

The Christian Center of Thomas Merton's Thought

By **Bonnie Thurston**

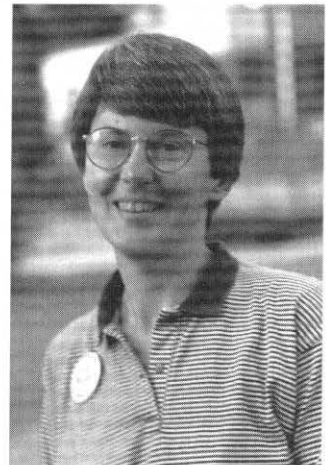
Merton appended this note to his 1956 reflection entitled "The Nativity Kerygma": "Christianity is not so much a body of doctrine as the revelation of a mystery. A mystery is a divine action, something which God does in time in order to introduce men into the sanctuary of eternity."¹ In what follows I shall speak of Christianity not as a "body of doctrine," but as the lived reality of the fact of Incarnation, of Christ among us in many guises (sometimes, as Mother Teresa of Calcutta reminded us, in unfortunate disguises) constantly offering the human family invitations "into the sanctuary of eternity."

Introduction

History will undoubtedly remember Thomas Merton as one of the great Catholic ecumenists of the last century. His open-ness not only preceded, but influenced that of the Second Vatican Council. Writing in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966) Thomas Merton made the following two observations: "If I affirm myself as a Catholic merely by denying all that is Muslim, Jewish, Protestant, Hindu, Buddhist, etc., in the end I will find that there is not much left for me to affirm as a Catholic: and certainly no breath of the Spirit with which to affirm it."² In that same volume Merton wrote, "For myself, I am more and more convinced that my job is to clarify something of the tradition that lives in me, and in which I live: the tradition of wisdom and spirit that is found not only in Western Christendom but in Orthodoxy, and also, at least analogously, in Asia and in Islam (CGB 176).

In notes for a paper he was to have delivered at Calcutta, India in October, 1968 the following appears: "I think we have now reached a stage of (long-overdue) religious maturity at which it may be possible for someone to remain perfectly faithful to a Christian and Western monastic commitment, and yet to learn in depth from, say, a Buddhist or Hindu discipline and experience."³ On December 10, 1968 in Bangkok, Merton closed the final talk he ever gave by saying, "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" (*AJ* 343).

These, and many other citations one might choose, characterize the thinking of Thomas Merton from the mid-1950s. They are quotations that delight many of us, but make an equal number of Merton's readers very nervous, indeed. More than one Christian I know has



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expressed admiration for Merton the ecumenist and then wondered aloud whether Merton were, in fact, moving away from Christianity. Personally, I am quite convinced that the answer to this query is “no.” The center of Thomas Merton’s thought was always Christian. He was converted to Jesus of Nazareth, whom Christians call the Christ, and, as a result, the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation was never far from his thought.

I. Thomas Merton's Conversion Was TO Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ of Christian Faith

St. Gregory the Great, who lived from 540 to 604 AD, provided the language that has dominated the discussion of Christian conversion for fifteen centuries. In St. Gregory’s schema, worldly living and sensual extravagance precede an insight into the transitory quality of such a life as opposed to the eternal value of the spiritual life. One who has (or, more properly, receives) such an insight embarks on a path of detachment from the corrupt world (*via purgativa*) and repudiation of the corrupt self (*contemptus sui*) which frequently leads to the gift of spiritual love and may lead to mystical union with God.

Many discussions of the facts of Merton’s biography echo this schema. From the rootless life of one orphaned early, from a rowdy and sensual (if not downright orgiastic) university experience, Merton turns to Catholicism, then becomes a Cistercian monk and grows more and more deeply into the mystery of God which he wonderfully articulates for the rest of us. This is fine insofar as it goes. What it overlooks, in my view, is that Merton’s conversion was less a turning away *from* something, as a turn *to* somebody, Jesus the Christ. Simply put, Jesus Christ drew Merton to Himself and to himself.

In the section of his autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain* which he calls “The Harrowing of Hell,” Merton describes a trip he made to Italy in 1933 when he was eighteen. He speaks of being fascinated by the Byzantine mosaics he encountered in Rome. “I began to haunt the churches where they were to be found,” he writes.

And thus without knowing anything about it I became a pilgrim. . . . And now for the first time in my life I began to find out something of Who this Person was that men called Christ. It was obscure, but it was a true knowledge of Him, . . . truer than I knew and truer than I would admit. But it was in Rome that my conception of Christ was formed. It was there I first saw Him, Whom I now serve as my God and my King, and Who owns and rules my life.⁴

It was in Rome during that same period that Merton had the vivid sense of his father’s presence, the father who had been dead for over a year. He noted, “The whole thing passed in a flash, but in that flash, instantly, I was overwhelmed with a sudden and profound insight into the misery and corruption of my own soul” (*SSM* 111). Meeting Christ for the first time opened Merton’s spiritual sensibilities and led to an insight into his own condition, although at that time, nothing came of either.

Five years later, in September 1938, Merton says that “the groundwork of conversion was more or less complete” (*SSM* 204). The previous month Merton had felt impelled to attend Mass. He went to the 11:00 Mass at the Church of Corpus Christi in New York City (*SSM* 207-208). What he heard there was a sermon about Jesus Christ by a young priest. Here is how Merton reports it:

What was he saying? That Christ was the Son of God. That, in Him, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, God had assumed a Human Nature . . . had taken Flesh and dwelt amongst us . . . and that this Man, Whom men called the Christ, was God. . . . His acts were the acts of God. He loved us: God, and walked among us:

God, and died for us on the Cross, God of God, Light of Light, True God of True God (*SSM* 209).

The passage describing the sermon continues for a page and a half in the edition I was using. Merton remarks that he “had almost discovered the Divinity of Christ in the ancient mosaics of the churches of Rome,” but closes, “The sermon was what I most needed to hear that day” (*SSM* 210). And the reason he most needed to hear it, I would suggest, is that it told Merton, quite simply, Who it was Who was seeking him. Although not quite meant this way, scripture attests that the One Who seeks, finds!

The description of Merton’s baptism and first communion on November 16, 1938 also closes with Jesus Christ clearly in focus. Merton speaks of Christ “hidden in the small Host, . . . giving Himself for me, and to me. . . . In the Temple of God that I had just become,” Merton says, “the One Eternal and Pure Sacrifice was offered up to the God dwelling in me: the sacrifice of God to God, and me sacrificed together with God, incorporated in His Incarnation. Christ born in me, a new Bethlehem, and sacrificed in me, His new Calvary, and risen in me: offering me to the Father, in Himself” (*SSM* 224).

For now 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. And God, that center Who is everywhere, and whose circumference is nowhere, finding me, through incorporation with Christ, incorporated into this immense and tremendous gravitational movement which is love, which is the Holy Spirit, loved me. And He called out to me from His own immense depths (*SSM* 225).

Through Jesus the Christ, God drew Thomas Merton to the Divine Self. Merton’s initial insight that his own most authentic identity is in and through Christ became and remained central to this thought about everything else.

Let me give one other example of my premise that Thomas Merton’s conversion was to Jesus the Christ, the account of the Mass he attended at the Church of St. Francis in Havana, Cuba on April 29, 1940. The event was very important to Merton and is recorded both in *The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton* and in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. In the autobiography, Merton explains that he had already been to communion when he visited the Church of St. Francis where a great many children were seated at the front of the church. “It came time for the Consecration. The priest raised the Host, then he raised the chalice. . . . and all at once the voices of the children burst out: ‘*Creo en Dios*’” (*SSM* 284);

something went off inside me like a thunderclap and without seeing anything or apprehending anything extraordinary through any of my senses. . . . I knew with the most absolute and unquestionable certainty that before me . . . was at the same time God in all His essence, all His power, all His glory, and God in Himself. . . . And so the unshakable certainty, the clear and immediate knowledge that heaven was right in front of me, struck me like a thunderbolt and went through me like a flash of lightning and seemed to lift me clean up off the earth.⁵

It interests me very much that this journal entry in 1940 continues, “The certitude of faith was the same kind of certitude that millions of Catholics and Jews and Hindus and everybody that believes in God have felt much more surely and more often than I” (*SJ* 77). “These movements of

God's grace are peculiar to nobody, but surely they stir in everybody, for it is by them that God calls people to Him, and He calls everybody" (*SJ* 78). Here is clear evidence that Merton's ecumenism was not just characteristic of his mature thought. Though obliquely, it is where he began. But what stirred "these movements of God's grace" in Merton on this particular occasion seems to have been the elevation of the Host, the Real Presence of Christ with His assembled people, which, in describing the event in *The Seven Storey Mountain* Merton calls "the Truth Who was now physically really and substantially before me on the altar" (*SSM* 285).

The Christian center of Thomas Merton's thought begins with the fact that Merton was drawn by Jesus Christ to Christianity. Merton became a Christian because of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ. As he grew in his life as a Christian and as a monastic, Merton's call was always to live more in Christ, to be more conformed to Christ. He, himself, put this very eloquently in a journal entry on March 18, 1947: "I no longer desire to be myself, but to find myself transformed in You, so that there is no more 'myself' but only Yourself. And that is when I will be what You have willed to make me from all eternity: not myself, but Love."⁶ As a result of Merton's desire to be conformed to the Christ of his conversion, the doctrine of the Incarnation became the theological polar north of his Christian thought, or, to change the metaphor, the May pole around which all else danced.

*II. Incarnation as the Christian Center of Thomas Merton's Thought*⁷

Merton's fascination with the Incarnation began with mosaics of Jesus in the Byzantine churches of Italy, flowered in an ordinary Sunday sermon at Mass, and bore good fruit in nearly all his contributions to spiritual theology and social thought. The center of Merton's Christian thought is the Incarnation because here he resolved the great theological preoccupation of his life, the nature of human identity. In Merton it occurred exactly as T. S. Eliot wrote in the "Dry Salvages" section of his *Four Quartets*: "The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation. / Here the impossible union / Of spheres of existence is actual."⁸

For Merton the doctrine of the Incarnation went far beyond the mystery of the God-become-flesh (*sarx* is the Greek word for "flesh," not "man" which is *aner*) which Christians celebrate at Christmas. "The Gospel of the Nativity," Merton noted, "is a solemn proclamation of an event which is the turning point of all history: the coming of the Messiah, the Anointed King and Son of God, the Word-made-Flesh, pitching his tent among us, not merely to seek and save that which was lost, but to establish his Kingdom, the eschatological Kingdom, the manifestation of the fullness of time and the completion of history."⁹ Moreover, the Christmas mystery pervades, impregnates, if you will, the whole creation. Ultimately, it means that where creation is, God is. For Merton the Incarnation is not just about the coming-to-flesh of God, but means that God is not "out there" somewhere. It means that God is not absent, even that God is not someone else.¹⁰ Even in the mid-1940s Merton could speak of being "incorporated in His Incarnation" (*SSM* 224). The Incarnation has everything to do with human identity. Writing to D. T. Suzuki on April 11, 1959 Merton noted, "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. . . . that is the trouble with the Christian world. It is not dominated by Christ . . . it is enslaved by images and ideas of Christ that are creations and projects of men and stand in the way of God's freedom. But Christ Himself is in us as unknown and unseen."¹¹

The implications of this are more clearly spelled out in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, the 1962 revision of a book written some twelve years earlier. In Chapters 5 and 6 of this work Merton points

out that “the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self.”¹² Unfortunately “Every one of us is shadowed by an illusory person: a false self” (NSC 34). This false self can only be set aside when one realizes that his or her identity is a gift of God. As Merton puts it, “Within myself is a metaphorical apex of existence at which I am held in being by my Creator. God utters me like a word containing a partial thought of himself” (NSC 37). To the reader Merton says, God “utters Himself in you, speaks His own name in the center of your soul” (NSC 39). The point is that, again in Merton’s words, God “comes down from heaven and finds us” (NSC 39). “God bridges the infinite distances between Himself and the spirits created to love Him” (NSC 40). “God Himself, bearing in Himself the secret of who I am, begins to live in me not only as my Creator but as my other and true self. *Vivo, iam non ego, vivit vero in me Christus* (‘I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me’)” (NSC 41). In “A Letter on the Contemplative Life,” written August 21, 1967, Merton made the point this way: “we exist solely for this, to be the place He [God] has chosen for His presence, His manifestation in the world, His epiphany.”¹³

In Chapter 21 of *New Seeds*, which is entitled “The Mystery of Christ,” Merton elaborates on the implications of Christ’s “indwelling”: “For in Christ God is made Man. In Him God and man are no longer separate, remote from one another, but inseparably one, unconfused and yet indivisible. Hence in Christ everything that is divine and supernatural becomes accessible on the human level to every man born of woman, to every son of Adam” (NSC 150). Authentic human identity comes by means of God’s incarnation in us. This is what I meant by saying that for Merton, God is not someone else. But beyond that, “in Christ *everything* that is divine and supernatural becomes accessible” (NSC 150; italics mine). This implies that it is through the Incarnation that Divinity becomes available to human beings, that Eternity becomes accessible. God is known (however imperfectly by humans) because God has chosen to become known as one of us. And this is not abstract theology, not only the cosmic overcoming of Cartesian dualism; it has practical implications.

First, Merton was deeply interested in the world, by which I mean both the created universe (nature) and people and cultures, because he believed it was full of Christ. Because God had taken on material life, material life was itself transformed and, however dimly, shone forth the light of Christ. For example, Merton was profoundly attentive to the natural life of the Kentucky knobs not because he was a pantheist, but because he was an Incarnationist. Again, to quote Eliot, because of the Incarnation, “the impossible union / Of spheres of existence is actual” (Eliot 136). I think any understanding of Merton the poet must be intrinsically connected to Merton’s thinking about the Incarnation because both poetry and the Incarnation work in the same way: they use what is to draw us toward what might be and what will be.¹⁴

Similarly, Merton’s social thought, his cutting-edge insight into civil rights, and war and peace, and all the rest of it, grew from his understanding of the Incarnation. Indeed, writing to Erich Fromm on March 18, 1955, Merton says categorically, “All our ideas on the dignity of Man, all our ‘humanism’ really flows from the right understanding of the Incarnation and of the recapitulation of all in Christ” (HGL 314). Human beings are to be valued, treated with dignity, precisely because God became one. As Merton wrote to Dorothy Day in “Cold War Letter 11” on December 20, 1961, “the natural law is the law which inclines our inmost heart to conform to the image of God which is in the deepest center of our being, and it also inclines our heart to respect and love our neighbor as the image of God” (HGL 143). Note Merton does not say “love our Christian neighbor,” or “love of the one like us.” God’s incarnation is vastly wider and more pervasive in its implications than that.

God's having taken on a form (Greek, *morphe*), makes all forms, every body, valuable. Merton's letter continues, "I want with my whole heart to realize and fulfill my communion of nature with my brother, in order that I may be by that very fact one with him in Christ" (*HGL* 143). Incarnation is the reason for love of neighbor. One loves the neighbor because the neighbor is Christ. And in neighbor one finds God.¹⁵

Conclusions

The Christian center of Thomas Merton's thought was the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. By his own admission, this is where he began. Reviewing his life in his journal on December 22, 1964, he says, "Here in the hermitage, returning necessarily to beginnings, I know where my beginning was, having the Name and Godhead of Christ preached in Corpus Christi Church. I heard and believed. And I believe that He has called me freely, out of pure mercy, to His love and salvation."¹⁶

Very soon Merton understood that the coming of Christ into the world, the Incarnation, had profound implications for human identity. In *New Seeds of Contemplation* he wrote: "To live 'in Christ' is to live in a mystery equal to that of the Incarnation and similar to it. For as Christ unites in His one Person the two natures of God and of man, so too in making us His friends he dwells in us, uniting us intimately to Himself. Dwelling in us He becomes as it were our superior self, for He has united and identified our inmost self with Himself" (*NSC* 158). Merton understood that, because of the Incarnation, there can be no *deus absconditus*, no absent god. Our situation is more like that described in the Latin quip attributed to Carl Jung: *vocatus atque non vocatus, deus aderit*. Loosely translated it means "whether we like it or not, God is with us." Merton was very clear about the centrality of Jesus Christ both to his personal life and to his theology. He wrote in his journal on June 26, 1965, "I may be interested in Oriental religions, etc., but there can be no obscuring the essential difference – this personal communion with Christ at the center and heart of all reality, as a source of grace and life" (*DWL* 259).¹⁷

What does all this mean for interfaith dialogue? First, it has profound implications for the proclamation of the Christian gospel because it means that Christians are, in fact, if not always in action "little Christ's." In "The Nativity Kerygma" Merton says, "Christ is born to us today, in order that He may appear to the whole world through us" (*SC* 112). Christ comes to us in order that others may know Christ through us. In the introduction to the section on unity in her collection of Merton's writings, Christine Bochen notes, "Though neither a professional ecumenist nor a specialist in inter-religious dialogue, Merton modeled a way of encounter and dialogue in his conversations and correspondence with Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus. Deeply rooted in his own tradition, he was open and receptive to the wisdom of the world's religions."¹⁸ Merton modeled the truth of his identity: Christ in him, the open-ness and receptivity that is Christ.

In my correspondence with her on Incarnation in Merton, Patricia Burton articulated the point wonderfully clearly: "Incarnation was absolutely everything for [Merton]. When he believed something he also embodied it." Burton suggests that Incarnation was Merton's process, "the way he did . . . everything: find an interesting subject, explore it, take it up in a major way, and then BECOME it so that everything subsequently lived and written about was infused with it."¹⁹

That Christians are to be "little Christ's" may or may not mean that their goal is to convert others. A second implication of Merton's understanding of the Incarnation for Ecumenism is that if Christ has come into the world at all, then at least in potentiality, Christ can be found *anywhere* in that world. In "A Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra Concerning Giants," published in *Emblems of a Season*

of *Fury* (1963), Merton reflects as follows:

If I insist on giving you my truth, and never stop to receive your truth in return, then there can be no truth between us. Christ is present “where two or three are gathered in my name.” But to be gathered in the name of Christ is to be gathered in the name of the Word made flesh, of God made man. It is therefore to be gathered in the faith that God has become man and can be seen in man, that he can speak in man and that he can enlighten and inspire love in and through any man I meet. It is true that the visible Church alone has the official mission to sanctify and teach all nations, but no man knows that the stranger he meets coming out of the forest in a new country is not already an invisible member of Christ and perhaps one who has some providential or prophetic message to utter. . . . 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*.²⁰

In “A Letter on the Contemplative Life,” written in August 1967, from which I quoted earlier, Merton goes even further: “Jesus is in the world in people who know Him not, . . . He is at work in them when they think themselves far from Him” (*MJ* 172).²¹ What Merton is telling Christians engaged in interreligious dialogue is that we are to be filled with and model the Truth Who is Christ while simultaneously being open to the Truth of Christ in others. This is a tall order.

I began discussion of Incarnation in Merton’s thought with a quotation from Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, and I shall conclude with another. The final stanza of “Little Gidding,” the last of the four poems, begins with these lines: “We shall not cease from exploration / And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time” (Eliot 145). In searching for a fitting conclusion to these reflections about the Christian Center of Merton’s thought as it relates to interfaith dialogue I thought I might find something from a later writing, a last journal entry perhaps, that would be the capstone, the icing on the cake. But the “end of all my exploring” led me to the place “where he started,” *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Almost at the end of the autobiography Merton wrote the following: “We all add up to something far beyond ourselves. We cannot yet realize what it is. But we know, in the language of our theology, that we are all members of the Mystical Christ, and that we all grow together in Him for Whom all things were created. In one sense we are always travelling, and travelling as if we did not know where we were going. In another sense we have already arrived” (*SSM* 419). Indeed.²²

1 Thomas Merton, *Seasons of Celebration* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1965) 101; subsequent references will be cited as “SC” parenthetically in the text.

2 Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 129; subsequent references will be cited as “CGB” parenthetically in the text.

3 Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1968) 313; subsequent references will be cited as “AJ” parenthetically in the text.

4 Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948) 108-109; subsequent references will be cited as “SSM” parenthetically in the text.

5 Thomas Merton, *The Secular Journal* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1959) 76-77; subsequent references will be cited as “SJ” parenthetically in the text. A somewhat different version of this material is found in Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation. Journals, vol. 1: 1939-1941*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995) 218.

6 Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer. Journals, vol. 2: 1941-1952*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco:

HarperCollins, 1996) 49; subsequent references will be cited as “ES” parenthetically in the text.

7 I express gratitude to Patricia Burton and Jonathan Montaldo for their help with this section. I asked each what passages they felt were central to Merton’s thinking about incarnation, and each responded helpfully. While this essay relies on primary sources, the reader is reminded that there is a fine book-length study of Merton’s Christology: George Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton’s Christ* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993).

8 T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962) 136; subsequent references will be cited as “Eliot” parenthetically in the text.

9 Thomas Merton, *Love and Living* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979) 223. (I am grateful to Patrick O’Connell for reminding me of this quotation.)

10 This same idea led to the martyrdom of the Sufi mystic Ibn Mansur al-Hallaj, whose writings Merton knew and admired.

11 Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 564; subsequent references will be cited as “HGL” parenthetically in the text. This letter (562-66) is an important source for Merton’s understanding of the Trinity.

12 Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions 1961) 31; subsequent references will be cited as “NSC” parenthetically in the text.

13 Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey* (Kansas City: Sheed, Andrews & McMeel, 1977) 172; subsequent references will be cited as “MJ” parenthetically in the text.

14 For an interesting discussion of Incarnation as it affects Merton’s poetics see Alan Altany, “Thomas Merton’s Poetic Incarnation of Emptiness,” *The Merton Annual* 10 (1997) 109-30.

15 For More on this point see Chapters 7 and 8 of *New Seeds of Contemplation*.

16 Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 181; subsequent references will be cited as “DWL” parenthetically in the text.

17 I am grateful to Patrick O’Connell for pointing me to this quotation.

18 Christine M. Bochen, ed., *Thomas Merton: Essential Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000) 140-41.

19 Patricia A. Burton, email to Bonnie Thurston, Feb. 10, 2002.

20 Thomas Merton, *Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 383-84.

21 Parenthetically, I think the influence of Vatican II and of the thought of Karl Rahner is evident here.

22 The substance of this essay was given at the Conference “Thomas Merton and Interfaith Dialogue: Transcending Religious Barriers,” sponsored by the Vancouver, BC, Canada chapter of the International Thomas Merton Society, March 15-16, 2002.