

How to Disagree: Peace-Building in the Interfaith Letters of Thomas Merton and Doña Luisa Coomaraswamy

By **William Apel**

In order to sharpen the Western world's spiritual awareness, Doña Luisa Coomaraswamy wondered if something like a Sufi order could be established in Christianity. Writing to Thomas Merton on January 23, 1961, she noted that "there comes a time" in which "only the top values survive."¹ Perhaps this time had come for the West. Just as the Sufis, Muslim mystics, had enlivened a stagnant Islam, Doña Luisa wondered whether a similar thing could be done with the framework of Christianity.

Merton's response to his interfaith friend's proposal for a Christian Sufi order opens a window for us to view Merton's approach to interfaith dialogue, especially when his views differ from those of his dialogue partner, as they do in this case. Indeed, Merton's dialogue with Doña Luisa provides us with an early look at how he goes about his "call to unity" in the 1960s, how he approaches interfaith dialogue.²

Merton in Correspondence

Doña Luisa Coomaraswamy was but one of some 2,100 people Merton corresponded with in the late 1950s and 1960s. During this period, he wrote over 10,000 letters to numerous correspondents from around the world. This was in sharp contrast to the four letters per year he was permitted to write when he entered the austere Trappist Order in 1941.³ Merton's letters included correspondence with individuals on matters of spiritual direction, letters to social activists, exchanges with publishers and writers, correspondence regarding war and peace, and letters of dialogue with people in various faith traditions.⁴ Doña Luisa Coomaraswamy is among this latter group of interfaith friends seeking to work for a more just and peaceful world.⁵ Born in 1905 to Jewish parents in Argentina, Doña Luisa came to the United States at the age of sixteen. She worked as a Boston society photographer and married Ananda Coomaraswamy in 1930. Her husband was, at the time of their marriage, already a well-known scholar and interpreter of East Indian art and culture to the West. He also wrote with spiritual insight about the ways of Buddhism and Hinduism. At Ananda's request and encouragement, Doña Luisa studied Sanskrit and popular folklore in India for more than two years. After this she worked closely with her husband as his academic and literary secretary. After Ananda's death in 1947, Doña Luisa began the arduous task of gathering and editing Ananda's papers in order to establish a definitive edition of his writings. It was at this point that Merton began his correspondence with Doña Luisa. She died in 1970, two short years after Merton.



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The Merton/Coomaraswamy Correspondence

Merton knew enough about Doña Luisa to realize that she would appreciate his contemplative approach to the study of Ananda's life and writings. In his first letter to Doña Luisa, dated January 13, 1961, his words are almost lyrical, and certainly heartfelt, as he describes his desire to publish a selected anthology of Ananda's work along with a commentary. Merton tells Doña Luisa: "The study of AKC will be reserved for a very pleasant hermitage among the pine trees, looking over the valley, a place which I think would have appealed to him and where I now spend much time, when I can" (*HGL* 127). In this introductory letter, Merton is careful to present himself as a monk first and a writer second. What Merton truly hoped for was as direct a spiritual engagement with Ananda's work as possible. And this is exactly what he obtained through the intellect and spiritual awareness of Doña Luisa.

Merton confesses to Doña Luisa, "I cannot help but feel that his [Ananda's] 'world of thought' is also mine, and that in any other realm today I am purely and simply an exile" (*HGL* 127). Merton very much wanted to enter the spiritual territory of Ananda Coomaraswamy. He tells Doña Luisa, "Forgive me then, all I really ask is an opportunity to feel myself a citizen of my true country" (*HGL* 128). This "country" for Merton, as for Ananda, was a homeland free from the manipulation of people into places they did not want to go and open to learning from various religious traditions. Furthermore, he shares with Doña Luisa that "Ananda Coomaraswamy is in many ways to me a model: the model of one who has thoroughly and completely united in himself the spiritual tradition and attitudes of the Orient and of the Christian West, not excluding also something of Islam, I believe" (*HGL* 126). This model of openness and inclusion of various elements of the world's great spiritual traditions into one's own life was something Merton himself attempted to do. In this process, however, he remained firmly grounded in his own Christian faith. Herein was the maddening genius of his dialectical approach to world religions.

Merton in Dialogue

All that has been said thus far leads us to the heart of our essay – the dialogue between Merton and Doña Luisa. Merton has already accomplished the first task in his dialoguing. He has looked for common ground for the dialogue. In the case of Doña Luisa this was not difficult to do. A love and appreciation for Ananda Coomaraswamy was the common ground. Doña Luisa responded favorably to Merton's desire, passed on through their mutual friend Graham Carey, to gain entrance into the spiritual realm of Ananda's life. However, Doña Luisa did add one cautionary note: "AK Coomaraswamy would object to anything 'personal' as such, but not if this made possible furthering the understanding of what he wrote which (was) is not his, but everyman's, yours and mine."⁶ In no time at all, Doña Luisa felt free to discuss all kinds of interfaith issues with Merton. And this brings us back to where we started – Doña Luisa's suggestion that the creation of Christian Sufis might be developed to aid what she perceived to be a floundering Christianity. Merton's response alerts us to a second key element for his style of interfaith dialogue.

Merton searched for the positive first. What might he say favorably about Doña Luisa's proposal? The monk from Gethsemani sometimes has been criticized for bending over backwards to find agreement with his dialogue partner. Merton's response to this criticism is in accord with St. Paul's openness to all for the sake of the Gospel message. Brother Patrick Hart has noted that Merton, like St. Paul, "was convinced that he must 'become all things to all men' – that he must

become a ‘universal man’ in the sense of sharing in some measure the lot of the Jew, the Hindu, the Buddhist, the Muslim.”⁷

Therefore, Merton agreed in principle with Doña Luisa’s proposal. But one should not be fooled by what appeared to be Merton’s full acceptance of Doña Luisa’s idea. Merton wrote to Doña Luisa on February 12, 1961: “You are right about the Sufis and about the need for Christian equivalents of the Sufis. This kind of need is not something that man thinks up and then takes care of. It is a question of God’s honor and glory and of His will. Men do not choose to be Sufis, least of all Christian Sufis so to speak: they are chosen and plunged into the crucible like iron into the fire” (*HGL* 128). With this statement, Merton affirms Doña Luisa’s point about the need for “Christian equivalents of the Sufis,” but insists that a response to such a need is a matter of God’s will and not human initiative. From Merton’s viewpoint, God calls and we humans respond. It is up to us to respond or not respond. Indeed, the call and response dynamic is central to many of the stories within Merton’s sacred scriptures (the Bible) and to his own life story. His interfaith friend Abraham Joshua Heschel’s book *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*⁸ helped reinforce and clarify this call-and-response model of life for him.⁹

In the final analysis, Merton offered both a “yes” and a “no” to Doña Luisa’s proposition. He could agree with Doña Luisa’s idea but a caveat was also insisted upon; he must say “no” to any notion that Christians could simply will the creation of a Sufi order. In a one-sentence response to Merton’s caveat, in a letter dated February 18, 1961, Doña Luisa acknowledged that a Christian Sufi movement must emerge from a great need but she didn’t pick up on Merton’s insistence on the need for divine initiative.¹⁰ Doña Luisa then went on to another subject in their dialogue.

Merton did not belabor his point but moved on as well. The apparent disagreement was dealt with in the context of the positive relationship he had carefully cultivated with his interfaith friend. He was not going to insist upon the “rightness” of his position and risk the loss of his relationship with Doña Luisa. The relationship was more important than abstract ideas and speculation about dogma. Doctrines are important but relationship has the primacy for in it the Great Commandment to love comes to life.

Another Area of Disagreement

As the dialogue with Doña Luisa progressed, there were other matters in which Merton must say both “yes” and “no.” One of the most instructive for our exploration of Merton’s style of interfaith dialogue has to do with the issue of conversion, especially as it relates to proselytizing. In her January 23, 1961 letter to Merton, Doña Luisa rejects the notion of converting others, seeking to change another’s way of spiritual life to one’s own way of believing and living:

I personally do not hold to converting, because of this, what is congenial to us may not be truly so to another, on our level of reference, I trust. I do hold with the possibility of an individual after some 18-20 years study, one Avatar may come to be more apparent (to one present being) than another, but after 18-20 years of study . . . we should have come to be God’s very own in whatever channel it has pleased Him to cast us in.

Again, Merton must say “yes” and “no” to Doña Luisa’s observation. In the first place, he agrees wholeheartedly with the main thrust of her point. But he does want to suggest that the preaching of conversion can also have a positive valence for Christians. Merton writes to Doña

Luisa on February 12, 1961, “Like you, I hate proselytizing.” This practice of “converting,” to use Doña Luisa’s language, was very distasteful to Merton. He agrees with his interfaith friend about proselytizing. He is devastatingly clear on the subject: “This awful business of making others just like oneself so that one is thereby ‘justified’ and under no obligation to change himself. What a terrible thing this can be. The source of how many sicknesses in the world” (*HGL* 128). One of these “sicknesses” for Merton, as well as for Doña Luisa, has been Westerners forcing the East through Christian missionaries into a so-called Christian way of life. Merton notes that proselytizing takes many different forms. For example, fundamentalists of all sorts, in many different religions, are prime offenders – seeking to make others over into their own images.

However, there is another way of looking at “converting” and it cuts to the heart of Christianity. It has to do with the proclamation of the Gospel itself, that is, the good news of God’s love as expressed in the life of Jesus Christ. As a Christian monk he professes:

The true Christian apostolate is nothing of this sort [the proselytizing they both reject], a fact which Christians themselves have largely forgotten. I think it was from Ananda that I first heard the quote of Tauler (or maybe Eckhart) who said in a sermon that even if the church were empty he would preach the sermon to the four walls because he had to. This is the true apostolic spirit, based not on the desire to make others conform, but in the desire to proclaim and announce the good tidings of God’s infinite love. (*HGL* 128-29)

From Doña Luisa’s perspective, the preaching of Tauler or Eckhart or anyone else would still have been proselytizing. But Merton persisted toward his point.

Merton tells Doña Luisa when his faith tradition is at its best it remembers that the proclaimer (the preacher) was not a “converter” but a “herald,” a voice (*kerux*). The Spirit of God is left free to act as it pleases. Merton grants that much of modern religion (including his Catholic tradition) has degenerated into “convert-makers” who use every technique of human manipulation available, and in the process, program out the Holy Spirit altogether. Merton declares to Doña Luisa, “Little do men realize that in such a situation the Holy Spirit is silent and inactive, or perhaps active *against* the insolence of man” (*HGL* 129). Just as in the case of the possible formulation of Christian Sufis, this matter too requires divine initiative, not human striving and manipulation. The herald (the preacher) can only proclaim; it is God who converts. In the best sense of the word (or should we say Word), only God can change, or convert, the human heart and spirit.

Conclusion

In sum, Merton’s epistolary dialogue with his interfaith friend Doña Luisa Coomaraswamy has opened a window for us to view how Merton enters into interfaith dialogue. His search for common ground in order to expand his “call to unity” is crucial in his closing years. Peace-building becomes a genuine possibility as he continued building a solid friendship that undergirds the dialogue itself. For Merton the relationship always remains paramount. Another important feature to note in the interfaith dialogue was that Merton never became defensive in his discussions, and he worked hard to ensure that his dialogue partner be allowed to define herself. He refused to project upon his dialogue partner his own definition of who he thought she “might be.” This hopefully allowed for him to say his “yes” and “no” without fear of jeopardizing the relationship.

All these features we have seen clearly in the two issues discussed in this brief presentation – the proposal for a Christian Sufi order and the matter about “converting” or proselytizing. These same features in Merton’s interfaith dialogue are not limited to Doña Luisa. I have seen them again and again in the other interfaith interchanges I have researched between Merton and others.

Finally, it is essential to recognize that Merton wanted to learn from his interfaith friends and he was able to do this while maintaining his commitment to Christ – in his own way of faith and belief. In his September 24, 1961 letter to Doña Luisa, Merton perhaps most directly reveals this dialectic in his interfaith exchange. He tells Doña Luisa:

You must understand by now that I do not entertain formally conventional notions of the Church. I certainly believe with all my heart in the Church, none more so. But I absolutely refuse to take the rigid, stereotyped, bourgeois notions that are acceptable to most Catholics and which manage in the long run to veil the true mystery of Christ and make it utterly unattainable to some people.

(*HGL* 133)

It is the “true mystery of Christ” that causes Merton to be the “expansive Catholic” that he was, always prepared to embrace what he deemed to be wise and most true in other religions because, in the end, that too is a part of the great “mystery of Christ.” It is a mystery that somehow stretches far beyond the boundaries of Christianity itself to express love throughout the entire world. This all begins for Merton with interfaith friendships dedicated to mutual understanding, to compassion, and to justice and peace.

1. Unpublished letter, archives of the Thomas Merton Center [TMC] at Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY.
2. In her book *Thomas Merton, Essential Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000), Christine M. Bochen divides Merton’s vocation as a Trappist monk and writer into three parts: “A Call to Contemplation”; “A Call to Compassion”; and “A Call to Unity,” with the last of these callings predominating during the final decade of his life.
3. This information was gathered from several discussions I had with Paul M. Pearson, director and archivist of the Thomas Merton Center, during my research at the Center over the past two decades.
4. On this last topic see William Apel, *Signs of Peace: The Interfaith Letters of Thomas Merton* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006); subsequent references will be cited as “Apel” parenthetically in the text.
5. See Apel chapter ten: “Unity: The Merton–Dona Luisa Coomaraswamy Letters” (161-82); for the source of the following biographical information, see the headnote to Merton’s letters to Coomaraswamy in Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 125; subsequent references will be cited as “*HGL*” parenthetically in the text.
6. Unpublished December 24, 1960 letter to Merton (TMC archives).
7. Patrick Hart, “The Ecumenical Monk,” in Patrick Hart, ed., *Thomas Merton/Monk: A Monastic Tribute* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1974) 212 (see Apel xviii).
8. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1955).
9. See Apel chapter five: “Holiness: The Merton–Heschel Letters” (67-84).
10. Unpublished February 18, 1961 letter to Merton (TMC archives).