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and like John of the Cross, Merton is firmly in the apophatic tradition of Christian contemplation.²² Apophatic mysticism is the way of negation, of the denial that anything we know on earth can be God; God is “not that.” The opposite of apophatic mysticism is cataphatic mysticism, the way of affirmation by analogy that the good, true, unified, beautiful that we know on earth can be affirmed in a purified and analogous way of God. Apophatic and cataphatic describe different kinds or qualities of experience, as well as different modes of talking about mystical experience. Famous examples of the apophatic and the cataphatic are, respectively, John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila. For Merton, contemplation is a mainly intellectual activity, a primarily noetic state, an emptiness, a mental vacuity.²³

Contemplation takes place in an obscurity where knowing is not knowing, in a darkness, and not essentially nor at all necessarily in the light of love.²⁴ The way to union with God, for Merton, is the way of darkness, night, emptiness. It stands in the void; real contemplation is mute in the empty silence of the void. The lights are out. Merton in his apophaticism is closest to Eckhart, and to Zen. “On the psychological level,” Merton writes, “there is an exact correspondence” between the Zen void and the dark night of John of the Cross.²⁵ And, for Merton, the normal contemplative state is the dark night.

21. Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 33.

22. From the Greek *apophasis*, “negation” or “denial.” On the apophatic in Merton, Teahan is excellent (“The Mysticism of Thomas Merton,” 158–91).

23. See Robert E. Doud, “Emptiness as Transparency in the Late Poetry of Thomas Merton,” *Horizons* 21 (1994) 269.

24. Love itself acts in emptiness, is a kind of emptiness. “The man who has truly found his spiritual nakedness, who has realized he is empty, is not a self that has acquired emptiness or become empty. He just ‘is empty from the beginning,’ as Dr. Suzuki has observed. . . . He is one with God, and identified with God, and hence knows nothing of any ego in himself. All he knows is love.” *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, 71.

25. Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, 242.

Merton’s personal contemplative experience was clearly dark, empty, a desert experience.²⁶ His material in *Contemplative Prayer* on emptiness in general and on “dread” in particular surely comes out of his own experience of not just emptiness and darkness but of real desolation in the face of limits and finitude.²⁷

Through and in darkness and emptiness, passing through dread, one arrives at that darkness in which one no longer knows oneself apart from God, one finds one’s true self.²⁸ The true self, then, is not self only; it is the self in Christ, the self in union with Christ in God in the self. The parallel concept in Zen would seem to be the self as nothing, but in—part of—the Buddha Nature, the True Mind, universally transcendent in its immanence, standing in and above all being and all nothingness.

What then is the purpose of Christian contemplation? This:

To come to know God through the realization that our very being is penetrated with his knowledge and love for us. Our knowledge of God is paradoxically not a knowledge of him as the object of our scrutiny, but of ourselves as utterly dependent on his saving and merciful knowledge of us. It is in proportion as we are known to him that we find our real being and identity in Christ. We know him in and through ourselves in so far as his truth is the source of our being and his merciful love is the very heart of our life and existence. . . . There is no true knowledge that does not imply a profound grasp and an intimate personal acceptance of this profound relationship.²⁹

The whole purpose of Christian contemplation “is to deepen the consciousness of this basic relationship of the creature to the Creator, and of the sinner to his Redeemer.”³⁰

26. See, for example, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1953). There is ample documentation of Merton’s interior darkness in prayer.

27. See especially *Contemplative Prayer*, ch. 16, 120–8.

28. *Ibid.*, 104.

29. *Ibid.*, 83. “Christ is King, but he controls by love. This love is the very root of our own being. . . . Our true sense of who we are consists entirely in this response to Christ, but the most important thing is that this response is to someone we really do not know. We know him; yes, we know him and we don’t know him. . . . We respond to someone unknown” (“Conference on Prayer,” 2, 4).

30. Merton, “Conference on Prayer,” 2, 4.