

THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD AND THE EXPERIENCE OF NOTHINGNESS IN THOMAS MERTON

by **James Conner**, O.C.S.O.

*"Leave nothingness as it is. In it, He is present."*¹

In these words, Thomas Merton expresses what may be the central message of all his writings. However this expression took gradual shape over the course of the years. He himself acknowledged the fact that his earlier writings contained a certain element of naivete which colored his approach to the life of contemplation. One of his earliest books was entitled *Exile Ends in Glory*, the life of a Cistercian nun; and the original title of the work which will be studied here was *The Dark Path*. This change of imagery, from glory to darkness, expresses the progression of his writings and of his life. This also expresses the extent to which Merton's writings moved from a theory about contemplation to the fruit of his own experience of the contemplative life. As his experience matured, it took on more of the flavor of that dark night through which one passes on the way to oneness with God.

1. Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience*, Edited by Brother Patrick Hart and published in *Cistercian Studies* in eight installments during 1983 and 1984; see Section VI, page 150. Hereafter referred to in the text as *IE*.

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John F. Teahan has pointed out that most studies of Merton have strangely ignored one of the major aspects of his work: his appropriation of the apophatic tradition in Christian mysticism.² Merton himself wrote:

Now while the Christian contemplative must certainly develop by study the theological understanding of the concepts about God, he is mainly called to penetrate the wordless darkness and apophatic light of an experience beyond concepts, and here he gradually becomes familiar with a God Who is "absent" and as it were "non-existent" to all human experience.³

Many studies have been done on the apophatic aspect of Christian mysticism.⁴ In contemplation God is known in darkness, by not knowing Him. God is sought and is found through not finding Him. In a taped lecture given to the monks of Gethsemani, Merton quotes Meister Eckhart: "Seek God so as never to find Him."⁵ The point Eckhart is making is that, once you seem to have found God, it is not He Whom you have found. Once you seem to grasp God, He eludes you. For God is not an object or a thing alongside other objects and things. He is not even a person alongside other persons. God is the All Whom we can discover only in the experience of not discovering Him.

In developing such a point, Merton was totally faithful to the whole of Christian tradition. God Himself had said: "No one can see Me and live" (Exodus 33:20). God refused to give a Name to Moses other than simply "I AM." Any other name or expression runs the risk of becoming an idol. St. Thomas Aquinas, the great teacher of Western Scholasticism, says that anything that can be affirmed about God must also be denied of Him, for our concepts are all limited and can be applied to God only in an analogical manner.⁶

However it is not principally reason that taught Merton this, but more particularly experience itself. Life is being constantly affected by our experiences. Edward Schillebeeckx says that experience means learning through "direct" contact with people and things.⁷ New experience is

2. Cited in William H. Shannon's *Thomas Merton's Dark Path*; rev. ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1987), p. 11.

3. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971), p. 7.

4. See William Johnston, S.J., "The Experience of God in Christian Apophatic Mysticism" in *God: The Contemporary Discussion*; ed. by Frederick Sontag and M. Darrol Bryant (New York: Rose of Sharon Press, 1982), pp. 363-375.

5. Thomas Merton, *The Merton Tapes/ Series III*, Chappaqua: Electronic Paperbacks, 1983, tape 4 ("The Ways of God"), side 1.

6. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, Q. 13, art. 10.

7. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), p. 31. Hereafter referred to as *Schillebeeckx*.

always related to the knowledge that we have already gained. Consequently there is a reciprocal relationship between knowledge and experience, states Schillebeeckx:

The connection between experience and thought is that the constantly unforeseen content of new experiences keeps forcing us to think again. On the one hand, thought makes experience possible, while on the other it is experience that makes new thinking necessary. (Schillebeeckx, p. 31)

Though we are constructive, rational beings, reality remains the final criterion. Reality confronts the human tendency to build idols and keeps us from erecting a theoretical system which would only serve as a bulwark against the incursion of the living God. It shows us the total inadequacy of our concepts and attempts to express the ineffable Mystery in words or even in dogmas.

Schillebeeckx speaks of that "permanent resistance of reality to our rational inventions" which forces us to "constantly new and untried models of thought." This is the desert which the Israelites of old had to experience in order to purify their understanding of the "I AM" who was leading them. This is the same desert which every person must encounter in his / her openness to the living God. By coming up against resistance, our planned search is continually forced to follow a new direction. In this way, "truth" directs our ever wider searching.

In view of the negativity or the "refractoriness" in all this, one might say that the intensity but also the authority of the experience of life culminates in "suffering", in the suffering of disaster and failure, in the suffering of grief, in the suffering of evil, in the suffering of love. Here are the great elements of the revelation of reality in and through men's *finite experience*. (Schillebeeckx, p. 36)

It was precisely such elements in Merton's own life which led him, as it has led every person open to reality, to formulate his experience of God more in a negative fashion. And yet for him this very negativity was not separate from its basis in the reality of faith. The human is simply a creature of God. Job said: "Were He to recall his breath, to draw His breathing back into Himself, things of flesh would perish altogether and man would return to dust" (Job 34:14-15). Because of this we are totally dependent upon God and are but nothing of ourselves. However as a result of the Fall, we have forgotten that we are nothing. We have the "illusion" that we are something of ourselves, and a great part of our lives is spent in striving to maintain this illusion for ourselves and for one another.

The struggle between this illusion, or what Merton calls the "false self," and the attempts of Reality to break through to the "true self" forms

the basis for his study on *The Inner Experience*. This struggle can be seen particularly in a section which is entitled "Sacred and Secular." This division is not the same as that made by many theologians in past years, separating all reality into that which is objectively "sacred" or pertaining to God and the realm of the holy, and "secular" or pertaining to the worldly or mundane. Since Merton is speaking of an inner reality, his distinction pertains more to the *attitude we have in dealing with all reality*.

Secular life is a life of vain hopes, imprisoned in the illusion of newness and change, an illusion which brings us constantly back to the same old point, the contemplation of our own nothingness. In the words of Pascal: "Nothing is so unbearable to a man as to be completely at rest, without passions, without busyness, without diversion, without study. He then feels his nothingness, his forlornness, his insufficiency, his dependence, his weakness, his emptiness . . ." (Pensees, 131). (*IE*, III, 10)

Merton says that "secular society" is by its nature committed to what Pascal calls "diversion," that is, to the frantic effort at quieting our "anguish." This anguish arises whenever reality threatens to break through the illusion that we have so carefully erected. Such an anguish forces us to a fork in the road of life. The sacred and the secular reflect two kinds of dependence. The secular depends on things it needs for diversion and for escape from its own nothingness. The world makes use of this spirit to create artificial needs which it then pretends to "satisfy." In actual fact, it is simply a complicity on both sides to maintain this illusion of our own false strength and greatness, of our "false self."

In the sacred society, on the other hand, man admits no dependence on anything lower than himself, or even "outside" himself in a spatial sense. His only Master is God. He rules us by liberating us and raising us to union with Himself *from within*. And in so doing He liberates us from our dependence on created things outside us. We use them and dominate them, so that they exist for our sakes, and not we for theirs. (*IE*, III, 213-214)

In an article on "Buddhism and the Modern World," Merton treats this same point. He quotes Shin'ichi Hisamatsu, a Zen scholar, as saying:

In Zen, true authority is that Self which is itself authority and does not rely on anything . . . True authority is where there is no distinction between that which relies and that which is relied upon.⁸

This Self is the "True Self" which is the Self the Father created and loved from all eternity. It is the Self in Christ. It is the Self God looked upon when He said: "Let us make man in our own image and likeness" (Genesis 1:26).

8. Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1969), p. 283. Hereafter referred to in the text as *MZM*.

This Self is one with God and finds its meaning and true reality only in Him. St. Paul reminded the men of Athens that "in Him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). This is the true authority which does not rely on anything and has no need of anything outside itself. "I can do all things in Him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13). Our strength comes from this God Who has given Himself to be our own deepest Self, and consequently there remains no distinction between "that which relies and that which is relied on."

Professor Hisamatsu speaks of the root problem of social and psychological alienation. Merton calls this a "modern and western term for a condition that Zen has been at grips with since it began: the condition of servile dependence on something which is really one's own but which is experienced as outside, above, more perfect than one's self" (MZM, p. 283). Because we despair of this inner authority and strength, because we forget that all that we are is a sheer gift from God, we succumb to the "secular" mentality and desperately try to avoid the awareness of that nothingness which is all that we are of ourselves. Merton reminds us that, if we have true faith and trust in the God Who is our All, then we can begin to take on that "sacred" mentality.

The truly sacred attitude toward life is in no sense an escape from the sense of nothingness that assails us when we are left alone with ourselves. On the contrary, it penetrates into that darkness and that nothingness, realizing that the mercy of God has transformed our nothingness into His temple and believing that in our darkness His light has hidden itself. Hence the sacred attitude is one that does not recoil from our own inner emptiness, but rather penetrates into it with awe and reverence, and with the awareness of Mystery. (IE, pp. 213-214)

The sacred attitude enables us to be open to that truth "which comes to us by the alienation and disorientation of what we have already achieved and planned" (Schillebeeckx, 35). Reality of life situations shows that the self we have imagined ourselves to be is false. But it also shows that the God Whom we have imagined to be separate from us is also false, for He is nearer to us than we are to ourselves. Consequently we do not have to try to build a false self, even a virtuous one, to confront this "God."

It is therefore a matter of great courage and spiritual energy to turn away from diversion and prepare to meet, face to face, that *immediate* experience of life which is intolerable to the exterior man. This is possible only when, by a gift of God (St. Thomas would say it was the Gift of Fear or sacred awe) we are able to see our inner selves not as a vacuum but as an *infinite depth*, not as emptiness but as fullness. This change of perspective is impossible as long as we are afraid of our own nothingness, as long as we are afraid of fear, afraid of poverty, afraid of boredom -- as long as we run away from ourselves. (IE, p. 214)

And yet this emptiness and nothingness which we discover in ourselves need not be feared. It is not a negative quality which would make us distant from God. On the contrary, it is the very title that we have to lay claim that God be "my God." As Merton says elsewhere:

The man who has truly found his spiritual nakedness, who has realized he is empty, is not just a self that has *acquired* emptiness or *become* empty. He just "is empty from the beginning," as Dr. Suzuki has observed. That is to say he loves with a purity and freedom that spring spontaneously and directly from the fact that he has fully recovered the divine likeness, and is now fully his true self because he is lost in God. He is one with God and identified with God and hence knows nothing of any ego in himself. All he knows is love.⁹

In Merton's dialogue with Dr. Suzuki on the question of Emptiness, reference was made to the Commentary of Meister Eckhart on the beatitude "Blessed are the poor in spirit." The Zen Master stated:

As Buddhists would say, the realization of Emptiness is no more, no less than seeing into the nonexistence of a thingish ego-substance. This is the greatest stumbling block in our spiritual discipline, which in actuality consists not in getting rid of the self but in realizing the fact that there is no such existence from the first. "Being poor" does not mean "becoming poor;" "being poor" means to be from the beginning not in possession of anything and not giving away what one has. Nothing to gain, nothing to lose; nothing to give, nothing to take; to be just so, and yet to be rich in inexhaustible possibilities -- this is to be "poor" in its most proper and characteristic sense of the word. This is what all religious experience tells us. To be absolutely nothing is to be everything. When one is in possession of something, that something will keep all other somethings from coming in. (ZBA, p. 109)

Suzuki says that this can be so because Buddhism sees the equation as being "zero equals infinity and infinity equals zero." The "zero" is not a mathematical symbol. It is the infinite -- "a storehouse or womb of all possible good or values." This is what Paul means when he speaks of "having nothing, yet possessing all things" (2 Corinthians 6:10). It is precisely the experience of nothingness within ourselves which opens the way to possess the fullness of God. This is also an expression of that "true wisdom" in contrast to the "foolishness of human wisdom" which Paul speaks of in I Corinthians Ch. 1 and 2. "As Scripture says: 'If anyone wants to boast, let him boast in the Lord'" (1 Corinthians 1:31). One who has the "sacred" attitude can "glory in our infirmity in order that the power of Christ may abide in us" (2 Corinthians 12:9). Merton developed this even further in a later article:

9. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 129. Hereafter referred to in the text as ZBA.

The utter "self-emptying" of Christ -- and the self-emptying which makes the disciple one with Christ in *His* kenosis -- can be understood and has been understood in a very Zen-like sense as far as psychology and experience are concerned. (ZBA, p. 21)

Like Suzuki, Merton makes use of Meister Eckhart to express this experience. Eckhart says:

A man should be so poor that he is not and has not a place for God to act in. To reserve a place would be to maintain distinctions . . . For if God wants to act in the soul, He Himself must be the place in which He acts -- and that is what He would like to do . . . It is here, in this poverty, that man regains the eternal being that once he was, now is, and evermore shall be.

(ZBA, p. 23)

Since it is only the "poor in spirit" who can experience this, it means that one must be willing to face this poverty in daily experience of life. Paul refers to those "unutterable groanings" with which the Spirit of God Himself intercedes on our behalf since we do not know even how to pray. James Dunn comments on this passage from Galatians as follows:

What Paul seems to have in mind is the only form of prayer left to the Christian believer when he comes to the end of himself, frustrated by his own weakness and baffled by his own ignorance of God and God's Will. Here we see the two sides of charismatic consciousness -- the consciousness of human impotence and the consciousness of divine power in and through that weakness. It is this consciousness that the Spirit is acting in and through his complete impotence at the most fundamental level of his relationship with the Father which gives him confidence that the Spirit is at work in all his other relationships and circumstances: "in everything He (the Spirit) cooperates for good with those who love God."

(Romans 8:26-28)¹⁰

In contrast to all of this is the person whose view of life is purely "secular." Unless one can accept this inner poverty and seeming emptiness with humility and trust in God, one will react against it and ultimately come to hate oneself. Merton says:

He hates himself in the sense that he cannot stand to be "with" or "by" himself. And because he hates himself, he also tends to hate God, because he cannot abide the inner loneliness which must be suffered and accepted before God can be found. His rebellion against his own inner loneliness and poverty turns into pride. Pride is the fixation of the exterior self upon itself, and the rejection of all other elements in the self for which it is incapable of assuming responsibility . . . The basic and most fundamental problem of the spiritual life is this acceptance of our hidden and dark self, with which we tend to identify all the evil that is in us. (IE, p. 214)

When one comes face to face with the inner poverty which opens us to the presence of the Divine, the reaction is normally a profound sense of

10. James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), p. 241.

our own sinfulness. Such was the experience of Isaiah when he found himself before the throne of God (Isaiah Ch. 6). Such was also the experience of Peter when confronted by that miraculous catch of fish which could have been effected only by the divine power: "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man" (Luke 5:8). Merton says that there is a subtle but inescapable connection between the "sacred" attitude and the acceptance of one's inmost self. As we recognize this emptiness of the true Self, we become aware of the extent to which we are a potentiality not only for the luminous presence of the divine, but also a potentiality for darkness and sin. He says:

This implies humility, or full acceptance of all that we tend to reject and ignore in ourselves. The inner self is "purified" by the acknowledgment of sin, not precisely because the inner self is a sea of sin, but because both our sinfulness and our interiority tend to be rejected in one and the same movement by the exterior self, and relegated to the same darkness, so that when the inner self is brought back to light, sin emerges and is liquidated by the assuming of responsibility and sorrow. (*IE*, p. 214)

It is once again the mysterious paradox that we find God in not finding Him, that we arrive in seeming to be further away, that it is only when we despair of our own power that the power of God can reveal itself in us. "For power is made perfect in infirmity" (2 Corinthians 12:9). Merton says:

Thus the man with the "sacred" view is one who does not need to hate himself, and is never afraid or ashamed to remain with his own loneliness, for in it he is at peace, and through it he comes to the presence of God. (*IE*, p. 215)

Moreover as a result of such an experience he can see others as they also truly are and has no need either to identify them with their sin. This engenders a spirit of true compassion and love for the other.

He is able, in them also, to see below the surface and to guess at the presence of the inner and innocent self that is also the image of God. Such a one is able to help others to find God in themselves, educating them in confidence by the respect he is able to feel for them. Thus he is capable of allaying some of their fears and helping them to put up with themselves, until they become interiorly quiet and learn to see God in the depths of their own poverty. (*IE*, p. 215)

Thus the acceptance of our own inner poverty brings us to a true compassion for others, a true love of them as God loves them with that creative love which enables them to become what they are. This opens the way to the further mission of the person of faith. Since we are one with God in our deepest self, we are also one with all mankind, and the path we walk and the search we pursue is done not only for ourselves but for all.

The contemplative is one who is, like the Servant of Yahweh, "acquainted with infirmity," not only with his own sin but with the sin of the whole world, which he takes upon himself because he is a man among men, and cannot dissociate himself from the works of other men. The contemplative life in our time is therefore necessarily modified by the sins of our age. They bring down upon us a cloud of darkness far more terrible than the innocent night of unknowing. Contemplation in the age of Auschwitz, Solovky and Karaganda is something darker and more fearsome than contemplation in the age of the Church Fathers. For that very reason, the urge to seek a path of spiritual light can be a subtle temptation to sin. It certainly is sin if it means the frank rejection of the burden of our age, an escape into unreality and spiritual illusion, so as not to share the misery of other men. (*IE*, IV, p. 149)

This oneness with humanity brings us to the even deeper level of the way in which we experience God in nothingness. For we not only experience God in our own nothingness, but we enter into an experience of the very Nothingness of God. It would be relatively easy to accept our own nothingness if that were accompanied with a profound sense of the power of God within us. But we find that in this attempt to come before the Lord with open hands and heart, we are left only with that even greater sense of nothingness. And yet that in itself is the surest indication of the fact that we have come into the presence of the living God, the great and tremendous Mystery of God, rather than some fabrication of our own making.

Nietzsche, speaking for our world, proclaimed that God was dead. And that is why, in our contemplation, God must often seem to be absent, as though dead. But the truth of our contemplation is in this: that never more than today has He made His presence felt by "being absent." In this, then, we are most faithful: that we prefer the darkness, and in the very depths of our being value this emptiness and apparent absence. We need not struggle vainly to make Him present, if such struggles are a mockery. Leave nothingness as it is. In it, He is present. (*IE*, p. 150)

This brings us to the very heart of the matter. Since God is God, that is, since the only way of adequately describing Him is as the Ultimate Mystery, this Mystery most surely reveals Himself to us in this very experience of emptiness and nothingness. Anything else that we might experience would not truly be that Mystery, but rather something of our own making or simply an experience of our own self.

Another way of expressing this can be seen in the oneness that exists between God and ourselves as a result of the outpouring of His Love, which is what our True Self really is. Another Japanese Zen Master, Keiji Nishitani, has developed possible connections between Christianity and Zen Buddhism. He admits that our encounter with God's transcendence and omnipresence in an existential way can be termed a personal relationship between God and man; yet it must be so in a very different sense from what

is usually meant by "personal," that is, a relationship of the "I-Thou" type. Seen from this perspective, it should rather be called "impersonal." Yet this "impersonal" is not seen as being the opposite of the personal. It is not impersonal in the usual sense of the word. To avoid this problem, he suggests that such a relationship be called "impersonally personal" or "personally impersonal." Such seemingly contradictory terms are not meant simply to confuse the issue, but rather to impress on us that the relationship we have with God is like nothing else in our human experience. Rather it parallels that relationship within the life of the Trinity Itself.

In Christianity, what is called the Holy Spirit possesses such characteristics. At the same time that It is thought of as one persona in the Trinity of "personal" God, it is not other than God's Love Itself, the breath of God: a sort of impersonal person or personal imperson, as it were.¹¹

He is suggesting that just as Christianity can recognize the Holy Spirit as One Person within the Trinity, though still not having Three Gods because of that complete Oneness that exists within the Trinity, so we could recognize that what seems to be the absence of God is simply an experience of that profound oneness between God and ourselves. That oneness has been given to us in Jesus Christ, giving us His own Spirit to be our very own Spirit. Merton speaks of this:

It is evident that the Holy Spirit has been given to us as a true and literal gift of God! *Donum Dei Altissimi*. He is truly our possession, which means to say that He becomes as it were our own spirit, speaking within our own being. It is He that becomes our spiritual and divine self. . . . The life of contemplation is then not simply a life of human technique and discipline; it is the life of the Holy Spirit in our inmost souls. (*IE*, p. 209)

It is striking that a Zen Buddhist should understand this reality more profoundly than we Western Christians do. The extent to which this is connected with the Mystery of God the Trinity and the Mystery of True Self is perhaps closer to what is experienced in that mysterious process of piercing through the meaning of a koan. Nishitani says:

Despite the great similarity between Zen and Christian mysticism, we should not overlook an essential difference between them. Pseudo-Dionysius calls that which is beyond all affirmation and negation by the term "Him." Many Christian mystics call God "Thou." In Zen, however, what is beyond all affirmation and all negation -- that is, Ultimate Reality -- should not be "Him" or "Thou" but "Self" or one's "True Self." I am not concerned here with verbal expressions, but the reality behind the words. (*AN*, p. 141)

11. Quoted by Hans Waldenfels in *Absolute Nothingness*, Foundations for a Buddhist-Christian Dialogue (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 142. Hereafter referred to in the text as *AN*.

Perhaps the answer to this can be found in the Pauline "koan" used by Nishitani when talking with the theologians of Basel:

I find a statement in Paul which I, coming out of Zen Buddhism, believe I understand only too well. He says he has suffered a death. "I live now, not I, but Christ lives in me." That makes sense to me immediately. Allow me only to ask you this: Who is speaking here? (*AN*, p. 157)

Nishitani's European colleagues made no reply to his question. And yet contained in that "koan" is the whole mystery of this absence and presence, of this emptiness and fullness, of this sacred and secular.

Merton realized that the life of contemplation cannot be relegated merely to the realm of the objectively sacred. He saw that it must become an all-pervasive attitude which touches and affects every aspect of our life. If it does not, then the "secular" attitude will vitiate even those areas which are seen as more "holy."

The visible and symbolic expressions of the divine tend to become opaque in their constant use by men, so that we stop at them and no longer go through them to God. Hence Holy Communion, for instance, tends to become a routine and "secularized" activity when it is sought not so much as a mystical contact with the Incarnate Word of God and with all the members of His Mystical Body, but rather as a way of gaining social approval and allaying feelings of anxiety. In this way even the most sacred realities can be debased and, without totally losing their sacred character, enter into the round of secular "diversion." (*IE*, p. 213)

Even those sacred realities or times can be used as a way of evading that sense of emptiness in which we encounter that God Who is the very "ground" of our being. At that level of our being, which is to be activated in every part of our life, we develop that sacred attitude which is "one of reverence, awe and silence before the mystery that begins to take place within us when we become aware of our inmost self" (*IE*, p. 215).

The sacred attitude is then one of deep and fundamental respect for the real in whatever form it may present itself. The secular attitude is one of gross disrespect for reality, upon which the worldly mind seeks only to force its own crude patterns. (*IE*, p. 215)

Such a fundamental attitude is what Merton is trying to inculcate in his writing. It expresses itself in that openness to all things and all people as a revelation of the divine. Merton says that "it is this delicate instinct to yield to the slightest movement of God's love that makes the true contemplative."

This same phenomenon can be found in Christian tradition in the figure of Christ hanging on the Cross. The emptiness of God is manifested in the pouring out of His Love in Jesus Christ and the emptiness of man is seen in the radical obedience of Jesus, in His total surrender to this "other"

whom He calls "God" and Whom He addresses as "Father." In Jesus of Nazareth the self-emptying of God and the self-emptying of man coincide. Only in death are things shown to be what they really are. For only in the radical letting go of life is it revealed

whether the fullness reached in death is the previously only disguised emptiness and nothingness of man, or vice versa, whether the emptiness that shows itself in death is only the appearance (deceiving to us who have not yet died) of a true fullness. (AN, p. 159)

The fullness of life is revealed only in death, just as the complete presence of God and all creation is revealed only in that moment of absolute solitariness when one confronts that mystery of death. It is only this final experience which can ultimately break through the illusions and refuges that we cling to, even in the most remote parts of our heart. It is then that we will finally yield ourselves into the hands of the One Whom Jesus Christ revealed to us as being "at one with us as He is at one with the Father; that they may be perfectly One" (John 17).

By looking at these passages in Merton we see that his awareness of darkness and nothingness evolved so that traditional Christianity and the insights which he had learned from Buddhism were not contradictory, but rather complementary. It is especially useful to realize that Merton was totally faithful to Christian tradition while he also was able in writings, such as in *The Inner Experience*, to reach out to other world traditions.