Thomas Merton and Educative Dialogue among Diverse Christians

By **Padraic O'Hare**

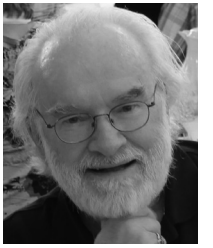
Thomas Merton certainly thought of himself as engaged with varieties of religious and spiritual education that promote dialogue.[1] He wrote: "If I affirm myself as a Catholic merely by denying all that is Muslim, Jewish, Protestant, Hindu, Buddhist, etc., in the end I will find that there is not much left for me to affirm as a Catholic: and certainly no breath of the Spirit with which to affirm it."[2] Pope Francis would seem to agree. Almost fifty years after Merton's death, the Pope spoke before the United States Congress of Merton's extraordinary work in revealing the unity of authentic religious experiences, and recommended him to the people of the United States as one of four exemplars especially worthy of emulation, saying of Merton that he was "a thinker who challenged the certitudes of his time and opened new horizons for souls and for the Church. . . . a man of dialogue, a promoter of peace between peoples and religions."[3]

The present discussion deals principally with the pedagogy of the sacred that initiates people into religious and spiritual tradition from the inside.[4] First, I will situate Thomas Merton in the history of religious and spiritual traditions of pedagogy. Second, I will sketch some remarkable contributions he has made to ecumenical engagement among Christians. Third, I will disclose my own (final) quarter-century of pedagogical engagement in a practice best designated as education for contemplation and compassion. And I will link this, however tentatively, with pedagogies that approach crossing deep and apparently incommensurable divisions.

In this context, by "pedagogy" I mean practice which assists persons to live spiritual lives. By "spiritual lives" I mean inner lives (as does Merton, as the reader will note), in which we grow over the course of that lifetime in the skill set of accessing our true selves in a vast inner landscape of stillness, where also the Holy One – by any name or none – dwells. Encounters with one's true self have the effect of progressively setting aside the false self. By "pedagogy of the sacred" I must therefore mean practice which alerts persons to the reality that, as Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote in his poem "God's Grandeur," "nature [that from which everything is born] is never spent; / There lives the dearest freshness deep down things."[5] This is a pedagogy that induces awe. By "religion," I mean communal arrangements which nurture spiritual lives.

Situating Merton Historically

In his history of silence in Christianity, the Cambridge Church historian Diarmaid MacCulloch makes a remarkable, and at first perplexing, claim about Thomas Merton's place in, of all things, history itself! Eschewing,



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as any self-respecting contemporary historian will, the preposterous notion associated with Thomas Carlyle that history is a report on the actions of great men, MacCulloch nevertheless confesses that on one great pivot in human history he is tempted to lapse back and identify a world-historical shift with one man, and the one man is Thomas Merton. The shift MacCulloch ascribes to Thomas Merton is no less than *the democratization of spiritual exploration*.[6] Hear again: the democratization of spiritual exploration! One needn't be a priest or minister, brother, sister, monk or nun to live a holy life! The mature Merton said everyone is called to holiness. In *New Seeds of Contemplation*, we hear him say, quite simply, "Christ . . . came on earth to form contemplatives."[7] And he took plenty of grief for it. When Merton wrote this, the Catholic way was still largely "pray, pay and obey"; the path to holiness: "Do what Monsignor says"! In Morgan Atkinson's recent film on Merton's life, James Finley says on camera that when his pastor heard of Merton's accidental death in 1968 at only 53 years of age, the pastor said it was perhaps God's will that Merton would no longer be able to lead Catholics astray.[8]

A remarkable claim, MacCulloch's for Merton. In Merton's lifetime as now, the "schools" – as Saint Benedict called them[9] – for practicing holiness were monasteries, and the principal exemplars were monastics, nuns and monks. Mind: the principal exemplars, not the only candidates practicing holiness; and only effective when, as Joan Chittister says, the monasteries teach by example, "living the ordinary life extraordinary well . . . life beyond the superficial and uncaring, calmly in the midst of chaos, productively in an arena of waste, lovingly in a maelstrom of individualism, gently in a world full of violence."[10] Merton writes approvingly of Martin Luther's repudiation of the calcified and corrupted monastic life which Luther himself encountered. What the great Reformer repudiated, Merton says, was "Sterile devotionalism, attachment to trivial outward forms, forgetfulness of the essentials of Christian faith, and obsession with accidentals."[11]

Evoking Luther brings me back to the perplexity I felt reading MacCulloch's praise of Merton: first, feelings of exhilaration; then, almost immediately, the thought: shouldn't it be Luther himself to whom this democratization is ascribed? A Bible translated so that ordinary Germans can read it; repudiation, as Merton says, of religious sterility and obsession with outward forms, recapturing the essentials of Christian faith? My perplexity grew as I recalled among the warmest, richest insights of my graduate-school experiences at Union Theological Seminary in New York City – the great Daniel Day Williams evoking what he called the "the therapeutic [healing] insight of the Protestant Reformation": Luther's retrieval, Luther's placing at the center, the fiducial dimension of Christian faithfulness, from *fiducia* – trust: more than assent to doctrine, more even than faithfulness as actions (since good trees will bear good fruit) – Christian faithfulness as trusting God. How could a historian who writes so profoundly about what he calls the "Protestant Reformations"[12] (plural) get that wrong? Answer is: he doesn't. Luther and Calvin, for all their clinging to hierarchy, nevertheless initiate processes which come, oh so slowly, to effect the "democratization of Church form and structure." (As for their own times, Calvinists and Lutherans butchered just as many real Christian egalitarians, Anabaptists and the like, as did Roman Catholic authorities.)

No, MacCulloch has the right person. It is Merton who renews the search to inhabit our own inwardness, to encounter our inner lives, our true (or real) selves. It is Merton who virtually

reintroduces to Western Christians the word, the practice of contemplation, or so Richard Rohr believes and declares (see Atkinson). In this lies his appeal to Protestant Christians, to young Protestant Christians, to young adult Protestant Christians in the 1960s and now beyond: it is in initiation into the practice of the spiritual life that Merton's appeal to a vast range of Protestant Christians resides. This is the first of the three contributions to ecumenical engagement I discern: Merton influencing Protestant Christians' attraction to the spiritual life, complemented by Merton sharing with Protestant Christians an utterly Christ-centered practice and Merton's love affair, from the age of 18 to 53, with Orthodox, or Eastern, Christianity.

Merton Influencing Protestant Christians' Attraction to the Spiritual Life

There is no question that Merton understands "the spiritual life" as inner life and as the source not only of contemplative identity with the Holy One, but of actions which make us more like God. Merton links a true inner life with acts of mercy, justice, compassion and forgiveness, the link between what is sometimes framed as, even contrasted as, Protestant prophetic sensibilities and Catholic mysticism. He writes: "I consider that the spiritual life is the life of a man's real self, the life of that interior self whose flame is so often allowed to be smothered under the ashes of anxiety and futile concern."[13] Elsewhere he declares, "The spiritual life is first of all a *life* . . . . a matter of keeping awake. . . . Meditation is one of the ways in which spiritual man keeps himself awake."[14] He adds, "If you want to have a spiritual life you must unify your life. A life is either all spiritual or not spiritual at all. No man can serve two masters. Your life is shaped by the end you live for. You are made in the image of what you desire" (*TS* 56). In these citations and throughout his mature writings, there is no doubt: for Merton contemplation is the fountain from which compassion flows, not an act of works righteousness. For example:

> All men seek peace first of all with themselves. . . . We have to learn to commune with ourselves before we can communicate with other men and with God. A man who is not at peace with himself necessarily projects his interior fighting into the society of those he lives with, and spreads a contagion of conflict all around him. (*NMI* 120-21)

Remember Merton's approval of Luther's repudiation of "sterile devotionalism," the work of degenerate sixteenth-century monks and nuns, fruitless monastic contemplative regimes substituting for Protestant prophetic consciousness and practice. From this critique generations upon generations of Protestant Christians came to speak, as does Justin Klassen today, of "my Protestant formation['s] deep skepticism of the inwardness of faith."[15] Until Merton! Beginning in the late 1950s, Protestant seminarians began visiting Merton at Gethsemani, spurred by ecumenically sensitive Protestant seminary professors, who like their ecumenically sensitive Roman Catholic counterparts, yearned, for themselves and their students, for what we separated sisters and brothers had had to do without for 500 years because the something yearned for was associated with the repudiated "other": Protestants deprived of inwardness, deprived of Merton's insight that "Contemplation is the highest expression of man's intellectual and spiritual life" (*NSC* 1); Catholics deprived of a trustworthy God who needs no works from us for redemption, who needs no attachment to outward forms, forgetfulness of essentials and

obsession with accidentals. Today, the body of Christians around the world for whom Merton is the great spiritual master (because he is a very *human* being) is seamlessly non-denominational, though, by the way, I think very prayerful, as the touching testimony from a Protestant Christian of Merton's influence on her that will conclude this discussion will exemplify.

Merton Sharing with Protestant Christians an Utterly Christ-centered Practice

In his film *Soul Searching: The Journey of Thomas Merton*, Morgan Atkinson interviews the theologian and literary scholar Anthony Padovano, who at one point in the film says he thinks Merton was especially drawn to Zen because of the muting of dogma and doctrine in that spiritual tradition of practice. No doubt Padovano is correct. But it strikes me that the same can be said of Merton's very early, and enthused, and now, posthumously, sustained and vigorous engagement with Protestant Christians. The little-known but remarkable spiritual writer, the French priest Joseph Lemarchand (his translator, Joseph Cunneen, called him "the most significant writer of Christian inspiration in France since Georges Bernanos"[16]), who wrote under the name Jean Sulivan, stated with chilling clarity, unequivocally: "Those people in the service of a religious ideology that is mistaken for faith participate in the assassination of Jesus."[17] It is the purity of Reformation Christianity that is expressed here, is it not? To return to Saint Paul, "To live is Christ" (Phil. 1:21). It was so with Merton as well. It is perhaps why Karl Barth was among Merton's favorite theologians, "almost the one among theologians alive today that I like best."[18] (And, by the way, it is so also for the great Liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez, this affinity with Barth; I have myself heard Gustavo say: "for a Christian the highest compliment is to be called 'evangelical.'") Certainly, for Merton it is the later Barth, the Barth who loves Mozart, the Barth "more open to apprehending God in the passions of creaturely life" (Klassen 190), who is admired. Certainly Barth's God is not Merton's:

> God the pure limit and pure beginning of what we are, have and do, standing over in infinite qualitative difference to man and all that is human, nowhere and never identical with that which we call God, experience, surmise and pray to as God, the yes in our no and the no in our yes, the first and the last and as such unknown, but nowhere and never a magnitude amongst others in the medium known to us, God the Lord, the Creator and Redeemer.[19]

Contrast this utter transcendence with Merton's "The only true joy on earth is to escape from the prison of our own false self, and enter by love into union with the Life Who dwells and sings within the essence of every creature and in the core of our own souls" (*NSC* 25); or "At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth . . . which belongs entirely to God . . . . It is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak His name written in us" (*CGB* 142). Barth's famous dictum that only faith is to be taken seriously, his indifference to religions and to natural theology, would seem miles from Merton; but Merton could still write: "I may be interested in Oriental religion, 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. . . . none of it [Merton's interest in Eastern thought] touches on the mystery of personality in God and His personal love for me."[20]

Merton brings the two elements together, that is, his often breathtaking speech about inner life and the true self, and also the utter Christ-centeredness he shares with Protestant Christianity: "Christ forms Himself by grace and faith in the souls of all who love Him . . . . Therefore if you want to have in your heart the affections and dispositions which were those of Christ on earth . . . . [e]nter into the darkness of inner renunciation, strip your soul of images and let Christ form Himself in you by His cross" (*NSC* 157). To which we need only add that in all healthy and genuine expressions of Christianity, Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant, this cross embodies the wholesomeness and freedom of sacrificial love, and never blood payment to a brutish God!

Merton's Love Affair with Eastern Orthodoxy

We know from many sources, Merton himself and others, of his admiration for and inspiration derived from the spiritual richness of Orthodoxy. Michael Plekon, Rowan Williams, Basil Pennington, Jim Forest, John Eudes Bamberger, A. M. Allchin – all have written of it.[21] Consider the lonely 18-year-old Tom in Rome in 1933, moved, he tells us, for the first time since his father's death about two years earlier, moved to pray, moved by the icons in the Greek-inspired Byzantine churches in Rome: "I was fascinated by these . . . mosaics. I began to haunt the churches where they were to be found . . . . And now for the first time in my life I began to find out something of Who this Person was that men called Christ."[22] In 1950, the maturing Merton, at age 35, finds Eastern Orthodox hesychast contemplation, with its mantric focus on the name of Jesus, saves Western contemplative practice from becoming "rather animal . . . in its intoxication, . . . lazy, lethargic," something that "confuses and degrades the higher powers." In contrast, the Eastern way, Merton thinks, "can become the secret of a simple and pure and intense recollection that might last for hours and easily merges into infused prayer."[23]

In the final months of his life, Merton writes that he is attracted to the Christ of the icons, the rich expression of "a theology of light, the ikon being a kind of sacramental medium for the illumination and awareness of the glory of Christ within us."[24] Then at the very end of his life, as Jim Forest reports, the following items were in Merton's pockets when he died, items returned to Gethsemani with his body, a dollar value assigned to each: "Timex Watch $10.00 1 Pair Dark Glasses in Tortoise Frames Nil 1 Cistercian Leather Bound Breviary Nil 1 Rosary (broken) Nil 1 Small Icon of the Virgin and Child Nil." On the back of the icon was a saying from the *Philokalia* (a collection of Orthodox Christian writings on the spiritual life, especially on the Prayer of the Heart): "*If we wish to please the true God and to be friends with the most blessed of friendships, let us present our spirit naked to God. Let us not draw into it anything of this present world – no art, no thought, no reasoning, no self-justification – even though we should possess all the wisdom of this world*."[25]

Conclusion

I promised earlier to finish these reflections with "touching testimony from a Protestant Christian of Merton's influence on her." The woman is Stephanie Paulsell, of the faculty of Harvard Divinity School, a member of the Disciples of Christ, found in *Merton and the Protestant Tradition*,[26] edited by her father William, who had first come to Gethsemani as a

Vanderbilt University divinity school student in the 1960s, and had met Merton at that time, and later frequently brought his own family to the monastery. His daughter writes: "My sister and I would sit in the first pew of the balcony, peering over the railing at the monks as they stood, sat, knelt, sang. Compline was our favorite office, the last of the day. I remember how the last note of the monks' hymn to Mary would rise and rise into the high ceiling, spreading itself among the eaves until it turned back into silence" (Paulsell 114). As a girl, Professor Paulsell read *The Sign of Jonas*[27] and especially recalls the report of Merton (Father Louis) and Father Macarius going out to bless the fields, calves, pigs, sheep, chickens (who ran from them) and the rabbits who "stayed quiet until we threw holy water at them and then they all jumped" (Paulsell 112). The Paulsells became friends with and came to revere another Gethsemani monk, Matthew Kelty, who opened an experimental monastic community 90 miles from their family home in North Carolina; a native of South Boston, originally a Divine Word missionary, later a hermit in Papua, New Guinea for 8 years, a gracious preacher and spiritual writer, who died in 2011 at age 94. Paulsell writes beautifully of his life (see 114-16) and of others that connected her with a vision she came to recognize as that of Merton:

> Thomas Merton's influence did not reach me only through his books . . . . It also came to me intertwined with the relationships that meant the most to me, and the idea of him accumulated meaning as I encountered people who loved him and shared his commitments. In the second grade, I had spent a year in a Catholic school. When the courts insisted, more than ten years after Brown vs. the Board of Education, that the schools in my small southern town had to become fully integrated, the town closed the public schools and did not open them again until after Christmas. My parents sent me to the already-integrated Saint Therese Catholic School, where I was taught by nuns who were serious about racial justice in the south and who taught us with a wry, intelligent humor. As they interacted with us in the classroom and on the playground, in the chapel, in the gym, and when we were fidgeting in line, Sister Mary Griffin and Sister Mary Ann communicated to us that the capacity for friendship and community was a religious capacity, a practice of faith. When the schools reopened, I went back to public school. But when I began reading Thomas Merton, his voice brought back to me the voices of my teachers at St. Therese and the things about which they cared most deeply. (Paulsell 113)

Professor Paulsell concludes her lovely essay with words that provide a vivid personal witness of Merton's role in the educative dialogue among diverse Christians that has been the focus of this discussion:

> Thomas Merton's influence on me has been, and continues to be, profound. In truth, it is difficult for me to separate it from the influence of others – my parents, my sister, my father's students and my own, Sister Mary Griffin, Sister Mary Ann, Father Matthew Kelty. But perhaps that is not surprising. To encounter Merton is to encounter a universe of others – writers he loved, people with whom he corresponded, the monks by whose side he worked out

> his vocation in fear and trembling, frustration and joy. To feel the influence of Thomas Merton is to feel the influence of many. It is to be invited into a living conversation that springs into motion, like the rabbits Merton once blessed, with every new voice that enters. (Paulsell 118)

It is of this encounter with a universe of others transcending all boundaries that Merton himself spoke so memorably shortly before he died:

> the deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words, and it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity. My dear brothers, we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are.[28]

1. An earlier version of this article was presented at a conference on October 16, 2018 entitled "Thomas Merton and the Religions" sponsored by the Center for the Study of Jewish-Christian-Muslim Relations at Merrimack College, North Andover, MA.
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. Pope Francis, "Address of the Holy Father to a Joint Session of the United States Congress – September 24, 2015," *The Merton Annual* 28 (2015) 21.
4. For previous discussions of aspects of this topic, see Padraic O'Hare, "Merton and Masterpiece Making," *The Merton Seasonal* 26.3 (Fall 2001) 10-17; "Merton and Young Adults in the Wilderness," *The Merton Seasonal* 40.1 (Spring 2015) 42-44; "Young Adult Spiritual Lives: Merton, Moran and Monastic Resources," *The Merton Annual* 29 (2017) 203-20; "Christ and the Undivided Young Adult: Clues from Merton and More," *The Merton Seasonal* 43.1 (Spring 2018) 3-11.
5. Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems and Prose*, ed. W. H. Gardner (Baltimore: Penguin, 1963) 27.
6. Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Silence: A Christian History* (New York: Viking, 2013) 229.
7. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 250; subsequent references will be cited as "*NSC*" parenthetically in the text.
8. Morgan Atkinson. *Soul Searching: The Journey of Thomas Merton* [DVD] (Louisville, KY: Duckworks, 2007); subsequent references will be cited as "Atkinson" parenthetically in the text.
9. "Therefore we intend to establish a school for the Lord's service" (*Rule*, Prologue 45 [*RB80: The Rule of St. Benedict in English*, ed. Timothy Fry, OSB (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1982) 18]); see also Thomas Merton, *The Rule of Saint Benedict: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* 4, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2009) 69, 71.
10. Joan Chittister, OSB, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of Saint Benedict Today* (New York: HarperOne, 2000) 4; ; subsequent references will be cited as "Chittister" parenthetically in the text.
11. Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967) 188.
12. See Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation* (New York: Viking/Penguin, 2003).
13. Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955) ix; subsequent references will be cited as "*NMI*" parenthetically in the text.
14. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1958) 46-47; subsequent references will be cited as "*TS*" parenthetically in the text.
15. Justin D. Klassen, "Thomas Merton and the Integrated Life," *Merton and the Protestant Tradition*, ed. William Oliver Paulsell (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2016) 186; subsequent references will be cited as "Klassen" parenthetically in the text.
16. Joseph Cunneen, "Writing as a Vocation: Jean Sulivan," *America* 154 (6 November 1986) 117.
17. Jean Sulivan, *Morning Light: The Spiritual Journal of Jean Sulivan*, ed. Joseph Cunneen & Patrick Gormally

(Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1976) 17.

18. Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: Letters on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990) 189 [12/20/1963 letter to Kilian McDonnell, OSB].
19. Karl Barth, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns, 6th ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1933) 330-31.
20. 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) 259 [6/26/1965].
21. Indispensible for this topic is Bernadette Dieker and Jonathan Montaldo, eds., *Merton & Hesychasm: The Prayer of the Heart* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2003), a volume in which many of these authors appear.
22. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 108-109.
23. Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer. Journals, vol. 2: 1941-1952*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 405.
24. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 642 [3/29/1968 letter to June Yungblut]; subsequent references will be cited as "*HGL*" parenthetically in the text.
25. Jim Forest, *Living with Wisdom: A Life of Thomas Merton*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008) 241.
26. Stephanie A. Paulsell, "Thomas Merton's Living Influence," *Merton and the Protestant Tradition*, ed. William Oliver Paulsell (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2016) 111-18; subsequent references will be cited as "Paulsell" parenthetically in the text.
27. See Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953) 103.
28. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 308.