

## Thomas Merton and Paramahansa Yogananda: Two Prayerful Mergings of Cult and Culture

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Readers of Thomas Merton have known that while being a faithful member of the Catholic Church he was certainly also catholic in the broader meaning. His final journey was like the cymbal crash at the end of symphony of many years of prayerful investigating of different religions and many schools of thought. During his last months he visited with Hindus, Buddhists and other groups in his Asian tour. Such encounters bore equal weight with his participation at the conference where he gave what was to be his last sharing of insights about monastic life. At what turned out to be Merton's last address, he pointed out that monasticism from the Christian or Eastern traditions were equally concerned with "...penetrat[ing] by detachment and purity of heart to the inner secret of the ground of ... ordinary experience, [and thus] attain to a liberty that nobody can touch, that nobody can affect, that no political change of circumstances can do anything to."<sup>1</sup>

The title of his talk on December 10, 1968 was "Marxism and Monastic Perspectives," and it suggested many direct parallels with Buddhist thought and prayer, and, importantly, concludes, "...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."<sup>2</sup> In his journal Merton mentions that he discussed points in this planned talk with the *Dalai Lama*.

The tenet we investigate here is that there is a striking consonance of Merton's teaching with the Hindu person who is perhaps the most published in the US, and in perhaps the entire western hemisphere, Paramahansa Yogananda. The contention of this study is that there is a spiritual union of complementarily that, when explored, will prove helpful both to readers of Merton and to readers of Yogananda.

The question, of course, immediately presents itself: "Is this a forced fit?" A corollary might be "Where do they meet in any way that one can truthfully assert such spiritual unity?" Table 1 pre-

sents a biographical and personal comparison. They were born only twenty-two years apart, Merton having early education in Europe and in the US and Yogananda in India. Both, however, spent a goodly portion of their time in countries other than those of their birth (UK and US for Merton, US for Indian-born Yogananda). The French-born Merton lived for fifty-four years and Yogananda for fifty-nine; both amassed many followers during their lives, and more followers than ever after their deaths. Both of these visionaries wrote books that are today being read more than ever, and are ever being translated into new languages. Yogananda has "centers" and "temples" and a non-denominational church dedicated to his teaching. There are academic centers, societies and "chapters" and "reading rooms and libraries" along with The International Thomas Merton Society to cherish, hold and propagate Merton's works.

Table 1

	Merton	Yogananda
Birth	Jan, 1915	Jan, 1893
Date bodily death	Dec. 8, 1968	Mar.7, 1952
Time "in body"	53.8 years	58.2 years
Life altering event	1938, age 23	1909, age 16
Autobiography published	1948	1946
Age @autobio. publication	33	53
Books written	45+	15+
Poems written	hundreds	hundreds
Artistic renderings	hundreds	unknown
Copies sold	tens of millions	tens of millions
Languages of autobiography	dozens	dozens
Occasion of bodily death	after speech, quickly	after speeck, quickly
Today's followers	worldwide	worldwide
Type of follower	monastics, but mostly lay persons	monastics, but mostly lay persons
Center of prayer life	liturgy, meditation	yoga, meditation
Taught system of meditation	no	yes
Lived under human guru	no	yes
Served as guru to followers	no	yes

Both of these spiritual masters had their autobiographies published in the nineteen-forties, post-WWII, and both books continue to sell and be translated widely sixty years later. At this writing Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi*<sup>3</sup> and Merton's *The Seven Storey*

*Mountain*<sup>4</sup> both remain in print in many languages, and continue to be the prime sellers of the authors' many works. The influence of both is growing with no sign of waning. Each was highly evolved, and had a major event to trigger a deeper spiritual life: Merton's was his preparation for and receiving his Baptism<sup>5</sup> (age twenty-three) and Yogananda's his search for and finding his guru<sup>6</sup> (age seventeen). Merton had lost his mother at age six and Yogananda at age eleven.

Merton's Baptismal preparation had such intensity as to include recitation of the Divine Office, meditation, and certain aspects in his daily routines which most may associate only with monastic life. He had made inquiries of various churches, including the Quakers, the Mormons, and the Church of England without any lasting interest. His reading of Étienne Gilson<sup>7</sup> had piqued his respect for the Catholic notion of God. Later, in 1951, he wrote to Gilson to thank him his influence.<sup>8</sup> His love for Blake's poetry had led him to Gerard Manley Hopkins. Upon reading Hopkins' letter to Cardinal Newman about becoming a Catholic Merton states "...something began to stir within me, something began to push me, to prompt me ... like a voice. 'What are you waiting for?...Why don't you do it?'"<sup>9</sup> To quell the voice he smoked a cigarette (as was his wont) but the voice repeated "What are you waiting for?" His nine-block walk in the rain followed, leading to his visit with Father Ford at Corpus Christi Parish, the discussion, and departing the priest's house with three books and appointments for twice-a-week instructions.

During Merton's instruction period in 1938 he had frequent visits with Dan Walsh, the philosophy professor and friend, who introduced him also to St. Anselm, St. Bernard, St. Bonaventure, and Hugh and Richard of St. Victor as well as Duns Scotus. He was a recent graduate of literature at Columbia, and a graduate student in the same field. "I now began to burn with desire for Baptism, and to throw out hints and try to determine when I would be received into the Church."<sup>10</sup> On November 16, 1938, during the ceremony of Baptism, he recalled "...I had entered into the everlasting movement of that gravitation which is the very life and spirit of God: God's own gravitation towards the depths of His own infinite nature, His goodness without end."<sup>11</sup>

Yogananda (born Mukunda lal Ghosh) sought a pathway to channel his severe need for a life of prayer and meditation by spending time in an ashram recommended to him. He followed

the ashram's rules, meditated faithfully, but had no inward satisfaction from communication with the leader, swami Dayananda. One day in 1910, at age 17, he prayed "Merciful Mother of the universe, teach me thyself through vision, or through a guru sent by Thee." After some hours he reports "...suddenly I felt lifted as though bodily to a sphere unsubscribed: 'Thy Master cometh to-day.'"<sup>12</sup> At that moment one of the priests sent him and another postulant on an errand to the market. He continues "as Habu and I moved on, I turned my head (and) a Christ-like man in the ocher robes of a swami stood motionless at the end of the lane." Thinking he was mentally confused (for he had already a master at his ashram) he continued. "After ten minutes, I felt heavy numbness in my feet. As though turned to stone, they were unable to carry me farther, (and he said) the saint is magnetically drawing me to him." He returned and the swami was still there. Mukunda shouted "Gurudeva!" ("Beloved Guru"). The teacher responded, "O my own, you have come to me...How many years I have waited for you."<sup>13</sup> They both promised unconditional love, and Yogananda promised life-long obedience to his guru as the first words from his mouth.

After their different launchings into their respective states (baptized Catholic and Hindu disciple) both dedicated the major effort of their days and indeed their lives to prayer and to writing. Merton and Yogananda have both had many books written about their thought and their teachings. The influence of both is still growing at this writing several decades after their deaths. Regarding their public life, Yogananda was a public speaker whose lectures on yoga and self-realization filled large venues on three continents. Merton spoke quite selectively and nearly always to small groups, yet of course he is now recognized world-wide.

The Hindu man arrived in Boston in 1920 and continued his work until his death thirty-two years later in the United States. The European-born Merton came to live in New York in 1936 and continued his work for thirty-two years until his death. Both died after giving addresses on cross-cultural matters, addresses which they wanted to give for many years: Merton on "Marxism and Monastic Perspectives"<sup>14</sup> and Yogananda on "My India / My America."<sup>15</sup> Merton died in Bangkok, Yogananda, in Los Angeles. Consistent with the catholic character of both, the "Westerner" died in Asia; the "Asian" died in America.

### This Author's Lens

It is difficult to describe the biases and assumptions of the comparison of these two remarkable men of God without some personal admission or confession. As a seminarian who went through the pre-Vatican II seminary curriculum for secular priests (1954 to 1961) leading to my ordination, I read *The Seven Storey Mountain*, *The Sign of Jonas*, (1953) and *No Man Is an Island*<sup>16</sup> (1955). During those years we had a daily twenty-minute morning meditation and twenty-minute afternoon quiet chapel visit, but were not taught that contemplation would be central to our life-style. As seminarians we were perhaps trained rather than educated in spiritual matters, and assumed that the "real meditative life" was for monastics.

As an "activist" priest for the next nine-plus years I knew of Merton's support for the reforms of the Vatican Council, his ecumenism and his backing of the peace movement,<sup>17</sup> but did not really "discover" him until some thirty years later as an ex-priest. Having just retired from work I became aware of a local ITMS chapter in Atlanta which met monthly to discuss Merton's books and ideas. Such a discovery meant that in addition to knowing Merton as a fine writer and critical observer of the social and ecclesial milieu, it began to become clear that this remarkable monk was preparing monastics as well as lay and ordained Christians—in fact, all humankind—toward the life of prayer and meditation as a desirable life-style for all God-seekers. He was quite more catholic than most in our church. His death in late 1968 freed him from the dilution by the Roman Curia of much of the Spirit-content of Vatican II. The still promising re-evangelizing of his beloved Catholic church voted by the Ecumenical Council was to be ignored in large measure for the next four decades.

I discovered Yogananda in 2000 (My wife had bought his *Autobiography of a Yogi* in 1980) when I found the book on my shelf shortly after beginning to attend the Merton discussion group. From that day until now it is a rare day that I don't read from both of these inspired teachers. Little by little I have perceived the Christ of the New Testament very clearly known, loved and explained equally well both by this Hindu man, and by this worldly convert. I became active in a meditation/study group at the Self-Realization Fellowship Center in Atlanta in 2002 and after a few years of study was initiated into Kriya Yoga.

### A Common Sense of Urgency

For both Yogananda and Merton the interest in both Eastern and Western spirituality was laced with urgency. Yogananda's interest in the West is recounted several times in his *Autobiography*. After spending some time in the ashram of his guru, Swami Sri Yukteswar, the basic sameness of all true religions had become clear to him; that is, that there is a basic core of truth, wisdom and spiritual desire present in all God-seekers. In an unusual encounter with his paramguru (guru of his guru), some twenty years previously, Yukteswar quotes Mahavatar Babaji as saying "East and West must establish a golden middle path of activity and spirituality combined; you...have a part to play in the coming harmonious exchange between Orient and Occident. Some years hence I shall send you a disciple whom you can train for yoga dissemination in the West...I perceive potential saints in America and Europe, waiting to be awakened."<sup>18</sup>

While Merton did not have his interest in Eastern spirituality pre-announced by any guru, his vision was no less clear. In *Mystics and Zen Masters* he recalls: "A hundred years ago America began to discover the Orient and its philosophical tradition.... America did not have the patience to continue what was happily begun. The door that had opened for an instant, closed again for a century....[and now] seems to be opening again.... It is imperative for us to find out what is inside this fabulous edifice."<sup>19</sup> Later in the same essay ("Love and Tao") he concludes, "The horizons of the world are no longer confined to Europe and America. We have to gain new perspectives, and on this our spiritual and even our physical survival may depend."<sup>20</sup> This can easily be seen today as a prescient statement given the large overlap in culture and economy of today's Europe and America in the West and China, and Japan in Asia.

Today some half-century after the death of these two remarkable men of God we who choose to study their works can begin to see how each contributed to the bridge between East and West which is becoming more and more needed to maintain the human understanding in our ever-shrinking world. Seeing through the outward differences to the core of unity among God-seekers is key to understanding our two monks. Merton might be described as joyously conflicted by knowing that his personal calling from God was to be a monk, but indeed one who eventually longed more for

a hermitage than a monastery. He also knew that due to the unique role he played in the lives of faithful God-seeking persons his every word was likely to be published, which was joyous because he saw that his mission was to share the contemplative life with others. This led quite naturally to his lifelong need to understand the spiritual orientation of persons who were so obviously on a God-ward path ("by your fruits they will know you"), yet were not directly associated with Christianity.

As a Christian humanist Merton concluded that the spiritual teaching guiding non-Christian seekers must indeed be from the Holy Spirit. Thus Christian seekers must learn of and from them. As the airplane taking him on his 1968 journey eastward lifted off, he wrote in his journal that he was departing "...with Christian mantras and a great sense of destiny" and added "May I not come back without having settled the great affair." He continued "I am going home, to the home where I have never been in this body."<sup>21</sup>

It might be hyperbole to compare him to a mendicant with his begging bowl seeking the rice of their spiritual wisdom, but still he was going as a brother, a fellow contemplative, to learn and to share the ways in which other seekers find unity with God.

Yogananda reached his own catholicity by the route of his guru, Swami Sri Yukteswar. Born in 1893, he was seventeen when he met Yukteswar and asked to be his disciple upon their first meeting. After some years, Yogananda matriculated at the local university and obtained a degree.

After receiving his university degree (Calcutta University, 1915), Mukunda continued at the ashram but asked to be made a monk in order to remove the family pressures to enter into business and become a householder, which is the Indian position for those who marry and raise a family. Yukteswar happily agreed and at the ceremony of initiation said "Forsaking your family name of Mukunda lal Ghosh, henceforth you shall be called Yogananda of the Giri branch of the swami Order."<sup>22</sup> "Yogananda" means "bliss from yoga."

After some years of preparation and fund-raising, Yogananda founded the Ranchi School for Boys (for teaching skills in academics, living, and yoga) and was its headmaster for some three years. That was the time when Yukteswar was to give him his "commission" which was to consume the balance of his time on earth.

Yukteswar had received an invitation to represent Indian mysticism at an international congress of religious leaders in Boston

in the fall of 1920. The group asked for Yukteswar to deliver a talk on "The Science of Religion" or to name a delegate in his stead. Sri Yukteswar had been expecting the day when he would fulfill the prescient word of Babaji given to him in the city of Allahabad on the occasion of the Kumbha Mela (the decennial, largest gathering of swamis, disciples, Hindu religious persons in the world) many years previously. So he commissioned Yogananda to represent him. Through a sizable gift from his father, Yogananda undertook the long boat journey to Boston, where his address was enthusiastically received. He remained in Boston some three years to learn American culture and ways. He was a learner and a teacher, and gained followers.

That same year he founded Self Realization Fellowship (SRF) "to disseminate among the nations knowledge of definite scientific techniques for attaining direct personal experience of God."<sup>23</sup> In 1924 he undertook a lecture tour of the country, going east to west and attracting much publicity and large crowds in many cities. Ending in California, he set up the international headquarters for SRF, where it remains today. Since that date several dozen temples and centers have been opened in over thirty countries, some four-hundred monastics serve the community of those practicing yoga and meditation techniques of self-realization as taught by Yogananda.

### Shared Spiritual Themes

There are many common topics shared by Merton and Yogananda. Here follow some that have such commonalities as to make our basic tenet easily seen.

#### 1. Centrality of Nicodemus' encounter and "new birth"

Although Jesus attracted the masses of humble Jews, he also drew the attention of some of the best known rulers and scholars, among them Nicodemus. Merton is perhaps at his most catholic and mystical center when he writes of the need for Rebirth, which he describes as the "answer [to] a deeper need in man: a need that cannot be satisfied merely by the ritual celebration of man's oneness with nature."<sup>24</sup>

Nicodemus came and expressed, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who comes from God; for no one could perform the signs that you do unless God were with him."<sup>25</sup> Merton notes that



Christ brushes aside Nicodemus' compliment that he is a "true master," and that Jesus "... says there is something of much more crucial importance than being the disciple of a spiritual master.... A man must be born again, or in a better translation, 'born from above' (John 3:3)."<sup>26</sup> Merton underscores that Jesus makes very clear from the outset that the old (false) self must die to the new man. Nicodemus, the scholar, asks, "How can a grown man be born? Can he go back into his mother's womb...?"<sup>27</sup>

So eager was Jesus to have this fine, but obviously fearful, Jew understand that he went on to clarify that what is born of flesh is flesh, what is born of Spirit is Spirit. This mystery is a new kind of birth, and Merton, understanding the ardor of Christ to help Nicodemus grasp its importance, underscores Jesus' insistence for "a renewed transformation, a 'passover' in which man is progressively liberated from selfishness."<sup>28</sup> In fact being a Christian demands one "To become completely transparent and allow Love to shine by itself is the maturity of the 'New Man.'"<sup>29</sup>

Merton concludes his commentary on rebirth and the new man, insisting that the reborn Christian renounce his own will to dominate and let the Spirit act secretly in and through him. He then adds that "This aspect of Christianity will...be intelligible to those in an Asian culture.... For the religions of Asia also have long sought to ...initiate [man] into the full and complete reality of an inner peace which is secret and beyond explanation."<sup>30</sup> Many readers of Merton will also recall the new birth in Christ as revealed in the meditations of his pivotal work by the same name of *The New Man* in 1961, and in his last unfinished work, *The Inner Experience*.

<sup>31</sup>

Yogananda's stress on the "second birth of man – in Spirit" is no less clear or intense. In the posthumously published two volumes entitled *The Second Coming of Christ*,<sup>32</sup> there are seventy-five chapters (called discourses), and three are dedicated to the new birth as outlined in the visit of Nicodemus. Yogananda perceives Jesus' insistence on the second birth as "...the necessity of which Jesus speaks, [and which therefore] admits us to the land of intuitional perception." This is parallel with Merton's "renewed transformation" which Yogananda compares to the faith of "illuminated Christian mystics – St. Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, Jan van Ruysbroeck, Meister Eckhart, Henry Suso, Johannes Tauler..."<sup>33</sup> All of these spiritual thinkers also found liberal citations in

Merton's own works, including *The Seven Storey Mountain*,<sup>34</sup> *The Inner Experience*,<sup>35</sup> *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.<sup>36</sup>

Yogananda perceives Jesus' handling of Nicodemus' objection to "rebirth" in terms of "...removing the debris of karma [effects of one's past actions] from the individualized God-image of his soul."<sup>37</sup> Such is quite consistent with Yogananda's assumption of reincarnation. In other words Jesus was stressing that after "Man's soul becomes incarnate—born of water or protoplasm—he should transcend the moral impositions of the body by self-development. Through awakening the 'sixth sense' of intuition, and opening the spiritual eye, his illumined consciousness can enter into the kingdom of God."<sup>38</sup>

In his third chapter on the secret visit by Nicodemus, Yogananda concludes with a cogent explanation of Christ's words that "...as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up; that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life"<sup>39</sup> with the awakening of the kundalini. To Yogananda, new birth in the Spirit happens when the kundalini (coiled-up serpentine) power of the lower chakras moves to the higher chakras of consciousness of the Son of Man. The self-awareness that Christ had of his union with the Father is the most desirable end-point which he modeled for us. Jesus was instructing Nicodemus that such a union is possible and indeed the necessary end-point for all to be "born again." This very overt yogic / Hindu reference is an obvious difference from Merton's explanation of the Christ-Nicodemus encounter, yet it is nonetheless clear that each one of these monk-mystics perceived the Jesus-Nicodemus encounter as epitomizing the struggle of humankind to return to God, its Source.

At this point the basic difference in approach to spiritual matters between the two might be underscored. This author is unaware of explicit mentioning of man's cerebro-spinal energy centers in Merton's writings. These energy centers (chakras) are central to many practices of Eastern traditional medicine (e.g., acupuncture and acupressure are fully dependent on this cerebro-spinal grid), yoga practices and systems of meditation and contemplation. Merton readers recall the Dalai Lama's questioning of Merton about posture of meditation, since the straight spine in meditation is the fundament of all oriental methods of centering prayer.<sup>40</sup>

Yogananda, however, expounds on the chakras in myriad places in his writings. He even considers that the mention in St. John's "Book of Revelation" of the "seven seals, seven stars, seven churches with their seven angels and seven golden candlesticks"<sup>41</sup> are all very direct references to the chakras, or energy grid in every human.

In *The Bhagavad Gita* Yogananda explains that the "spiritual spine" (Sanskrit "sushumna") "...extends from the coccygeal center (muladhara chakra) to the brain. This spiritual or astral spine controls the sympathetic nervous system of the gross physical body."<sup>42</sup> The five spinal chakras are described as "wheels" and are located at the coccygeal, the sacral, lumbar, dorsal, cervical areas of the spine. The two cerebral chakras are located at the medulla oblongata, and between the eyes, called "spiritual eye" or the "Christ consciousness center." Yogananda uses this latter term literally thousands of times in his writings. God's grace energizes and magnetizes the sushumna in order to facilitate the meditation process to assist the meditator to ascend more and more from the basic human functions to the direct knowledge of God. Here follows the yogic premises of such development.

Table 2: The Chakras and their Functions

Cerebro-spinal #	Chakras	Positive Powers	Relate to physical cosmos parts:	Negative Powers
7	1000 Petalled Lotus	Christ consciousness	Astral/Causal Cosmos	False ego, greed
	House of Lords			
6	Medulla	Thinking	Super ether	Evil thoughts
5	Cervix	Vocalizing	Ether	Cruel, dishonest speech
4	Dorsal	Peaceful Sensation	Air	Sensuous Touch
	House of Commons			
3	Lumbar	Tactile sense	Fire	Material attachments
2	Sacrum	Reproduction	Water	Indiscriminate sex
1	Coccyx	Elimination	Earth	Retains poison

The "climbing" up the ladder of chakras is the spiritual journey of everyman. Previous to entering the God-ward path the life force is most identified with chakra 1, in which energy flows outward, focusing on safety and survival issues. The five senses occupy the large part of one's attention. Reason enters more directly in the second chakra, freeing attention to be aware of wellness, quality

of life and need for ethical behavior. After success in habitually avoiding evil and seeking good, the third chakra energies move toward the interior freedom of seeking personal honor, self-esteem and sensitivity.

As the thinking person perfects these basic life skills, he is prepared to move from the "House of Commons to the House of Lords, the fourth to sixth chakras."<sup>43</sup> By meditation the devotee starts on the spiritual path of re-uniting with God as his Source. The fourth chakra (dorsal area, corresponding to the heart-center or thymus gland area) is the beginning of experiencing the soul's realizing that it is associated with the bliss which is God. "I am he" is an ancient chant known to yogic meditators.<sup>44</sup> More devotion and deeper meditation will free the devotee from bodily matters into the blissful world of limitless bliss (samadi) and indeed to union with Christ in this life. Here one is living from and seeing with the spiritual eye,<sup>45</sup> so often referenced by Yogananda as the Christ-centered spiritual eye invisibly present between the eyebrows.

While the Merton reader has no overt citations of such concepts, he receives some strong ideas of the East-West possible union from the inclusion in his *Asian Journal* of Appendix IV, "Monastic Experience and East-West Dialogue."<sup>46</sup> The notes for a paper to have been delivered in Calcutta sum up Merton's thoughts on the rapprochement between monastics of both traditions, written previous to his last departure from home and prior to those inchoate ideas gleaned from the journey itself. He remarks that there exists a real possibility for exchange of a transformation of religious consciousness of both groups. Merton immediately adds that at our current state of "religious maturity" one can indeed remain perfectly faithful to a Christian monastic life and yet learn in depth from, say, a Buddhist or Hindu discipline and experience, and finishes the discussion by saying, "...I believe that some of us need to do this in order to improve the quality of our own...life and even help in the task of...renewal."<sup>47</sup>

## 2. Gandhi's spiritual mission to the modern world

Gandhi's profound influence on both Merton and Yogananda is evident not only in that each stresses the same central ideas of ahimsa (non-violence) and satyagraha (holding on to truth), but that both see him as the very embodiment of Christian and human virtues as preached and lived by Jesus himself.

Born on October 2, 1869 in Porbandar, province of Kathiawad, at a time when India was owned and operated by Britain, Mohandas Gandhi was a loyal subject of the crown. He attended Indian schools, and subsequently studied law in England. His work in South Africa led him to see the extraordinary evil involved in discrimination based not on capability but on race, class, caste or religion. His many experiences in S. Africa, along with his discovery of the *Bhagavad Gita*<sup>48</sup> in the English translation of Sir Edwin Arnold, led him to his lifelong, historic battle for peace. His weapons were prayer and fasting.

Merton's *Gandhi on Non-Violence*<sup>49</sup> consists of a twenty page essay followed by selections from Gandhi's *Non-Violence in Peace and War*,<sup>50</sup> with commentary. Merton briefly notes that his early life had prepared Gandhi more for activity than contemplation. His fully unexpected encounter with racism in South Africa while traveling on a totally different legal matter politicized the young London-educated lawyer. This led to his helping to liberate parts of Africa from such obvious abuse, and to the turning, or more properly returning to his Indian/Hindu roots.

In section one of his essay, Merton demonstrates in detail that Gandhi's *ahimsa* (loosely translated as "non-violence" or peace in all circumstances) is not a means to an end (freedom and independence for India), but rather is the result of his *satyagraha*, a term coined by Gandhi meaning "holding on to truth," and entailing resistance by non-violent means.<sup>51</sup> Satyagraha was the very core of Gandhi's life, which resisted by non-approval and civil disobedience to unjust laws, yet always performed in the spirit of love for oppressor and oppressed. Violence in action and even in thought had no place in satyagraha.

Even though Gandhi concentrated on equality and freedom for the lowest of all classes, the Harijan (untouchables), Merton observes that "*the people of India were awakening in him.... It was not 'Indian thought' or 'Indian spirituality' that was stirring in him, but India herself. It was the spiritual consciousness of a people that awakened in the spirit of one person.*"<sup>52</sup> Merton therefore sees Gandhi as the ultimate renunciant dressed in homespun even though "...surrounded not only by respect but by worship."<sup>53</sup>

In the Mahatma ("great soul"), Merton sees Christianity and Hinduism as melded, along with activity and contemplation. With some comparison to Christ as well as to Aquinas and to Erasmus, Merton sums up Gandhi's lesson and legacy to the world: "The

evils we suffer cannot be eliminated by a violent attack in which one sector of humanity flies at another in destructive fury. Our evils are common and the solution of them can only be common."<sup>54</sup> And then he sees this Hindu as so close to the heart of Christ, stating that Gandhi taught us that "To forgive others and to forget their offense is to enter with them into the healing mystery of death and resurrection in Christ."<sup>55</sup>

Yogananda devoted a chapter of his *Autobiography of a Yogi* and a chapter in *The Divine Romance*<sup>56</sup> to his 1935 visit to Gandhi's ashram in Wardha.<sup>57</sup> He gives a detailed account of the eleven vows (the Satyagraha) observed in a spirit of humility by the disciples of Gandhi at the ashram as: truth, non-stealing, celibacy, non-possession, body labor, control of the palate, fearlessness, equal respect for all religions, use of home goods (made in India), freedom from unsociability.<sup>58</sup> Among the twenty-five disciples in the ashram were those of lowly castes as well as the high-born British woman Madelyn Slade, who spun cloth from cotton, served the poor and fit into the group with all naturalness.

Yogananda sees Gandhi as the father of a nation, who encapsulated all of the Hindu qualities of the vows above with a full and joyous spirit, having no self-seeking, and indeed distributing his goods to the poorest when he began his ashram in Wardha. Gandhi discussed the celibacy vow taken by himself and his wife after the birth of their fourth child, and how he saw the control of the palate as a necessary means to self-control.

In response to Yogananda's request to "...tell me your definition of ahimsa," Gandhi replied "the avoidance of harm to any living creature in thought or deed," further explaining that "I could not kill a cobra without violating two of my vows – fearlessness and non-killing. I cannot lower my standards to suit my circumstances."<sup>59</sup>

Gandhi asked and received Kriya yoga from Yogananda<sup>60</sup> and spent their day together talking of the ahimsa and the satyagraha, the very terms to be selected by Merton in 1964 for explaining the Mahatma's philosophy. Issued in 1946, the *Autobiography* added a page "in memoriam" in later editions, recalling Einstein's tribute to Gandhi, stating that the "generations to come may scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon the earth."

In the same section Yogananda also quotes the Vatican dispatch that "...the assassination caused great sorrow [to the Church];

Gandhi is mourned as an apostle of Christian virtues."<sup>61</sup> Yogananda had himself spoken of the mahatma during his lifetime in Christian terms, stating that he "...is reestablishing the Christian doctrine. All men—white, brown, yellow and black—are descendants of Adam and Eve, our common grandparents, and as such have one blood flowing in their veins."<sup>62</sup>

### 3. Ecstatic Moments

Merton and Yogananda both undoubtedly had occasions when the sense of time and place evaporated into the Christ-conscious state. The unity of mankind can be called the most telling characteristic of such an event. Here perhaps are the two best known examples. Many Merton students recall his journal when he wrote:

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream....The conception of separation from the world [is] a complete illusion ... [I]t cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.<sup>63</sup>

Yogananda, some months after joining his guru's ashram, recounts the following:

One morning at Sri Yukteswar's hermitage, I experienced a divine state in which I was in tune with everything. I could not distinguish between my brother and anyone else. Later, when I went to Master, he said, 'your training is finished. You feel the same love for all.' Master knew my thoughts and feelings. My guru was not interested in what people were saying, but in what they were thinking. He was always conscious of everything that was going on, always calm he had expanded his consciousness into Christ Consciousness.<sup>64</sup>

By this Paramahansa means that just as with Christ, others can expand consciousness to a point beyond everyday experience.

Both stressed that having visionary experiences of cosmic consciousness, while possible for all God-seekers, was not an outcome to be sought. More central to the seeker is the peace and the constant striving to do God's work, while being detached from any consolation or outcome of the work.

#### 4. False self and attachment vs. true self and detachment

These two masters spent a large part of their effort in teaching and encouraging their readers to develop their most authentic self, and showing that this can be possible only by a highly evolved sense of detachment. For Merton to build and live by the "true self" one must replace the "false self" that is part of the human illusion of separateness from God and from each other.

Merton contends: "The secret of interior peace is detachment," and that even if one desires the interior life, constant recollection and prayer, "...You will never be able to have perfect interior peace and recollection unless you are detached even from the desire of peace and recollection. You will never be able to pray perfectly until you are detached from the pleasures of prayer."<sup>65</sup>

He urges that we take this hard lesson from those who have continued to seek God first and always, saying that even the mystic "...lives in emptiness, in freedom, as if he had no longer a limited and exclusive 'self' that distinguished him from God and other men." Thus detachment is a function not of the sweetness and peace that sometimes accompany our prayer, but of the "...resoluteness, the determination to renounce all things for the love of God, without which....we remain aghast at our own weakness, our own poverty, our evasions...."<sup>66</sup>

By continuing in one's resolve, Merton contends that "...the false, exterior self is caught in all its naked nothingness and immediately dispelled as an illusion."<sup>67</sup> And then "If we enter into ourselves, find our true self, and then pass 'beyond' the inner 'I,' we sail forth into the immense darkness in which we confront the 'I AM' of the Almighty.... For us, there is an infinite metaphysical gulf between the being of God and the being of the soul, between the 'I' of the Almighty and our own inner 'I.' Yet paradoxically our inmost 'I' exists in God and God dwells in it."<sup>68</sup> Such is the consolation he gives to the struggling prayerful seeker.

The utter centrality of detachment to enabling the God-seeker to experience deep prayer and self-realization was also a constant



part of Yogananda's instructions to his monks and followers. "Scripture" to Yogananda consisted in three sacred canons of writings: the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali, the *Bhagavad Gita* from the times of the Ancient Vedas and Hindu rishis, and the Old and New Testament of the Judeo-Christian Bible.

In his commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita*, he cites Lord Krishna's admonition to his disciple: "...renunciation, O mighty Arjuna, is difficult to achieve without God-uniting actions [yoga]. By the practice of yoga, the muni ["he whose mind is absorbed in God"] quickly attains the infinite. "No Taint [karmic involvement] touches the man of action who ...has conquered ego consciousness, who is victorious over his senses, and who feels his self as the Self existing in all beings."<sup>69</sup> He teaches that "attachment is the offspring of desire," and only "desire-less action" in which one follows God's will without any personal attachment to the outcome of his prayer or of his activity, is bound for God. He will perceive his self as the Self existing in all things. Over and over he perceives desire as leading to "anger and lust"<sup>70</sup> whereas performing right action without regard to the outcome leads to the soul-perfection, which transforms the little self (ego) into the divine self (soul), and only thus does the God-seeker perceive his unity with God, perceiving "the self as the Self."

Continuing in Volume Two of the same work on the *Bhagavad Gita* he minces no words, stating "Good actions...that are performed with any motive in the conscious or subconscious minds other than the desire to please God are ...done with longing for their fruit. No matter how noble the activity, if it diverts one from the Supreme Goal by its consequent karmic bondage it does not belong to the category of the highest dutiful actions."<sup>71</sup> A priest serving in India applied this very notion from the *Gita* text of detachment to Thomas Merton, calling his work and spirit of personal detachment that of "a modern Arjuna."<sup>72</sup>

As stated above, Yogananda named his non-denominational church "Self-Realization Fellowship," and all centers, temples and other entities bear that same title today. In his commentary on the original sin of Adam and its consequences for all humans, Merton used that term thus: "Contemplation is the highest and most paradoxical form of self-realization, attained by apparent self-annihilation."<sup>73</sup> His usage in this one instance describes quite precisely the return to man before his separation from God, which is the goal of Yogananda's self-realization movement.

## Conclusion

Many more likenesses appear in the writings of these men of God, but the above will serve to show the basic tenet we are investigating, that there is much consonance and harmony between these two spiritual masters. By implication one can also infer that same harmony in true religions and among spirit-filled persons, rather than seeing sectarian biases which have often been recognized in the past.

We have attempted to show the sameness of many central spiritual themes of these two strangers and their perceptions of: Christ's message to Nicodemus, Gandhi as a modern Christ in Hindu clothing, the vast overlap of East and West in so many ways (perhaps a subtle updating of R. Kipling!), as well as the deep similarities in their concepts of detachment and the need to develop and realize the true Self. We have also noted (*supra*, p.173) that we find no mention of the cerebro-spinal plexes with its *seven* energy centers, so central to Yogananda, in Merton's writings. Still one who knows the multi-layered mind of Merton will smile when thinking about the title he gave to his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

## Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, eds., Naomi Burton Stone, Br. Patrick Hart & James Laughlin (New York: New Directions), pp. 342.

2. Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, p. 343.

3. Paramahansa Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi* (Los Angeles: Self-Realization Press, 1946).

4. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948).

5. Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, pp. 222-23.

6. Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi*, pp. 106-107.

7. Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 171.

8. Merton's gratitude to Gilson is perhaps better expressed in a private correspondence of Nov. 12, 1951. Merton says in part "...I want to do what I should have done long ago—write you a line to assure your of my recognition of a spiritual debt to you which I too sketchily indicated in the pages of *The Seven Storey Mountain*—...To you...I owe the Catholic faith. That is to say I owe you my life. This is no small debt" (Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity*, ed., Br. Patrick Hart [New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990], pp. 30-31).

9. Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 215.

10. Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 217.
11. Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 225.
12. Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi*, p. 105.
13. Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi*, pp. 106-107.
14. Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, pp. 326-43.
15. Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*; Thomas Merton, *Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953); Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955).
16. International Publications Council of Self-Realization Fellowship, *Personal Accounts of Master's Last Days* (Los Angeles: Self-Realization Press, 1958), p. 67-69.
17. Many references, such as Thomas Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980), pp. 67, et seq.
18. Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi*, pp. 389-91.
19. Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967), p. 69.
20. Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, p.80.
21. Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, pp. 4-5.
22. Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi*, p. 258.
23. See "Aims and Ideals of Self-Realization fellowship," in Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi*, p. 573.
24. Merton, *Love and Living*, eds., Naomi Burton Stone & Br. Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979), p. 194.
25. John 3:14-15.
26. Merton, *Love and Living*, p. 197.
27. Merton, *Love and Living*, p. 197.
28. Merton, *Love and Living*, p. 199.
29. Merton, *Love and Living*, p. 199.
30. Merton, *Love and Living*, p. 202.
31. Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience*, ed., William H. Shannon (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2003), p. 62.
32. Paramahansa Yogananda, *The Second Coming of Christ* (Los Angeles: Self-Realization Fellowship Press, 2004).
33. Yogananda, *The Second Coming of Christ*, p. 241.
34. Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, pp. 30, 173, 175, 186, 200, 218ff., 230, 238, 242, 261, 267, 288, 290, 303ff., 327, 333, 337ff., 352ff., 418, 428ff.
35. Merton, *The Inner Experience*, pp. 13-14, 75, 82, 84, 86, 157, 162.
36. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), pp. 42-43, 115, 121, 168-70, 182, 184-90, 200, 241, 267, 290, 293.
37. Yogananda, *The Second Coming of Christ*, P. 244.
38. Yogananda, *The Second Coming of Christ*, P. 245.
39. John 3:14-15.

40. Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, pp. 112-13.
41. Yogananda, *The Second Coming of Christ*, p. 109.
42. Yogananda, *The Bagavad Gita: Royal Science of God-Realization*, pp. 60-62.
43. Yogananda, *The Bagavad Gita: Royal Science of God-Realization*, pp. 16-21.
44. Yogananda, *The Bagavad Gita: Royal Science of God-Realization*, pp. 985-87.
45. Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi*, pp. 243, 316, 319, *et alibi*.
46. Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, pp. 309-317.
47. Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, p. 313.
48. Sir Edwin Arnold, *The Bhagavad Gita* (New York: Truslove, Hanson & Comba, 1900.)
49. Thomas Merton, *Gandhi on Non-Violence* (New York: New Directions, 1965).
50. M.K. Gandhi, *Non-Violence in Peace and War* (New York: Associated Advertisers and Printers, 1942).
51. Gandhi, *on Non-Violence*, p. 4.
52. Gandhi, *on Non-Violence*, p. 5.
53. Gandhi, *on Non-Violence*, p. 7.
54. Gandhi, *on Non-Violence*, p. 16.
55. Gandhi, *on Non-Violence*, p. 18.
56. Paramahansa Yogananda, *The Divine Romance* (San Rafael: Self-Realization Press, 1986) pp. 117-29.
57. Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi*, pp. 497-513.
58. Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi*, p. 498.
59. Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi*, p. 507.
60. Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi*, p. 508. Kriya yoga is an ancient system of yoga revived by Lahiri Mahasaya in 1861 and was brought to widespread public awareness through Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi*. The system consists of a number of yogic techniques that are believed to hasten the practitioner's spiritual development and to help to bring about a deeper state of communion with God.
61. Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi*, p. 517.
62. Yogananda, *The Divine Romance*, pp. 117-29.
63. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, pp. 140-41.
64. Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi*, p. 166.
65. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), pp. 207-208.
66. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, pp. 210, 212.
67. Merton, *The Inner Experience*, p. 10.
68. Merton, *The Inner Experience*, pp. 11-12.
69. Yogananda, *The Bagavad Gita: Royal Science of God-Realization*, p. 537.
70. Yogananda, *The Bagavad Gita: Royal Science of God-Realization*, pp. 542-43.

71. Yogananda, *The Bagavad Gita: Royal Science of God-Realization*, p. 587.

72. Veliyathil, Paul, "East-West Dialogue: Thomas Merton, a Modern Arjuna," *Spirituality Today*, Vol. 39, (1987), pp. 293-304.

73. Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1961), p. 19.