

THOMAS MERTON'S JOURNEY TOWARD WORLD RELIGIOUS ECUMENISM

by **Jacques Goulet**

I. INTRODUCTION

World Religious Ecumenism is the acceptance of the plurality of religions as God's will and as God's gift. It is a value judgment that plurality of religions is a good thing: plurality of religions is seen as the appropriate expression of human creativity and freedom animated by God's grace, by God's Spirit. People who are "ecumenically minded" rejoice in the diversity of religions. They see such a diversity as an enrichment and indeed as an adequate expression of human religious freedom. They see the historical fact of the plurality of religions as a positive embodiment of God's grace or salvation.

By contrast, people who are not so "ecumenically minded" reject the plurality of religions as the expression of human ignorance at best and of waywardness rooted in sin at worst. They tend to maintain that there is only one true religion which should be universally normative. They identify the advance of human religiousness with the spread and dominance of one true religion throughout the world.¹

In the following essay I wish to consider, against the background of a convenient typology of forms of ecumenism, the life-struggle of Thomas

1. One is reminded here of Mark Twain's witty criticism: "What God lacks is conviction, stability of character. He ought to be a Presbyterian or a Catholic or something — not try to be everything."

* This paper was delivered on 26 May 1989 in the session, "Merton and Ecumenism," at the First General Meeting of *The International Thomas Merton Society* in Louisville, Kentucky.

Merton towards a global ecumenism. First I will sketch the typology, then consider basic stages of Merton's growth, and finally I will return to the question of a theology of ecumenical contemplation that broadens both the perspective on, and the practice of, such a life-search as was Merton's.

One can consider three main levels or degrees of Christian ecumenical mindedness.² The lowest level I would call exclusivism. It is the simple rejection of other religions. For such a Christian, there is no salvation outside Christ (interpreted as outside the Church) — "extra Ecclesiam nulla salus" in the famous medieval phrase. It stresses the particularity of Christ: "who is not with Me is against Me" (Matthew 12: 3; Luke 11: 23).

Provisions may have been made within this exclusivism for the salvation of individuals of good will. But these individuals of good will are saved in spite of, not because of, their own religion. Other religions, as faiths, are regarded as the work of the devil, the expression of human sinfulness, or, at the very least, as erroneous. That mentality is still, I'm afraid, very much alive but, fortunately, disappearing. Of course, there are different degrees of exclusivism, from a very narrow exclusivism where one has to be even a special kind of Christian such as a Roman Catholic or a charismatic to a broad exclusivism where to follow one's conscience is to be a Christian at heart (a very backhanded compliment: as a civilized, educated black person would be said to be a "white person at heart").

A second and higher level of ecumenism is fast growing up which could be called inclusivism, which recognizes that other religions have a place in God's scheme of salvation. They are part of the history of salvation. They mediate grace to men and women, but they are seen as merely partial expressions of the truth and grace found in their fullness in Christianity. It stresses the universality of Christ: "who is not against us is with us" (Mark 9: 40). Such Christians gladly acknowledge the truths contained and emphasized in the great religions, but each of them is less than the gospel of the unsearchable riches of Christ. The majesty of God in Islam, the high moral standards and profound truth in the other Eastern religions are approaches to the truth of God fully revealed in Christ.

That inclusivism recognizes the positive role of the other religions, but it insists in various ways that the decisive action, the complete truth, the total salvation, whatever other phrase is used, is to be found in Christianity. Inclusivism, at best, sees the work of God in Christ as spilling over the

2. My reflection was greatly stimulated by Professor Charles Davis of Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, at a lecture which he delivered at Mount Allison University, Sackville, New Brunswick, Canada in 1981.

Christian community into other traditions, working in other cultures. I would say that most Christian people and theologians today tend to be within this second type of ecumenism.

There is a third and still deeper level of ecumenism which can be called a pluralistic attitude. It involves a radical transformation in our conception of the universe of faith and the place of our own religion in it. It involves a shift from the dogma that Christianity is at the center to the realization that God is at the center, and that all the religions of men and women, including our own, serve and revolve around God. A pluralistic ecumenism calls for a Copernican revolution in theology.³ We must shift from having our religion in the center and we must put God in the center: and have all the religions revolving around that center.

It is a new appreciation of the unique and positive contributions of other religions while challenging Christianity (or any other religion for that matter) to transcend its former narrow claim for itself as the exclusive purveyor of the total message of God and of Christ. It requires a preliminary purification and spiritual conversion to open the way toward a broader and less timebound cultural understanding of God's self-disclosure in Jesus. It leads us to further revelation of the universal Anointed One.

Such pluralism sees each of the world's major traditions as offering its own road to Truth. We must look empirically to discern whether their truths are competing, supplementary, contradictory, or mutually irrelevant. Such pluralism perceives the great religious traditions as concerned with the Real in itself, and the Real as manifested in human thought, action and tradition. The spiritual paths then all take the form of surmounting the ego's concern and opening oneself to the Real.

II. MERTON'S EXCLUSIVE ECUMENISM (1938-1948)

During the first decade following his conversion to Christianity (from twenty-three to thirty-three years old), Thomas Merton was molded in heart and in mind, in doctrine and worship, by the Christian theology of Rome. He had not really known any other theology until the time he consciously chose to believe in God and to become a Christian. The Roman Catholicism of the Council of Trent and of Vatican I became his sacrosanct

3. This expression is used by John Hick in *God and the Universe of Faiths* (London: Macmillan, 1973).

tradition, his authoritative past, his norm of orthodoxy.

In the 400 pages of his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton has only one entry on Buddhism and it is to blame Aldous Huxley "for his sympathy for Buddhism, and for the nihilistic character which he preferred to give to his mysticism and even to his ethics."⁴ In part two, section three of the autobiography. Merton develops his views on Hinduism. After a sympathetic description of the lifestyle and spirituality of Hindu monks in general, Merton still feels obliged to exclude them from any supernatural grace:

But the point is, although it may be more than the full flowering of the natural virtue of religion, with the other natural virtues, including a powerful natural charity, still the life of these pagan [sic] monks is one of such purity and holiness and peace, in the natural order, that it may put to shame the actual conduct of Christian religious, in spite of their advantages of constant access to all the means of grace. (SSM, p. 190)

For the young monk Merton, anyone who is not a Christian is excluded from the supernatural order, that is to say from the order of grace, from being truly adopted as children of God. Thus Merton makes the judgment:

Ultimately, I suppose all Oriental mysticism can be reduced to techniques that do the same thing, but in a far more subtle and advanced fashion: and if that is true, it is not mysticism at all. It remains purely in the natural order. That does not make it evil, *per se* (in itself), according to Christian standards: but it does not make it good in relation to the supernatural. It is simply more or less useless, except when it is mixed up with elements that are strictly diabolical. (SSM, p. 185)

His exclusivism, of course, not only rejected atheism and communism, but also excluded non-Catholic Christians (SSM, pp. 147, 173). Protestants were seen as second class Christians who are handed some truths of the Christian religion in an "extremely diluted form" (SSM, p. 174). Merton described the Church of England in this way:

The Church of England depends, for its existence, almost entirely on the solidarity and conservatism of the English ruling class. Its strength is not in anything supernatural, but in the strong social and racial instincts which bind the members of this caste together; and the English cling to their Church the way they cling to their King and to their old schools because of a big, vague, sweet complex of subjective dispositions regarding the English countryside, old castles and cottages, games of cricket [etc.]. . . . (SSM, pp. 69-70)

In his critique of Huxley, Merton the neophyte writes: "It seems to me that in discarding his family's tradition of materialism he has followed the old Protestant groove back into the heresies that make the material creation

4. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1948), p. 184. Hereafter referred to in the text as SSM.

evil of itself" (SSM, p. 184). And he is glad in the same vein to say of his Hindu friend, Bramachari: "The people he had the least respect for were all the borderline cases, the strange, eccentric sects, the Christian Scientists, the Oxford Group and all the rest of them. That was, in a sense, very comforting. Not that I was worried about them; but it comforted me in my respect for him" (SSM, p. 195).

It is no surprise, then, to find such a narrow ecumenism give rise to a one sided triumphant Roman Catholic exclusivism. Merton saw the Roman Catholics as solidly grounded in their faith: "Catholics knew what they believed, and knew what to teach, and all taught the same thing, and taught it with coordination and purpose and great effect" (SSM, p. 209). He could link himself firmly with William Blake, of whom he wrote: "In the latter part of his life, having discovered Dante, he came in contact, through him, with Catholicism, which he described as the only religion that really taught the love of God" (SSM, p. 188). He expressed an open enthusiasm for all the facets of Roman Catholicism:

The eloquence of this liturgy [the Roman Catholic Conventual Mass] was even more tremendous: and what it said was one, simple, cogent, tremendous truth: this church, the court of the Queen of Heaven, is the real capital of the country in which we are living. This is the center of all the vitality that is in America. This is the cause and reason why the nation is holding together. These men, hidden in the anonymity of their choir and their white cowls, are doing for their land what no army, no congress, no president could ever do as such: they are winning for it the grace and the protection and the friendship of God. (SSM, p. 318; see also p. 194)

We may sum up this stage of Merton's search by recalling a statement he made in the first edition of his book, *Seeds of Contemplation*. After having said that the saints arrived at the deepest knowledge of God through the tradition of prayer guarded and fostered by the Roman Catholic magisterium, Merton added: "For outside the magisterium directly guided by the spirit of God we find no such contemplation and no such union with Him — not only the void of Platonic idealism or the sensual dreams of Sufis."⁵ Fortunately, Merton concluded his autobiography with this Latin sentence: "Sit finis libri, non finis quaerendi" — "It may be the end of the book; it is not the end of the searching" (SSM, p. 423).

5. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1949), p. 229. Hereafter referred to in the text as SC.

III. MERTON'S INCLUSIVE ECUMENISM (1949-1959)

During the second decade following his conversion to Christianity (from thirty-four to forty-four years old), Father Louis researched and read much about spiritual traditions other than his own. In addition to his business contacts with his agent, Naomi Burton Stone, and his publishers, Merton kept as close to his friends as he could through letter writing, particularly with Robert Lax, Mark Van Doren, and Catherine de Hueck Doherty. He gradually reestablished contact with the world outside, while at the same time wanting firmly to live as a hermit. In 1959, an ecumenical meeting house was built in the woods of Gethsemani. During this period, Merton gradually recognized, not only that other Christian denominations are valid ways of reaching Jesus the Christ, but that other religions have a positive place in God's scheme of salvation. Still, Merton saw those other religions as merely partial expressions of the truth and grace to be found in their fullness only in Christianity.

Already in 1949, in the first revised edition of *Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton deleted the unfortunate sentence quoted at the end of section two.⁶ Donald Grayston, in his insightful study, considers the cancellation of that sentence as "perhaps his single most important change in *Seeds of Contemplation Revised*."⁷ We will return in the conclusion to the question of the dynamics of this change. Here I would note that it was one seeded indeed by contemplation, an inner spiritual change that gradually found its expression not in theological argument, but in the eloquent assertion characteristic of illuminated conviction. It was a slow illumination, shadowed with hesitation about the validity of life that it not explicitly Christ-centered. In 1955, Merton could still write:

Suffering is wasted if we suffer alone. Those who do not know Christ suffer alone. Their suffering is no communion. The awful solitude of suffering is not meant to seek communion in vain. But all communion is denied to it except that which unites our spirit with God in the Passion of Jesus Christ . . . How sad a thing is human love that ends with death: sadder when it pitifully cries to reach out to some futile communication with the dead. The poor little rice cakes at a pagan tomb! Sad, too, is the love that has no communion with those we love when they suffer.⁸

But gradually Merton's perspective broadens, so that he is able to write:

6. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*; revised edition (New York: New Directions, 1949), p. 229.
 7. Donald Grayston, *Thomas Merton, the Development of a Spiritual Theologian* (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1985), p. 99.
 8. Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1967), pp. 85-86.

The values hidden in Oriental thought actually reveal themselves only on the plane of spiritual experience, or perhaps, if you like, of aesthetic experience. They belong, of course, to the natural order: but they surely have deep affinities with supernatural wisdom itself.⁹

The spirit of Merton's broadening quest and of his search for historical perspective on it can perhaps best be indicated by quotations from two articles of this period.

First of all, it is quite clear that no non-Christian religion or philosophy has anything that Christianity needs, in so far as it is a supernaturally revealed religion. Yet from the point of view of the "incarnation" of revealed Christian truth in a social and cultural context, in man's actual history, we know how much Greek philosophy and Roman law contributed to the actual formation of Christian culture and even Christian spirituality.

(TMR, p. 302)

It was certainly right that Christian Europe should bring Christ to the Indians of Mexico and the Andes, as well as to the Hindus and the Chinese: but where they failed was in their inability to encounter Christ already potentially [not actually?] present in the Indians, the Hindus, and the Chinese God speaks, and God is to be heard, not only on Sinai, not only in my own heart, but in the voice of the stranger But they [the Christians] had omitted to listen to the voice of Christ in the unfamiliar accents of the Indian, as Clement [of Alexandria] had listened for it in the pre-Socratics.

(TMR, pp. 306-307)

In early spring 1959, Merton's ecumenism becomes broad enough for him to be able to write of his love of and interest in Zen Buddhism. He writes to the great Japanese scholar, Dr. Daisetz T. Suzuki:

I will not be so foolish as to pretend to you that I understand Zen. To be frank, I hardly understand Christianity.

. . . I have my own way to walk, and for some reason or other Zen is right in the middle of it wherever I go.

. . . It seems to me that Zen is the very atmosphere of the Gospels, and the Gospels are bursting with it. It is the proper climate for any monk, no matter what kind of monk he may be. If I could not breathe Zen I would probably die of spiritual asphyxiation. But I still don't know what it is. No matter. I don't know what the air is either.¹⁰

This is a far cry from Merton's overall condemnation of Oriental mysticism, less than ten years before, as "simply more or less useless, except when it is mixed up with elements that are strictly diabolical" (*SSM*, p. 185).

In April 1959, Merton is asking himself: what does it mean to say that "we are in Christ"? He shares his tentative answer in another letter to Suzuki:

9. Thomas Merton, *A Thomas Merton Reader*; ed. Thomas P. McDonnell (New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1962), p. 302. Hereafter referred to in the text as *TMR*.

10. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience & Social Concerns*; ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985), p. 561. Hereafter referred to in the text as *HGL*.

Does it mean conformity to a social and conventional image of Christ? Then we become involved and alienated in another projection: a Christ who is not Christ but the symbol of a certain sector of society, a certain group, a certain class, a certain culture . . . Fatal. The Christ we seek is within us, in our inmost self, is our inmost self, and yet infinitely transcends ourselves. We have to be "found in Him" and yet be perfectly ourselves and free from the domination of any image of him other than Himself. You see, that is the trouble with the Christian world. It is not dominated by Christ (which would be perfect freedom), it is enslaved by images and ideas of Christ that are creations and projections of men and stand in the way of God's freedom. But Christ Himself is in us as unknown and unseen. We follow Him, we find Him (it is like the cow-catching pictures?) and then He must vanish and we must go along without Him at our side. Why? Because He is even closer than that. He is *ourselves*. Oh my dear Dr. Suzuki, I know you will understand this so well, and so many people do not, even though they are "doctors in Israel." (HGL, p. 564)

Merton's ongoing contemplative quest for life, truth, and union with God is gradually taking him beyond the frontiers of historical Christianity. Merton is slowly but deeply developing a third level of world religious ecumenism. We might call to mind here Bonhoeffer's expression, a "religionless Christianity" and give it a new twist, a "Christless Christianity" or better a "Christless religiosity." I will return to this issue at the end of the next section.

IV. MERTON'S PLURALIST ECUMENISM (1960-1968)

The final years of Merton's life show a greater reaching-out, through research, correspondence and contemplation, to people of all religions and traditions. We can characterize that reaching-out by calling again on the correspondence with Suzuki with which this period begins.

The realization, the finding of ourselves in Christ . . . is all a free gift from God. With us, this stress on freedom, God's freedom, the indeterminateness of salvation, is the thing that corresponds to Zen in Christianity. The breakthrough that comes with the realization of what the finger of a koan is pointing to is like the breakthrough of the realization that a sacrament, for instance, is a finger pointing to the completely spontaneous Gift of Himself to us on the part of God — beyond and above images, outside of every idea, every law, every right or wrong, everything high or low, everything spiritual or material. Whether we are good or bad, wise or foolish, there is always this sudden irruption, this breakthrough of God's freedom into our life, turning the whole thing upside down so that it comes out, contrary to all expectation, right side up. This is grace, this is salvation, this is Christianity. And, so far as I can see, it is also very much like Zen. (HGL, p. 565)

The stress here, and increasingly in this last decade, is on freedom: the freedom of God, working "outside of all set forms, all rites, all theology,

all contemplation — everything” (*HGL*, p. 565). The rites remain important but the central focus of the spiritual search more and more becomes the mysterious freedom of God. Religious traditions other than Christianity are slowly — but tentatively, even to the end — regarded positively, and indeed sinned against by Christianity in not being so regarded.

And now one more thing. I feel obliged to say this because of the huge burden of the sins of the Western world, the burden of our sins toward the East: sins committed in the name of God and even in the name of Christ. I want to speak for this Western world which has been and is so utterly wrong. This world which has in past centuries broken in upon you and brought you our own confusion, our own alienation, our own decrepitude, our lack of culture, our lack of faith. And worst of all, that we have shamed the Truth of Christ by imposing upon you our own confusion as if it came from Christ. With us Christians tears of sorrow are supposed to be significant. If I wept until the end of the world, I could not signify enough of what this tragedy means. (*HGL*, pp. 565-566)¹¹

This letter expresses beautifully Merton's new quality of ecumenism. It is not just that his own faith and his own religion are no longer at the center, but Merton welcomes the vision of other faiths and of other religions to enlighten ours. He expresses his sadness at the failure of Christianity to go towards others to learn, shedding its need to make others into Christianity's own image and likeness. By the mid-60s he is expressing an open pluralism with clarity. Asked about the relative nearness to God of a fervent Sadhu and a superficial Christian, Merton responds:

I see no problem whatever about declaring that such a one [the fervent Sadhu] is closer to Him [God] and is even, by that fact, closer to Christ . . . I repeat my conviction as a Catholic that the Holy Spirit may perfectly well be more active in the heart of a Hindu monk than in my own. (*HGL*, pp. 338-339)

Yet there are still difficulties such as that brought out by Marco Pallis, an Englishman of Greek parentage and a student of Tibetan art, religion and culture, who wrote a twenty-four page letter to Merton in 1964 in which he particularly criticizes the distinction Merton makes between “natural” religion and “supernatural” religion. It is a distinction which Merton uses throughout his writings up to his very last talk given on the morning of his death — to maintain the superiority of Christianity as a supernatural religion while trying to respect the values found in other religions. In the traditional Roman Catholic teaching, a “natural” religion would be one which flows directly from our human nature, by using human reason alone,

11. We are reminded here of the Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 23, where Jesus is shown weeping and condemning the institutionalization which stifles the spirit and murders Christ within us. Life calls for order, and order destroys life, (that is to say that life, to sustain and develop itself, needs order; but that same order tends to sustain itself at the expense of the life it was called to serve).

while a "supernatural" religion is one which results from divine revelation through the gift of the Holy Spirit and of divine grace enlightening our human reason.¹² In his response at Easter 1965, Merton does not hesitate to question seriously the validity of such a distinction:

Of all the questions that I treated in my last letter to you, the one that still bothers me is that division "natural-supernatural" in religion and mysticism. I see more and more that it is misleading and unsatisfactory, and I also think that there is every solid reason even within the framework of Catholic orthodoxy to say that all the genuine living religious traditions can and must be said to originate in God and to be revelations of Him, some more, some less. And that it makes no sense to classify some of them as "natural." There is no merely natural "revelation" of God, and there is no merely natural mysticism (a contradiction in terms). However, this whole business of natural and supernatural requires a great deal of study. The terms are not clear or unambiguous even within the Catholic tradition, always. And outside it there is a great deal of confusion as far as I can see. It is something that requires a lot of study. (HGL, pp. 469-470)

In June 1965, Merton clarifies the meaning of that distinction in a letter to Yogashananda (Philip Griggs), an American Hindu in the Rama Krishna order:

The distinction lies in the fact that Catholics believe that the Church does possess a clearer and more perfect exoteric doctrine and sacramental system which "objectively" ought to be more secure and reliable a means for men to come to God and save their souls. Obviously this cannot be argued and scientifically proved, I simply state it as part of our belief in the Church. But the fact remains that God is not bound to confine His gifts to the framework of these external means, and in the end we are sanctified not merely by the instrumentality of doctrines and sacraments but by the Holy Spirit. (HGL, p. 339)

Two years later, February 1967, in a letter to Rosemary Radford Ruether, Merton challenges the right of Christianity to lord it over the other religions:

What does bother me theologically (I am not enough of a theologian to be really bothered by theological problems) is the sense that, when you go back into the history of the Church, you run into a bigger and bigger hole of unconscious bad faith, and at that point I get rather uneasy about our dictating to all the "other religions" that we are the one authentic outfit that has the real goods. (HGL, p. 501)

Still Christ remains at the center of Merton's spirituality and religion. But it is not the Christ of the Jesus of history. It is the Christ of the ikons.

The Christ of the ikons represents a traditional experience formulated in a theology of light, the ikon being a kind of sacramental medium for the illumination and awareness of the glory of Christ within us (in faith). Thus

12. For the relationship between nature and grace, see Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1967), chapter 4; also his *A Brief Catechesis on Nature and Grace* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1984); Karl Rahner, *Nature and Grace* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1964), chapter 5.

what one "sees" in prayer before an ikon is not an external representation of a historical person, but an interior presence in light, which is the glory of the transfigured Christ, the experience of which is transmitted in faith from generation to generation of those who have "seen," from the Apostles on down. I don't say this is a highly scientific theory or anything, but it is what the ikon tradition believes. So when I say that my Christ is the Christ of the ikons, I mean that he is reached not through any scientific study, but through direct faith and the mediation of the liturgy, art, worship, prayer, theology of light, etc., that is all bound up with the Russian and Greek tradition. But this is just by way of example, because obviously I am not hung up on orthodoxy. (HGL, pp. 642-643)

Merton struggles to liberate this ikonic Christ from Byzantine culture, indeed from all culture, knowing that this struggle is fraught with ambiguities. His Christ, *The Christ*, sheds all image, indeed one may say all local history, to be an illuminating Christ present in each one's history. It is The Christ born in us in poverty, The Christ of Eckhart, The Christ of Julian of Norwich, "The Christ of immediate experience all down through the mystical tradition but in each case detached from special historical and cultural residue . . . Christ not as object of seeing or study but Christ as center in Whom one is illuminated" (HGL, p. 643).

As he claims himself, Merton is reaching for an apophatic Christ, a light that is not light nor identifiable with any category or culture of light or enlightenment. And he writes of his efforts as provisional, tentative, requiring vision and lengthy reworking. Though "still hung up in a very traditional Christology," Merton realizes that a fuller and subtler understanding of Christ is central to world religious ecumenism. Thus, his Christology seriously changes over the years. Merton feels it is possible to believe simultaneously that God had acted decisively and for the salvation of all in the person of Jesus Christ and that Jews, Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists are warranted in remaining who they are and in following their own different ways to salvation.¹³ Merton's emphasis is on the mystery of the incarnation in its revealing and saving force for the total creation. The cosmic Christ is present to every aspect of human history and of human endeavor. He brings about a new creation, and as such he is the head not only of the Church but also of all humanity. He is present in all religious traditions and must be discovered there. We are reminded here of the first apologist,

13. For instance, Merton writes: "If I, as a Christian, believe that my first duty is to love and respect my fellowman in his personal frailty and perplexity, in his unique hazard and his need for trust, then I think that the refusal to let him alone, the inability to entrust him to God and to his own conscience, and the insistence on rejecting him as a person until he agrees with me, is simply a sign that my own faith is inadequate. I do not (in such a case) believe in the love of God for man, I simply itch to impose my own ideas on others. Claiming to love truth and my fellow man I am really only loving my own spiritual security, and using the Gospel as a gimmick for self-justification," *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p. 208.

Justin Martyr, who applied the Stoic concept of "Logos spermaticos" (fragmentary or seminal Word) to justify the universal claim for the Logos, Jesus Christ. Merton feels that the encounter of religions must take place in Christ, but in a Christ who does not belong to Christianity but to God. What we call Christianity is only one way among other possible ways of living and realizing the Christian faith.

Merton gradually realizes that every human journey faithfully made contains the experience of crucifixion and resurrection, and so partakes of the Christ experience. Merton considers unimportant, secondary, "somewhat irrelevant" the particular historical data regarding the death and resurrection of a historical personage, the knowledge even of Jesus as a man. Merton's approach allows him to be creative: it gives him the chance to recognize crucifixion and resurrection in himself and in others, without having to experience it in terms defined by others.

Merton now sees that all religions, including Christianity, are only a metaphor for what is beyond metaphor. However excellent a metaphor is, it is always below the reality it signifies. The language is always less than the experience it wants to communicate. For Merton the commitment is not to a formal religion, but to the "numinous" journey which constitutes life.

Merton's use of the term "Christ" in no way compromises the conviction of Christ's oneness or sovereignty. He does not, however, want to identify the term simply as a generic category by which to designate traditionally Christian denominations or groupings. Radical Christianity, for Merton, means a faith relationship characterized by total trust in and loyalty to the principle of being. Radical Christianity, in Merton's later usage, describes a form of faith in which the reality of Christ, transcendent, hidden, and ever exceeding our grasp, exerts transforming and redeeming tension on the structures of our common life and faith.¹⁴

So we return, briefly, to the issue raised at the end of the previous section, the issue of "Christless Christianity." Only briefly, for, as I note in conclusion, what is called for is a massive effort to develop a post-modern Christology, clear of the Western sins of backwardness, yet faithful to deep Christianity. I think now of the theological imagination of Aquinas who could think so transculturally as to envisage the possibility of many incarnations of any divine person, so pointing the way to a decultured redeemer.¹⁵

14. For more development, see my article "Good Faith and True Faith," *American Ecclesiastical Review* 169 (1975), pp. 545-566. See also Charles Davis' challenging study *What is Living, What is Dead in Christianity Today?* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986).

15. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Tertia Pars, Quaestio 3.

Again in the conclusion I will insist that Merton was not a theologian but a contemplative searcher who gave witness in a courageous handicapped journey. To give serious theological and ecumenical meaning to such a slogan as "Christless Christianity" is a task for the future.

V. CONCLUSION

The development of a world religious ecumenism and its theological appreciation is an ongoing process. Merton gradually discovered the remarkable kinship of the human spirit between those who know Christ as the absolute light of God ever present to us and those who do not, at least when both groups are faithful to the sources of honesty, courage and community within them. Merton experienced real encounters beyond dogma, beyond orthodoxy. He witnessed God revealing Themselves at all times to all people. Merton saw the absoluteness and reality of Christ as myth-symbol-reality of God's light within each human being. And thus Merton was led to question the ontological and functional uniqueness of Jesus of Nazareth.

Merton courageously faced the paradox of the Absolute in the particular and too often the resulting scandal of the particular. I have in mind here James Fowler's classic study, *Stages of Faith*:

We all know something about the scandal of the particular. The particular is the time-bound, the concrete, the local. The particular means this relatively undistinguished group, and not another. The particular has warts, and dust from the road; it has body odors and holes in its sandals. The scandal of particularity arises from the fact that over and over again disclosures of ultimate moment find expression to and among very finite, undistinguished, local and particular peoples. These particulars are scandalous precisely because something of transcendent and universal moment comes to expression in them or through them.¹⁶

Merton grew to appreciate the permanent and universal significance of particular historical events. He moved from tolerance to respect: from a conventional view that particularity is divisive and that inclusiveness must be abstract, to an appreciation of the various religions of the world, with all their cultural differences, their particular origins, their strange past histories. Merton recommends entering into a depth appropriation of what is

16. James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), p. 207.

particular in one's own religious paradigm as ultimate truth "for you." He sees the convergence of world religions as happening, not by some synthesis or reduction of the particularity of each religion, but eschatologically, as all religions surrender their cultural particularity before that God (or ultimate reality) who alone is truly universal and "all in all." Merton invites Christians to become centered in Christ, yet in that becoming, to live the paradox of ultimately having to die in Christ. I recall Merton's second letter to Dr. Suzuki in 1959, already quoted.

"To die to Christ" means to be prepared to let go of our images of Christ if need be so as better to embrace our brothers and sisters. There is only one type of Christology which Merton dislikes and considers "fatal," deadly: the one which wants to monopolize the Christ and which calls itself the party of Christ.¹⁷ "To die to Christ" for him is to die to oneself, it is to journey into a night of the senses and of the spirit that carries one "over the falls," to the end of the line without regard to any absoluteness in human explanation of the Absolute. This is what Merton was living when he wrote to his friend Daniel Berrigan in August 1964:

I realize that I am about at the end of some kind of a line. What line? What is the trolley I am probably getting off? The trolley is called a special kind of hope. The streetcar of expectation, of proximately to be fulfilled desire of betterment, of things becoming much more intelligible, of things being set in a new kind of order, and so on . . . I am waiting to fall over and it may take about ten more years of writing. When I fall over, it will be a big laugh because I wasn't there at all.

I do not propose this as a paradigm for anything or anyone, it is just something that happened (or did not happen, verbs are deceptive) to me (pronouns are even more deceptive than verbs).

I am sick up to the teeth and beyond the teeth, up to the eyes and beyond the eyes, with all forms of projects and expectations and statements and programs and explanations of anything, especially explanations about where we are all going, because where we are all going is where we went a long time ago, over the falls. We are in a new river and we don't know it. (HGL, pp. 83-84)

Merton felt himself a prisoner, indeed one already executed. But he also surrendered. And to surrender for him was to become the doorway where God and human meet, and to own one's own personal powerlessness. It means to give up all expectations. It is the beginning of empowerment in love. It is dying and being born and birthing, all in one. It is the divine Trinity in action within oneself. It is Brahma, Vishnu and Siva; the Creator, the

17. Less than two decades after Jesus's death and resurrection, Paul the Apostle was already warning the first Christians against monopolizing Christ: "Isn't that obvious from all the jealousy and wrangling that there is among you, from the way that you go on behaving like ordinary people? What could be more unspiritual than your slogans, 'I am for Paul' and 'I am for Apollos'?" (1 Corinthians 3: 3-4).

Preserver and the Renewer; the Parent, the Child and the Holy Spirit. *Tat tuam asi* — That thou art!

Merton gradually realized that the transcendent light is present within every single individual, and is enlightening and calling every person beyond herself or himself. Our answer constitutes our religion. In his notes for a paper to have been delivered at Calcutta, October 1968, Merton wrote:

Transcending the limits that separate subject from object and self from not-self, this development achieves a wholeness which is described in various ways by the different religions; a self-realization of atman, of Void, of life in Christ, of fana and baga (annihilation and reintegration according to Sufism), etc.¹⁸

According to Merton in this final stage of his living and its expression, we are all moved by the same Spirit present at the core of our being, calling us evermore to beauty, justice, oneness, life, God, Christ, Buddha, Nirvana. We must learn from each other's tentative, concrete, historical answer. Merton warns us not to stop at the symbols, at the finger pointing at the moon. The raft is not the shore.

Merton realized all this, not so much through his reason, as through his heart, his instincts, his emotions, his feelings, his body, his senses. We are all one. "Them is us!" It is not "they," the non-Christians, and "we," the Christians. It is us all together, for we are one. That was Merton's message in his last words spoken on the morning of December 10, 1968, the day he suddenly died in Bangkok, Thailand:

I believe that our renewal consists precisely in deepening this understanding and this grasp of that which is most real. And I believe that by openness to Buddhism, to Hinduism, and to these great Asian traditions, we stand a wonderful chance of learning more about the potentiality of our own traditions, because they have gone, from the natural [sic] point of view, so much deeper into this than we have. The combination of the natural [sic] techniques and the graces and the other things that have been manifested in Asia and the Christian liberty of the gospel should bring us all at last to that full and transcendent liberty which is beyond mere cultural differences and mere externals — and mere this or that.¹⁹ (AJTM, p. 343)

In this conclusion I have purposely included the foregoing extracts as intimating what I might call the final mood of Merton's ecumenism. They carry forward an element that was present throughout Merton's spiritual search, the element of heartfelt contemplation that somehow did not focus

18. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*; ed. Naomi Burton, Brother Patrick Hart & James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973), p. 310. Hereafter referred to in the text as AJTM.

19. Let us notice how much, up to the very end of his life, Merton feels obliged to censor himself and maintain, at least in public, the distinction between "natural" and "supernatural," a distinction which he, himself, privately considered nonsensical (HGL, pp. 469-470).

on theology. One might speak of his search — recall his apophatic Christ as one within apophatic theology rather than kataphatic theology. As I noted, he invited fellow Christians to share in that existential contemplative reaching-out, and in these final pages I would ask about the quality and character of that sharing, and so return to the initial issue of a theology of pluralist ecumenism.²⁰

First I would note that Merton's wish was for a spiritual sharing and a sharing of the heart rather than a theological sharing, and that wish seems to be fulfilled in the various concrete efforts, such as the Christian Zen tradition of which William Johnston writes, to open Western contemplative traditions to the techniques of the Orient.²¹ But I would note that his expression of that wish necessarily led him to write, and such writing at its best has somehow to reach beyond metaphor in these post-modern times. The great mystics of both West and East undoubtedly wrote magnificently in metaphors or koans, of mansions and depths and still points. But after Kierkegaard and Blondel and Husserl, the sweep of varieties of existentialism, the data of consciousness have begun to invite more metatheological reflection, and the limitation is more pressing in that the real problems of modern science lie within such data. In a world in which differentiations of consciousness occur beyond the realm of common sense and theory, the "cloud of unknowing" occurs more subtly in subjects, and requires more subtle reflection and cultivation.²² Merton's heroic searchings occurred without such a context, nor was his theological background linked to the innovative theological efforts of the last decades of his life.²³ Those who would share his apophatic search deserve sounder theological support.

So there is need for a kataphatic contemplation that would mediate theological redemption from the sins of backward arrogance of an exclusive Christianity, sins which Merton only slowly and painfully admitted. There is need for a massive effort of theological consciousness to reach a

20. I am indebted in what follows to a book by Philip McShane, *Process: Introducing Themselves to Young Christian Minds* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1991), especially to section 1 of chapter 2, on Christian Zen, and section 4 of chapter 5, on the centrality of Mystery.

21. In this context, among the many books written by William Johnston, we would especially recommend *Silent Music: The Science of Meditation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974); *The Still Point: Reflections on Zen and Christian Mysticism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1970); *Christian Zen* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971); *The Mysticism of the Cloud of Unknowing: An Interpretation*, with a foreword by Thomas Merton (New York: Desclée, 1967).

22. See Bernard Lonergan's *Method in Theology* (New York: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1972), p. 266; also Raimundo Panikkar's *The Silence of God* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1989).

23. One has only to read the names mentioned by Merton and his mentors' [Part IV, chapter 2, of *A Thomas Merton Reader* (1962), pp. 231-247].

historical consciousness, with focus in transcendence, that would locate the fine point of Christ, within cosmic Word, as transcultural and potentially multicultural.²⁴ So, two complementary contemplations, apophatic and kataphatic, would carry forward the global religious quest for the light that is for us wayfarers a darkness beyond light.²⁵ "For now," as Paul puts it in his first letter to the Christian community at Corinth, "we see through a glass darkly."²⁶

24. Bernard Lonergan identifies the focus of mystery in *De Deo Trino I* (Rome: Gregorian University, 1964), pp. 274-275.

25. The mystical approach to the Absolute is roughly divided into two main ways: the apophatic one and the kataphatic one. The apophatic way, a *via negationis*, negates image: God is unlike everything else. It seeks oneness with God for taking everything from mind or eyes that is not infinite God Itself. We must pass beyond words and concepts. The kataphatic way is the affirmation of images: it starts from creatures and through them ascends step by step towards the living God. Every creature is seen as a reflection or a living image of the Creator.

26. 1 Corinthians 13: 12 (King James Version).