

## Building on Merton's Legacy of Dialogue

Review of

*Thomas Merton's Encounter with Buddhism and Beyond: His Interreligious Dialogue, Inter-Monastic Exchanges, and Their Legacy*

By Jaechan Anselmo Park

Preface by Bonnie Thurston; Foreword by William Skudlarek

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*Thomas Merton's Encounter with Buddhism and Beyond: His Interreligious Dialogue, Inter-Monastic Exchanges, and Their Legacy* by Jaechan Anselmo Park is a deep excursion into Thomas Merton's path and growth in contemplative life and in dialogue with other religions, as well as his legacy for our time. It's a journey worth taking. Throughout the book, the author, a Benedictine monk from South Korea, highlights that the goal of Merton's own growth and of inter-religious dialogue – or contemplative dialogue – is a transformation of consciousness which leads to compassionate action and peace. The surprise for me of this remarkable book is that it is fundamentally future-oriented and suggests different forms Merton's inter-religious legacy might manifest. The organization of the book, with previews and summaries, takes the reader in a straightforward way through a strenuous examination of a complex topic. Noted Merton scholar Bonnie Thurston's introduction provides a broad and global perspective.

The book begins with a chapter reviewing Merton's interreligious openness (1-59). For this, Park uses the lens of key contemplative experiences as the basis for Merton's openness. "Merton's inner-mystical experience facilitated his self-transformation, his union with God, his new view of contemplation, and his dialogue with Asian traditions, especially Buddhism" (2). Organized around his pre-monastic life, his early monastic life and then his later monastic life, Park's discussion traces the movements of the Spirit in Merton's journey which led him to Gethsemani Abbey, then to a non-dualistic perspective and openness, and finally to his cross-cultural religious experience of integration and deeper enlightenment. Examining Merton's writings, Park shows Merton's spiritual development and outlines his contributions to the understanding of contemplative experience. Merton showed that such experience contributes to spiritual healing; that a direct experience of God could lead one to see that God is everywhere

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and everything is connected; and that encounters across religious traditions could lead to a deeper and more integrated understanding of one's own religious traditions. Indeed, in a 1965 article, "Final Integration: Toward a 'Monastic Therapy,'" "Merton defined the final integration of contemplation as a state of transcultural maturity at a universalizing level" (37).

Park's chapter "Merton's Pioneering Work with Buddhist-Christian Dialogue" (61-121) is a helpful examination of many aspects of interreligious dialogue. Again, his well-organized style clarifies a complex area. Merton's first encounters with Buddhism were with Zen teachers. In dialogue with Zen Buddhists specifically, Merton found terms that were helpful in describing different inner experiences which he came to see as universal, similar across traditions and available to all. Indeed, Merton was comfortable using Zen Buddhist terms to describe inner experiences: *anatta* (no-self), *sunyata* (emptiness), *satori* (enlightened experience). The result of dialogue, these terms also enabled and enriched further dialogue, and even helped him articulate the wisdom of Christian writers and mystics. In this section, Park points out that interreligious dialogue begins in friendship, in relationship with others. With the foundation of friendship, Park addresses three different classifications of interreligious dialogue: Dialogue of Religious Experience, Dialogue of Theology and Dialogue of Action. He shows how Merton was involved in all three, engaging in study, encounter and experience and joint actions for peace and justice.

The author then moves to dealing more specifically with inter-monastic/contemplative dialogue (123-79). Merton maintained that both Buddhist and Christian monastics sought "to bring about a transformation of human consciousness" (163). Park reminds us that "the goals of great compassion (*mahakaruna*) in Buddhism and of selfless love (*agape*) in Christianity were both rooted in the interdependence of all beings. Buddhist and Christian monastics could share with each other their ways to reach this goal and could cooperate to awaken the hidden contemplatives who live in the secular world" (163).

The author suggests two ways to develop Merton's inter-monastic legacy generally: through inter-monastic pilgrimage and spiritual solidarity between monastics and lay contemplatives. Merton's journey to Asia is a model for such pilgrimages, which require tremendous openness and curiosity and which have geographic as well as spiritual dimensions. Because these pilgrimages are more developed and common in Buddhist monastic life, Merton saw the benefit of Christian monastics spending periods of time in Buddhist monasteries, thus allowing for the dialogue of experience.

As a model of spiritual solidarity, the author points out that Merton did not distinguish contemplative dialogue from inter-monastic dialogue, nor did he exclude lay contemplatives from dialogue (see 144). Park urges us today to go further: "What still needs to be developed is the willingness of Christian monastics to put aside their attitude of superiority and to learn from lay contemplatives within and outside their own religious traditions" (176).

The careful groundwork thus provided leads up to the section "Merton's Legacy: Beyond His Encounter with Buddhism" (181-242), which includes an excellent history and overview of the development of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (DIM-MID) and of interreligious, contemplative dialogue generally, and then points to ways the legacy could continue in our time and into the future. Park includes in the history a number of challenges and also some of the suspicions which have been leveled at interreligious dialogue over the years. Still, he grounds

monastic interreligious dialogue as a specific mission stemming from Vatican II.

At this point, the author's identity as an Asian Benedictine comes to the fore as he reflects on and develops Merton's interreligious legacy for the future in his own context. This is an area ripe for interreligious dialogue, especially among Asian monastics and contemplatives. In his conclusion (243-56) he includes a variety of possibilities beginning with the importance of intra-religious dialogue: "dialogue at the interior and spiritual level within the minds and hearts of those who follow different religious traditions" (246). This wrestling within a seeker, in conversation with other religions, can spark growth.

One of the most fascinating sections of the book is Park's description of several forms of experience in Korea. For example, St. Joseph's Monastery, founded in 1987 by a Korean abbey in the Missionary Benedictine Congregation, combined some traditional Korean and Buddhist practices with their Western Benedictine practice. Another model of inter-monastic dialogue within the same region and same ethnic group is Samsohoe, a "gathering of the different religious women in South Korea: Nuns of Zen Buddhism, Christianity, and Won-Buddhism (an indigenous form of Korean Buddhism)" (233). Since 1988, they have been meeting for prayer and work. The purpose of the gathering is social engagement with those who are poor, with children and the disabled. Monastery stays are another creative venture offered by Buddhist and Christian monasteries for lay contemplatives and seekers. The author compares the schedule and activities of these stays and shows a remarkable similarity in the monastic practices offered to lay contemplatives for a temporary period.

There are many take-aways for monastics and all involved in contemplative dialogue from *Thomas Merton's Encounter with Buddhism and Beyond*. First, the legacy of interreligious contemplative dialogue we have inherited from Merton is our responsibility to shape and continue. Secondly, our involvement in interreligious contemplative dialogue includes intra-monastic dialogue, the internal wrestling and openness which stretches and transforms our own consciousness, which spills over into broader and deeper connections beyond barriers, differences and firmly-held positions. Third, as contemplatives and monastics, individually and communally we can enter into dialogue with others. We can also create spaces – physically and spiritually – where we can enter into Dialogues of Theology, Experience and Action with others. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this book demonstrates that there is something new brewing in Korea and Asia, since this Benedictine monastic is passionate and well-prepared for interreligious/contemplative dialogue whose goal is the transformation of consciousness which is a foundation for transformational action.

As William Skudlarek, OSB, Secretary General of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue, wrote in this book's Foreword, "On behalf of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue, I am profoundly grateful to Fr. Anselmo for so clearly articulating Merton's insistence that the core of interreligious dialogue must be spiritual and for his willingness to promote the legacy of this Western and yet universal monk among the Christians and Buddhists of Korea and beyond" (ix).