

## “Yes to Everyone”: Thomas Merton’s Radical Ecumenism and Inter-Monastic Mysticism of the Ground

By David M. Odorisio

In a journal entry of April 28, 1957, in the context of an extended reflection on Divine Wisdom as articulated by the Russian theologians Sergei Bulgakov and Nikolai Berdyaev, Thomas Merton wrote:

If I can unite *in myself*, in my own spiritual life, the thought of the East and the West of the Greek and Latin Fathers, I will create in myself a reunion of the divided Church and from that unity in myself can come the exterior and visible unity of the Church. For if we want to bring together East and West we cannot do it by imposing one upon the other. We must contain both in ourselves and transcend both in Christ.<sup>1</sup>

Merton’s unique contribution here is his emphasis on the *interior* dimensions of Christian unity – what I refer to as his “radical ecumenism.” This is no facile or superficial overcoming of divisions; nor, importantly, is it a canonical reformulation of dogmatic principles that will finally lead to the unification of a fractured and fragmented Christianity. To Merton, the real work, the deep work, is primarily interior.<sup>2</sup> Yet paradoxically, without the religious “other,” the scope of his radical ecumenism remains incomplete. To Merton, when “self” is viewed solely as “not-other,” any attempts at dialogue, much less unification, become untenable. The unfolding dynamic and evolution of Merton’s commitments to religious “others,” beginning with his profound “radical ecumenism” of the late 1950s and early 1960s, culminates in his universalist inter-monastic mysticism in the Ground of Being as outlined in his 1968 notes, “Monastic Experience and East-West Dialogue.”<sup>3</sup> Here, Merton’s inter-monastic thinking pushes beyond his earlier ecumenism as he moves toward an inter-faith, contemplative mysticism that touches – and relies – upon a kenotic and “hidden” Ground. Merton’s 1966 and 1967 essays “Transcendent Experience” and “The New Consciousness”<sup>4</sup> further support his inter-faith thinking by originating his mysticism of the Ground within the very structures of consciousness itself. Ultimately, Merton’s inter-spiritual vision is paradoxically rooted in his Christian monastic commitments while remaining extraordinarily open to religious others through a “transcendent unity” that Merton believed was accessible to all through contemplation, love and a heart open to all.

This ecumenical interiority is reflected again in *Conjectures of a Guilty*

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*Bystander*,<sup>5</sup> Merton's later re-working for publication of his private journals. Here, Merton significantly develops the radical interiority of his contemplative ecumenical stance in a powerful passage that deserves to be quoted at length:

If I do not have unity in myself, how can I even think, let alone speak, of unity among Christians? Yet, of course, in seeking unity for all Christians, I also attain unity within myself. The heresy of individualism: thinking oneself a completely self-sufficient unit and asserting this imaginary "unity" against all others.<sup>6</sup> . . . The true way is just the opposite: the more I am able to affirm others, to say "yes" to them in myself, by discovering them in myself and myself in them, the more real I am. I am fully real if my own heart says *yes to everyone*. (CGB 128-29)

Merton continues:

I will be a better Catholic, not if I can *refute* every shade of Protestantism, but if I can affirm the truth in it and still go further. So, too, with the Muslims, the Hindus, the Buddhists, etc. . . .<sup>7</sup> 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. (CGB 129)<sup>8</sup>

Merton's emphasis on the "fully real" as a bi-lateral orientation expands in multiple directions simultaneously: *interiorly* in an ontological unification of the self, that relies entirely on inter-faith relationship(s) formed *exteriorly*. The radicality of Merton's ecumenism, which blossoms here into a fully inter-religious declaration, has at its foundation the fundamental question of human *being*. In other words, Merton's "radical ecumenism" – and, later, his "inter-monastic mysticism" – has at its foundation not a *metaphysical* concern regarding the unity of Christian denominations or global religious traditions – but more fundamentally, an *ontological* question regarding *the nature of human being itself* that is intimately bound to religious and denominational "others." For Merton, to say "*yes to everyone*" is to become "fully real" at the level of one's personhood; yet, it is an achievement only actualized to the extent of one's capacity to stand in relationship with others. The more that I am able to "affirm others," "to say 'yes' to them," "the more real" I become; I am only "fully real" if my own heart says "*yes to everyone*."

In this mature statement representative of Merton's "radical" 1960s ecumenism, we see the flourishing of seeds sown throughout the late 1950s – seeds that were to continue to bear fruit well into the final years of Merton's life, and form the basis for a profound "inter-monastic mysticism": a mutual "interpenetration"<sup>9</sup> of faiths through an experiential and transformational encounter in a "hidden," contemplative, and kenotic Ground of Being that Merton locates within the very structures of consciousness itself. Merton outlines his daring "program for this seeing"<sup>10</sup> in a series of notes which were to be delivered at the Spiritual Summit Conference in Calcutta on October 23, 1968,<sup>11</sup> published posthumously as "Monastic Experience and East-West Dialogue" in an appendix to Merton's *Asian Journal*.

At the conclusion of his Calcutta address, Merton famously offered the following:

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. (AJ 308)

While many Merton readers readily recognize these lines, relatively few might be aware of the profound “notes” which lay behind them and underscored his outline for both a living inter-monastic comparative mysticism,<sup>12</sup> as well as a stunning vision of “truly universal consciousness” (AJ 317). “Monastic Experience and East-West Dialogue” – totaling only nine printed pages – serves as some of his most daring, far-reaching, and expansive thinking and writing on the topic of inter-religious, specifically inter-monastic, exchange.

Merton opens these notes with a broad and wide-ranging definition of “monasticism.” He defines three types of “individuals and communities,” each described as committed to: (1) detachment from secular materialism; (2) “preoccupation with the radical inner depth of one’s religious . . . beliefs,” as well as the “the inner and experimental ‘ground’ of those beliefs”; and (3) “special concern with inner transformation, a deepening of consciousness toward an eventual breakthrough and discovery of a transcendent dimension of life beyond that of the ordinary empirical self” (AJ 309-10).<sup>13</sup>

Notice the language Merton employs thus far: “radical inner depth”; “inner and experimental ‘ground’”; “inner transformation”; and most relevant here, “a deepening of consciousness” oriented toward “breakthrough,” “discovery,” and transcendence *beyond* the “ordinary empirical self.”<sup>14</sup> Merton utilizes these definitional concepts as through-lines to his particular approach to inter-religious, inter-monastic communion, describing this work as arcing towards an ineffable “universality and wholeness” that “transcend the limits that separate subject from object and self from not-self” (AJ 310). Merton’s inter-monastic vision,<sup>15</sup> or what I refer to as his inter-monastic *mysticism*, gravitates toward a universality that is “wide open to life and to new experience,” fully utilizing one’s own tradition, while going “beyond it” (AJ 315).<sup>16</sup> To Merton, this is a movement from “communication” toward a level of “communion” that is marked by “authentic experience” (AJ 315), an “integrity” in one’s own “inner depths,” as well as, perhaps most importantly, an “inner transcendent freedom” that points toward the “full maturity . . . of a truly universal consciousness” (AJ 317).<sup>17</sup>

Merton’s interest is in the “real possibility of contact on a deep level” between contemplatives and monastics of various cultures and religious traditions (AJ 311). In other words, what Merton outlines is a proposal for a truly *inter-monastic mysticism*, the aim of which is “to penetrate the ultimate ground of [one’s] beliefs by a transformation of . . . religious consciousness” (AJ 311), making possible a “dialogue in depth” vis-à-vis “the very ground of monastic and of human experience” (AJ 312). This is, to me, the type of communication-cum-communion that Merton famously articulates as the “original unity” that we already “are” (AJ 308).

We see in Merton’s essay an outline for a tremendous *trans-religious* project which can perhaps be read as both a summation of his own late-life aspirations as well as one of the most mature expressions of Merton’s inter-religious, inter-monastic mysticism.<sup>18</sup> Yet the question remains: *how*

does Merton get here? In other words, what is the line of thinking he follows in his own ideological development and philosophical evolution? In two important mid-1960s essays, Merton's burgeoning ecumenism of the late 1950s is linked to his more mature inter-monastic mysticism of the late 1960s. Through his correspondence with Linda (Parsons) Sabbath (1926-2013) and Raymond H. Prince (1925-2012),<sup>19</sup> Merton had occasion to submit two essays to the R. M. Bucke Memorial Society *Newsletter-Review*.<sup>20</sup> These two essays, revised and re-worked for inclusion in Merton's *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, are entitled "The New Consciousness" and "Transcendent Experience."<sup>21</sup> While the essays need to be read within the context of the (counter)culture<sup>22</sup> and correspondences out of which they arose, particularly around understanding and integrating religious experience,<sup>23</sup> and the delicate relationship between psychological diagnosis and mysticism,<sup>24</sup> these essays also serve as a powerful platform for some of Merton's most far-reaching conjectures regarding both the "psychology" of transcendent experience, as well as the nature of human consciousness itself. These two essays can be read, then, as a theoretical underpinning for Merton's developing inter-monastic universalism and general orientation towards the transformation of consciousness that feature so prominently in the writings and public talks of his final year.<sup>25</sup>

Merton's essay "The New Consciousness" can be read on two levels simultaneously: first, as an attempted articulation of an explicitly modern Christian consciousness; second, as an *apologia* for the revival of Christian mysticism today, including the radical implications of a revitalized mystical consciousness for contemporary Christians. Merton's unique contribution in this essay is deconstructing and reframing modern consciousness through the lens of a transformed – and explicitly Christian – mysticism, which involves a radical ecumenical revisioning as well.<sup>26</sup> Merton defines modern consciousness within a purely Cartesian – and perhaps uniquely American – cast, which "tends to create this solipsistic bubble of awareness – an ego-self imprisoned in its own consciousness, isolated and out of touch with other such selves in so far as they are all 'things' rather than persons" (ZBA 22). The switch, or way 'out,' for Merton, is his declaration that another form of consciousness "is still available" – one that begins *not* with the thinking self, but "from Being, ontologically . . . beyond and prior to the subject-object division. Underlying the subjective experience of the individual self there is an immediate experience of Being" (ZBA 23). This is Merton's way around or through the split subject-object inheritance of modern reductionist epistemologies, and serves as the underlying cornerstone of his radical ecumenism and inter-monastic mysticism: each of which places the practitioner beyond the boundaries of both the individualized ego-self as well as beyond theological and doctrinal systems of established religious traditions.<sup>27</sup>

This type of consciousness is not, to Merton, "consciousness of but *pure consciousness*, in which the subject as such 'disappears'" (ZBA 24).<sup>28</sup> This type of consciousness actualizes "a totally different kind of self-awareness from that of the Cartesian thinking-self . . . a self-to-be-dissolved in self-giving, in love, in 'letting-go,' in ecstasy, in God" (ZBA 24). "Thus," Merton reminds us, "from the very start this consciousness is disposed to encounter 'the other' with whom it is already united anyway 'in God'" (ZBA 24). In only a few brief but potent passages, Merton deconstructs modern notions of individualized self-consciousness, and outlines an alternative vision for human Being that is radically oriented toward others and rooted in an ecstatic, Divine generosity, "ontological openness. . . . Freedom and Love" (ZBA 25).

If Merton's "The New Consciousness" outlines a re-visioned and revitalized mystical awareness within an ontological framework, his second essay, "Transcendent Experience," approaches the

ineffable mystery of *how* such a reorientation occurs. In this essay, we see Merton's evolving trajectory as he moves beyond limited egoic awareness toward a form of mystical consciousness that is rooted in a transcendent "Ground." The mystical epistemology of "The New Consciousness" now expands outward into further ontological possibilities that, when read alongside "Monastic Experience and East-West Dialogue," paradoxically affirms both *difference* and *sameness* of individual believers and religious others (or others in general).

Merton opens the essay by first defining "transcendent experience" as, importantly and primarily, an experience of "self-transcending" that is simultaneously an encounter with the "'Transcendent' . . . Absolute Ground of Being" (ZBA 71). This is an important orientation as it allows Merton to tackle head on "the problem of a self that is 'no-self'" (ZBA 71). In other words, to Merton, the transcendent or mystical experience is not technically an "experience" at all, in that there is no subject-object duality in which "to experience."<sup>29</sup> There is, however, "a radical and revolutionary change in the subject" (ZBA 72). Merton is clear to articulate that this subject is "*not* the ego-self" but the "person as 'found' and 'actualized' in union with Christ" (ZBA 74-75).<sup>30</sup> Following St. Paul's declaration "I live now not I but Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20), Merton adds that "the identity of the mystic is never purely and simply the mere empirical ego . . . but the 'person' who is identified with Christ" (ZBA 75).

It is this shift from the empirical, egoic "I" to a sense of personhood that is identified "above oneself"<sup>31</sup> . . . in Christ, or the Holy Spirit 'within' this self" (ZBA 74) that allows Merton to make his claims regarding the radical self-emptying and "transcendent union with the Ground of Being" (ZBA 77-78). Commenting on the kenotic hymn of Philippians 2:5-10, Merton states:

This dynamic of emptying and of transcendence accurately defines the transformation of the Christian consciousness in Christ. It is a kenotic transformation, an emptying of all the contents of the ego-consciousness to become a void in which the light of God . . . the full radiation of the infinite reality of His Being and Love are manifested. (ZBA 75)

To Merton, it is a kenotic self-emptying that re-orient's one's identity toward an "Absolute Ground of Being" (ZBA 71) that, as outlined in "Monastic Experience and East-West Dialogue," paradoxically opens the individual believer-as-transformed-self to the type of authentic communion with religious others that characterizes Merton's radical inter-monastic vision of the late 1960s.

Merton's "The New Consciousness" and "Transcendent Experience" articulate a daring program for re-orienting egoic identity away from the dualistic self which splits reality into subject-object dichotomies, and toward a radically re-visioned identity rooted in a unified Ground of Being.<sup>32</sup> Merton locates this identity not within the vicissitudes of the "thinking and feeling and willing self" (ZBA 26), but within "a ground which transcends experience . . . a *ground of openness*, . . . a kind of ontological openness and an infinite generosity which communicates itself to everything that is. . . a radical gift that has been lost and must be recovered" (ZBA 24-25).

It is this Ground that serves as *locus operandi* for the radical transformation of the self. Through a kenotic self-emptying, the dualistic, egoic "I," the "self-to-be-dissolved," gives way to a radical "self-giving, in love, in 'letting-go,' in ecstasy, in God" that – centered on God – encounters "'the other' with whom it is already united anyway 'in God'" (ZBA 24). It is only from within such an

ecumenism in the “ground” (*MZM* 204) that the practitioner might hope to contain division and transcend polarization “in Christ.” Yet paradoxically, it is also with/in this “hidden ground of Love for which there can be no explanations” (*HGL* 115)<sup>33</sup> that the radical ecumenist and inter-monastic mystic “goes beyond” individual religious identities – transcending difference through affirming the basic sameness and universality of personhood. This allows the practitioner, from within the bounds of individual and communal religious commitments, to fully affirm a fundamental “transcendent unity” with religious others – others with whom we are “already united anyway” in contemplation and love – so that we may boldly proclaim a radical “yes to everyone.”<sup>34</sup>

1. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 87.
2. As Merton reflects in his “Preface” to *Mystics and Zen Masters* on the term *oikoumene* (“household” in Greek, from which “ecumenical” is derived) “there is a wider ‘oikoumene,’ the household and the spiritual family of man seeking the meaning of his life and its ultimate purpose” (Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967] x; subsequent references will be cited as “*MZM*” parenthetically in the text). Thus the focus and foundation of Merton’s inter-religious questioning continues to probe along lines that are *existential* (meaning) and *ontological* (being), as well as *teleological* (purpose), rather than narrowly dogmatic or doctrinal.
3. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 309-17; subsequent references will be cited as “*AJ*” parenthetically in the text.
4. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968) 71-78, 15-32; subsequent references will be cited as “*ZBA*” parenthetically in the text.
5. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966); subsequent references will be cited as “*CGB*” parenthetically in the text.
6. Merton continues this passage: “The affirmation of the self as simply ‘not the other.’ But when you seek to affirm your unity by denying that you have anything to do with anyone else, by negating everyone else in the universe until you come down to *you*: what is there left to affirm? Even if there were something to affirm, you would have no breath left with which to affirm it” (*CGB* 128-29).
7. It is important to note that Merton qualifies here: “This does not mean syncretism, indifferentism. . . . There is much that one cannot ‘affirm’ and ‘accept,’ but first one must say ‘yes’ where one really can” (*CGB* 129). See also *AJ* 316: “there can be no question of a facile syncretism” regarding interreligious, inter-monastic dialogue.
8. This passage is preceded by the quotation: “*Des hommes comme Saint Seraphim, Saint François d’Assise et bien d’autres, ont accompli dans leur vie l’union des Eglises*” [“Men like St. Seraphim, St. Francis of Assisi and many others brought about the union of the churches in their life”], cited in the original journal entry of June 6, 1960 as “*Metropolitan Eulogius. Quoted in [Maurice] Villain, L’Abbe Couturier [Paris, 1957], p. 51.*” This appears to have inspired the comment: “This is exactly my ideal and my desire” (Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer [San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996] 9). In the revised passage in *Conjectures*, Merton writes, “This profound and simple statement of an Orthodox Metropolitan, Eulogius, gives the key to ecumenism for monks, and indeed for everyone” (*CGB* 128).
9. A term borrowed from comparative theologian Raimon Panikkar, who defines the term as an approach where “No religion is totally foreign to my own; within our own religion we may encounter the religion of the other” (Raimon Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue* [Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999] 9).
10. A reference to Merton’s celebrated “Fourth and Walnut” epiphany: “I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere” (*CGB* 142).
11. In a journal entry for October 24, 1968, Merton notes that he “did not actually follow [his] prepared text” (Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey. Journals, vol. 7: 1967-1968*, ed. Patrick Hart [San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998] 221; subsequent references will be cited as “*OSM*” parenthetically in the text). He adds that the conference “has been well organized” and featured papers from Jewish, Chinese, Hindu, Sufi and Jain representatives (*OSM* 220-21). The conference was sponsored by The Temple of Understanding, a Washington, DC-based group (see Bonnie Thurston, “Waking from a Dream of Separateness: Thomas Merton’s Principles of Interreligious Dialogue,” *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 50.1 [2015] 90; subsequent references will be cited as “Thurston” parenthetically in the



- text). For Merton's related correspondence, see Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994) 256-58; subsequent references will be cited as "WF" parenthetically in the text. In a July 23, 1968 letter Merton describes his proposed talk as "A paper on intermonastic communication, on the need for all religions to develop that which is most deep . . . And [as an] interchange of ideas between different monastic systems, in depth, in terms of a mutual study of traditions" (WF 257).
12. It is interesting to note that in a letter written July 9, 1968, just a few months prior to his Asian journey, Merton qualifies his definition of the comparative study of mysticism as "ways of 'contemplation,'" using explicitly practical and experiential terminology ("I am quite involved in the study of comparative mysticism – or ways of 'contemplation' – and in relations with Buddhists and Hindus. Also with Moslems – particularly Sufis" (Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: Letters on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. Patrick Hart [New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990] 388). Merton most likely qualifies here to distinguish his approach from purely theoretical or academic interest, a distinction he makes explicit in "Monastic Experience" (AJ 312), evidently mirroring Jean Leclercq's classic differentiation between "scholastic" and "monastic" theologies (see Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, trans. Catherine Misrahi [New York: Fordham University Press, 1961] c. 9: "Monastic Theology"). See also Merton's April 25, 1965 letter to Linda (Parsons) Sabbath: "I would have to distinguish those who do 'research in mysticism' (studying it objectively) and those who seek to deepen their own contemplative experience or that of others (subjectively and intersubjectively). I am much more acquainted with the second field" (Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon [New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985] 517; subsequent references will be cited as "HGL" parenthetically in the text).
  13. Merton finishes this statement with "and of ethical and pious observance" (AJ 310). Although outside the scope of this essay, the implications of Merton's imperative to "breakthrough" and discover a transcendent dimension *beyond the ethical* are tremendous and seem to challenge notions regarding ethical action and mystical experience, e.g. G. William Barnard and Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Crossing Boundaries: Essays on the Ethical Status of Mysticism* (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2002).
  14. Compare to William James: "It is that our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. . . . How to regard them is the question" (William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985] 307-308). Perhaps one could also critically apply Merton's "going beyond" the "ordinary empirical self" to the rampant scientific materialism of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, e.g. Edward F. Kelly *et al.*, *Beyond Physicalism: Toward Reconciliation of Science and Spirituality* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).
  15. I am following Jaechan Anselmo Park here regarding usage of the term "inter-monastic" (see Jaechan Anselmo Park, OSB, *Thomas Merton's Encounter with Buddhism and Beyond: His Interreligious Dialogue, Inter-monastic Exchanges, and Their Legacy* [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2019], especially c. 3, "Merton's Pioneering Work with Inter-Monastic/Contemplative Dialogue" [123-71]). The influences of Thurston's "Waking from a Dream of Separateness," William Skudlarek's "Monastic Interreligious Dialogue: Dialogue at the Level of Spiritual Practice and Experience" (in *Catholicism Engaging Other Faiths: Pathways for Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. V. Latinovic *et al.* [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018] 229-47; subsequent references will be cited as "Skudlarek" parenthetically in the text) and Fabrice Blée's *The Third Desert: The Story of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue*, trans. William Skudlarek (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011) are also hovering in the definitional foreground.
  16. Merton qualifies his universalist agenda about halfway through the text, explicitly naming the importance of respect for "irreconcilable differences" at the level of doctrine, while continuing to assert a fundamental similarity from the place of *experience* (AJ 312; see also Thurston 92-93; and Skudlarek 229, as well as Merton's August 8, 1965 letter to Linda (Parsons) Sabbath where he explicitly states, "The only way to make any sense about the inner dimensions of religious experience is to discuss it in a framework of practice and experience" [HGL 518]). It is, of course, entirely possible to envision a type of inter-monastic, inter-religious commitment that occurs at *both* the level of *practice/experience* as well as *doctrinal and theological (re)formulation* à la Bede Griffiths or Jules Monchanin.
  17. Contrary to a "perennialist" or "essentialist" position, Merton states clearly that he is *not* "asserting that there is complete unity of all religions at the 'top,' the transcendent or mystical level – that they all start from different dogmatic positions to 'meet' at this [supposed] summit" (AJ 312). He does, however, support a "(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” (*AJ* 313; again, note the term “experience”). In moving beyond the polarized perennialist/essentialist–contextualist debates, Merton offers an alternative that respects both historical-contextual *difference* while *at the same time affirming* a deep experiential universality or *sameness* among mystical traditions. Merton more explicitly wrestles with these important comparative and methodological positions in his essay “A Christian Looks at Zen” (*ZBA* 42-45). For an overview of these academic debates, see Jess Hollenback, *Mysticism: Experience, Response, and Empowerment* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996) 5-17.

18. Another example would be Merton’s 1968 review-essay, “Final Integration: Toward a ‘Monastic Therapy,’” which appeared posthumously in his *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 205-17.
19. Sabbath first visited Prince at McGill University, Montreal, in 1964; with others, they co-founded the R. M. Bucke Memorial Society for the Study of Religious Experience. For a history and overview, particularly of Prince’s career and contributions to “transcultural psychiatry,” see Goffredo Bartocci *et al.*, “Raymond Prince and the R. M. Bucke Memorial Society for the Study of Religious Experience,” *Transcultural Psychiatry* 43.4 (Dec. 2006) 615-33; subsequent references will be cited as “Bartocci” parenthetically in the text. For Merton’s correspondences, along with biographical overviews, see *HGL* 492-96 (Prince) and 516-33 (Sabbath). For Prince’s life in his own words, see *Why This Ecstasy? Reflections on My Life with Madmen* (Montreal: Avmor Art and Cultural Foundation, 2010).
20. The R. M. Bucke Memorial Society *Newsletter-Review* consists of eight volumes published in the years 1966-1976. The Society was named after Richard Maurice Bucke (1837-1902), a Canadian psychiatrist, who, in 1872, had a profound and life-altering mystical experience on his way home from a long night of reading the Romantic poets (particularly Whitman, who would later become a dear friend of Bucke’s) at a local gathering: “All at once, without warning of any kind, he found himself wrapped around as it were by a flame-coloured cloud” (R. M. Bucke, *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind* [Philadelphia: Innes & Sons, 1901] iii). This event culminated in what is perhaps one of the earliest works on comparative mysticism, Bucke’s *Cosmic Consciousness*, a work that influenced William James’ own theorizing on the universal nature of the “varieties” of religious experience. For a brief biography of Bucke, see Bartocci 616-22.
21. “The New Consciousness” originally appeared as “The Self of Modern Man and the New Christian Consciousness” in the R. M. Bucke Memorial Society *Newsletter-Review* 2.1 (April, 1967; see *HGL* 532); “Transcendent Experience” originally appeared as “Who Is It That Has a Transcendent Experience?” R. M. Bucke Memorial Society *Newsletter-Review* 1.2 (Sept. 1966; see *HGL* 531). Although these essays first appeared in reverse order, I include them here in the order incorporated into *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (as cc. 2 and 6, respectively).
22. The influence of 1960s counter-culture is clearly evident in these essays. The radical expansiveness of the 1960s, specifically regarding LSD, the influx of “Eastern” spiritual teachers and traditions, and “consciousness-raising” in general, all serve as cultural context – and fodder – for Merton’s own radical reflections on the nature and transformation of consciousness. For the general tenor of Merton’s attitude toward LSD counter-culture, see Merton’s journal entry of November 27, 1965: “Yesterday I read some articles on psychedelics. There is a regular fury of drug-mysticism in this country. I am in a way appalled. Mysticism has finally arrived in a characteristic American mode. . . . The definitive turn in the road taken by American religion. The turn I myself will not take (don’t need to!)” (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] 318-19; subsequent references will be cited as “DWL” parenthetically in the text). See also the comments of late 1965: “Drugs and the expansion of the ‘American’ consciousness. Now the optimism is psychedelic. The drugged smile . . . The American psychic orgasm. Now available to all. For a limited time only. Clip coupon and send” (*DWL* 343); “The problem of psychedelics – questions of ‘consciousness-alteration’ as an end in itself (?). My stand on this (provisionally) is that of St. John of the Cross. . . . Not drugs but night, not visions but *nada* [nothing]” (*DWL* 346). See also William Torres, “Seeking Truth Elsewhere: Thomas Merton and Entheogens,” in Peter Savastano, ed., *Merton & Indigenous Wisdom* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2019) 143-62 and Dennis Sullivan, “Editor’s Note,” *Contemporary Justice Review* 10.3 (Sept. 2007) 237-46. On the influence of specifically Indian spirituality on 1960s American counter-culture, see Philip Goldberg, *American Veda: How Indian Spirituality Changed the West* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2010), where Merton makes numerous appearances (e.g., 134, 144, 313, 324).
23. Particularly regarding Sabbath’s own “spiritual emergency,” which serves as the more personal context and wider biographical background for her correspondence with Merton, see *HGL* 523-29 (Sabbath’s side of the correspondence is unpublished and archived at the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University). Sabbath candidly recounts these formative – and painful – years, as well as her relationship with Merton, in her memoir, *The Unveiling of God* (self-published, 2010). On “spiritual emergency,” see Christina and Stanislav Grof, eds., *Spiritual Emergency: When*



*Personal Transformation Becomes a Crisis* (New York: Jeremy Tarcher, 1989).

24. See especially the Merton-Prince correspondence, which, à la Freud (albeit with a more constructive turn), takes on the question of psychological “regression” and mystical experience (*HGL* 493-96).
25. See also the transcription of Merton’s talk at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions in Santa Barbara, CA, prior to his Asian journey (Walter Capps, ed., *Preview of the Asian Journey* [New York: Crossroad, 1991] 55; and Thurston 90-91).
26. Merton offers a critique here regarding definitions of “ecumenism” which are limited to strictly inter-Christian relations, and argues in favor of an expanded inter-religious perspective through the revival of a Christian mystical outlook: “Only the Catholics who are still convinced of the importance of Christian mysticism are also aware that much is to be learned from a study of the techniques and experience of Oriental religions” (*ZBA* 21). Merton explicitly mentions Hinduism and Buddhism here.
27. See e.g. *AJ* 315, and the general tenor of Merton’s “Monastic Experience and East-West Dialogue.”
28. Comparatively, Merton adds, “the subject with its self-awareness . . . as the Oriental religions and Christian mysticism have stressed . . . is not final or absolute; it is a provisional self-construction” (*ZBA* 24).
29. As the self is both “lost” and “found” in the Transcendent (*ZBA* 71). Merton later encourages his reader “to radically and unconditionally question the ego which appears to be the subject of the transcendent experience, and thus of course to radically question the whole nature of the experience itself precisely as ‘experience’” (*ZBA* 73-74).
30. Merton’s interest in the philosophy of “personalism” can be traced to the mid-1960s, the influence of which can be seen in a journal entry dated 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). The Oxford scholar of comparative mysticism and Catholic convert R. C. Zaehner was one of Merton’s personalist influences (see, e.g., *MZM* 5-6, 42).
31. Merton refers to this as a type of “*superconsciousness*” from the Latin “*supra se*,” “above oneself” (*ZBA* 74).
32. Merton’s usage of the term *Ground* has clear influences not only from the work of theologian Paul Tillich, but also, and perhaps even more significantly, from the thirteenth/fourteenth-century German mystical preacher and teacher, Meister Eckhart, whom Merton relies upon and cites directly throughout *ZBA* (see, e.g., 57, 63, 109-11). Eckhart also serves as an important figure in D. T. Suzuki’s comparative study, *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist* (New York: Routledge, 1957), to whom Suzuki devotes the first chapter. Merton and Suzuki dialogue on this confluence in “Part Two” of *ZBA* (99-138). Additionally, Aldous Huxley, an uncited (in *ZBA*) but not unimportant figure in Merton’s life, includes an entire chapter on “The Ground” in his *The Perennial Philosophy: An Interpretation of the Great Mystics, East and West* (New York: HarperCollins, 1945) c. 2: “The Nature of the Ground.” Merton attributes his discovery of mysticism in general to Huxley’s *Ends and Means: An Inquiry into the Nature of Ideals and into the Methods Employed for Their Realization* (London: Transaction Publishers, 1937): “until I read his *Ends and Means* just about four years ago, I hadn’t known a thing about mysticism, not even the word. The part he played in my conversion, by that book, was quite great” (Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation. Journals, vol. 1: 1939-1941*, ed. Patrick Hart [San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995] 454–55). Merton also credits *Ends and Means* for more specifically introducing him to various forms of Eastern spiritual practices in his influential autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948) 187: “the most important effect of the book on me was to make me start ransacking the university library for books on Oriental mysticism.” See also Judith Anderholm, “Thomas Merton and Aldous Huxley: The Springboard of *Ends and Means*,” *The Merton Seasonal* 16.2 (1991) 8-10.
33. Poignantly, this celebrated line – which additionally serves as the title of the first volume of Merton’s published letters – emerges out of his correspondence with Amiya Chakravarty, to whom Merton dedicates *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*. On the Merton-Chakravarty correspondence, see William Apel, *Signs of Peace: The Interfaith Letters of Thomas Merton* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006) c. 3 (29-46).
34. An earlier version of this essay was presented June 25, 2021 at the Seventeenth General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society.