

THOMAS MERTON & WORLD RELIGIONS

A Ten-Week Adult discovery Course in comparative religions and emerging technologies

Beyond the Algorithm: Thomas Merton, World Religions, and the Wisdom AI Cannot Generate or Replace

Ten Sessions · One Hour twenty minutes Each · Presentation roughly forty-five minutes the rest discussion

Focus on these four major world religions”

Buddhism · Hinduism · Judaism · Islam

And the Question the AI Age Asks of Us. What can we learn from other religions, and Thomas Merton to better understand what it means to be at the forefront of artificial intelligence and societal phase change?

Course Description

Based on the Complete 9-Volume Series by
Fons Vitae Publishing

When a Trappist monk in Kentucky began studying Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and Judaism in the 1950s -1960s, he wasn't losing his faith—**he was deepening it**. This course explores how AI shapes, mediates, and can flatten religious understanding and experience, and asks what cannot be automated.

In an age of information overload, Thomas Merton teaches us the forgotten art of encounter. Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam reveal something about the limits of artificial intelligence—and the depth of the human spirit.

Thomas Merton helps us ask what constitutes a genuine encounter, questions that are even more urgent as AI becomes central to how we access information. Using the **Fons Vitae World Religions Series** and **Catholic Social Teaching, including Magnifica Humanitas**, this ten-week course examines what Merton found in other religions and helps us understand more about how we should address emerging technology such as artificial intelligence.

Come ready to think. Leave with something you can share.

Course Goals

By the end of the course, participants will be able to:

- Understand Merton’s approach to world religions and his method of deep receptive encounter
- Identify major insights from Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism that illuminate the human person
- Articulate the Seven Pillars of Catholic Social Teaching and trace them across religious traditions
- Practice reflective listening and disciplined engagement in cross-cultural and interfaith dialogue
- Discuss what AI can and cannot do in the domain of religious understanding and spiritual formation
- Articulate how wisdom traditions offer resources the AI age needs but cannot produce

Come as you are, to discover, and experience new ideas and insights into the major religions of history.

The *Fons Vitae World Religions Series* (9-volume complete set) forms the backbone of the course.

This course is suitable for any adult seeker who desires both deeper faith and wiser engagement with a world that technology is reshaping. No academic background is required. |

Cultivating the Right Environment

Hospitality: We welcome each other on a path of discovery, into a space of genuine curiosity. There are no “dumb” questions, let’s all feel open to learn and discover.

Curiosity: Resist the urge to resolve every question. Let the “residual” mystery remain, sit with ideas you leave with and see where they go in your mind..

Accountability: As a facilitator of learning my role is to gently correct factual errors and stereotypes. Together we model accuracy with charity.

Honesty: Disagreement is healthy. When dealing with religions we are not familiar with it is important for all of us to encourage disagreements as a learning method, while maintaining respect. Discomfort is not the same as harm.

Ten-Week Session Outline

Session 1: The Monk and the Machine ~ Catholic Social Teaching on human dignity and AI~Information vs. understanding—the question AI forces

How Merton Reads Religion ~ Contemplative reading vs. AI text processing

Session 2: Buddhism — Emptiness, Presence, and the Limits of the Algorithm ~ Mindfulness apps and the commodification of attention

Session 3: Buddhism — Compassion, Community, and the Common Good ~ Zen, encounter, and what AI dialogue cannot be

Session 4: Hinduism — The Sacred Self and the Image of God ~ Consciousness, atman, and the AI question of inner life

Session 5: Hinduism — Dharma, Service, and Subsidiarity

Session 6: Islam — Surrender, Dignity, and the Human Vocation ~ Algorithmic distortion and accurate, generous description

Session 7: Islam — Justice, Zakat, and the Common Good

Session 8: Judaism — The Prophetic Tradition and the Repair of the World ~ Memory, covenant, and the Sabbath as counter to algorithmic life

Session 9: Judaism — Sabbath, Shemitah, and the Limits of Technology

Session 10: Beyond the Algorithm — What Wisdom AI Cannot Generate ~ What no algorithm could have given us—testimony and synthesis

All Seven CST Pillars in conversation. Final reflection: where has this course taken us that no search engine could?

Beyond the Algorithm

Thomas Merton, World Religions, and the Wisdom AI Cannot Generate or Replace

Based on the Fons Vitae World Religions Series · Using Catholic Social Teaching including Magnifica Humanitas

Facilitator/Discussion Leader/ Instructor Notes

About Thomas Merton (1915–1968)

Thomas Merton was a Trappist monk, poet, social critic, and spiritual writer whose influence extended far beyond the walls of the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. In the later years of his life, he turned with growing seriousness toward the great religious traditions of Asia and the Middle East—not as an escape from his Catholic faith, but as a deepening of it. He believed a contemplative heart could find something genuinely true in every tradition.

The Fons Vitae World Religions Series makes his insights accessible in a systematic, scholarly way. This ten-week course uses that primary text, leading participants through a guided encounter with these subjects—Merton himself as their dialogue partner and compass.

Woven throughout is a thread Merton himself would have recognized: the challenge of exploring the irreducible difference between what a human being experiencing mystery and what a computational system generates as output. These are among the most important sources of wisdom humanity has. We need them now.

The Seven Pillars of Catholic Social Teaching

Catholic Social Teaching (CST) represents the Church’s sustained reflection on human dignity, community, and justice. Pope Leo’s Magnifica Humanitas re-anchors these principles for an age of artificial intelligence, insisting that no technology can replace the irreplaceable: human encounter, conscience, and the common good. Each of the seven pillars resonates across the world religions Merton explored.

1. Human Dignity (Dignitas Humana)

Every human person is made in the image and likeness of God—*imago Dei*. This is not a religious sentiment but the bedrock of all justice. No economic system, political order, or technological tool may treat persons as mere means to an end.

In *Magnifica Humanitas*, Leo warns that AI systems risk reducing persons to data profiles and behavioral predictions, stripping away the irreducible mystery of the human being.

In Buddhism

- Buddha-nature (*tathāgatagarbha*): every sentient being carries the seed of awakening—a universal dignity that transcends caste, status, or capability
- Merton saw in Zen the refusal to reduce the person to any fixed concept; the self cannot be captured in a category
- *Anatta* (no fixed self) does not erase dignity but liberates it from ego’s distortions

In Hinduism

- *Atman*—the innermost self—is identified with *Brahman*, the ground of all being. Every person participates in the divine
- *Ahimsa* (non-harm) flows from recognizing the sacred in the other—a profound affirmation of human worth
- Merton’s study of Vedanta deepened his sense that contemplative traditions share a common reverence for the sacred in the person

In Islam

- Karama: human dignity is a divine gift—humans are khulafa' (stewards/vicegerents) of God on earth
- Each person is addressed directly by God—the Qur'an speaks to the individual conscience with profound respect
- Merton found in Sufism a mystical affirmation of the divine presence within the human heart

In Judaism

- Tzelem Elohim (image of God) is the foundation of Jewish ethics—every human life is of infinite worth
- Pikuach nefesh: saving one life is as if saving an entire world
- Merton's dialogue with Abraham Joshua Heschel showed him how prophetic Judaism insists on the sacred dignity of every person, especially the poor and the stranger

2. The Common Good (Bonum Commune)

Catholic Social Teaching insists that society must be ordered toward conditions that allow every person to flourish. The common good is not the aggregate of private interests but the shared conditions for human development—material, social, and spiritual.

In Magnifica Humanitas, Leo argues that AI must be evaluated against the common good: technologies that concentrate wealth, surveil populations, or monopolize information actively harm it.

In Buddhism

- Sangha (community) is one of the Three Jewels. The Buddhist vision of liberation is never purely individual—the bodhisattva vows to return for the benefit of all beings
- The concept of interbeing (Thich Nhat Hanh's development of pratityasamutpada) sees all conditions as mutually arising—the common good is built into the structure of reality
- Merton's exchanges with D.T. Suzuki explored how contemplative insight opens one to solidarity, not withdrawal

In Hinduism

- Dharma includes social obligations—one's duty is always situated within community, caste, stage of life
- The concept of Sarvodaya (uplift of all), developed by Gandhi, draws directly on Hindu social vision
- Karma yoga: selfless action for the benefit of all without attachment to results

In Islam

- Maslaha (public interest/welfare) is a foundational principle of Islamic jurisprudence—law must serve the welfare of the community
- Zakat (obligatory almsgiving) institutionalizes the common good within the practice of faith—wealth circulates, not accumulates
- Umma: the global community of believers creates obligations of solidarity that cross borders and cultures

In Judaism

- Tikkun olam (repair of the world) calls every person to active work for justice and restoration—the common good is a sacred obligation
- Tzedakah (righteousness/justice) is not merely charity but a structural claim of the poor on the community
- The Sabbath is a communal practice—not private but shared, ordering time for the whole society

3. Solidarity

Solidarity is not vague goodwill but a firm commitment to the good of all, especially those who suffer. John Paul II called it a social virtue, the disposition to see the other—across nation, class, religion, and culture—as one’s neighbor.

In the AI age, Magnifica Humanitas identifies a new threat to solidarity: algorithmic systems that segment populations, create information silos, and deepen social division. Genuine encounter—the kind Merton modeled—is solidarity in practice.

In Buddhism

- Metta (loving-kindness) meditation extends goodwill systematically to all beings—beginning with oneself, expanding to strangers and enemies
- Karuna (compassion) is an active solidarity with suffering, not mere sympathy
- Merton’s famous Louisville vision—feeling overwhelming love for strangers—resonated with his Buddhist reading; he saw it as a moment of solidarity breaking through his monastic isolation

In Hinduism

- Vasudhaiva kutumbakam: “the world is one family”—a classical Hindu affirmation of universal solidarity
- The service ethic of bhakti yoga expresses solidarity through devotion and care for others as expressions of the divine
- Gandhi’s ashram communities practiced solidarity across caste lines as a spiritual discipline

In Islam

- Waqf (Islamic endowment) institutionalizes solidarity—permanent charitable trusts for hospitals, schools, and public goods
- The hajj dissolves distinctions of wealth and rank—all pilgrims wear identical simple garments
- Merton found in Sufi poetry (Rumi, Ibn Arabi) a lyrical solidarity with all seekers of the divine

In Judaism

- The obligation to the ger (stranger) runs through the Torah—solidarity with the outsider is commanded because Israel itself was a stranger in Egypt
- Heschel’s march alongside Martin Luther King Jr. was an act of solidarity rooted in prophetic theology—a direct influence on Merton’s own social engagement
- Shiva and communal mourning practices embody concrete solidarity with those who grieve

4. Subsidiarity

Subsidiarity holds that decisions should be made at the most local level capable of handling them. Higher authorities should support (subsidium) lower ones, not replace or absorb them. This principle protects the freedom of families, local communities, and civil associations.

In Magnifica Humanitas, Leo applies subsidiarity to AI governance: technology decisions affecting communities should involve those communities—not be imposed by distant corporations or state actors.

In Buddhism

- The sangha is self-governing—monastic communities operate through consensus (by the Vinaya) rather than hierarchical imposition
- Merton’s interest in Zen communities showed him living examples of subsidiarity: small, intentional communities making their own decisions
- Buddhist council traditions (like the great councils after the Buddha’s death) model communal discernment

In Hinduism

- The village panchayat system is an ancient form of local self-governance rooted in Hindu social philosophy
- Ashrama traditions: each stage of life has its own authority and responsibility—spiritual development cannot be administered from outside
- Gandhi’s gram swaraj (village self-rule) drew directly on Hindu social thought

In Islam

- Shura (consultation): Islamic governance principles include communal consultation—decisions affecting the community require community voice
- Local ulama (scholars) have historically interpreted law for local contexts rather than imposing a single central authority
- Waqf institutions are locally controlled—communities manage their own charitable endowments

In Judaism

- The local kehilla (community) has been the primary unit of Jewish life for millennia—with its own courts, schools, and social services
- Responsa literature (teshuvot): local rabbis address local questions; Jewish law is applied contextually, not mechanically
- The bet din (court) operates at the community level—subsidiarity in jurisprudence

5. Preferential Option for the Poor

The preferential option for the poor does not exclude others but insists that justice requires special attention to those who are most vulnerable. In evaluating any social arrangement, Catholic Social Teaching asks: how does it affect the most marginalized?

In the AI age, Magnifica Humanitas notes that AI can deepen inequality: automated hiring discriminates against the poor; surveillance systems target marginalized communities; algorithmic credit scoring locks out the already excluded.

In Buddhism

- The Buddha's first community included people from every social stratum—outcasts, merchants, kings—with a special concern for those society had discarded
- The Ambedkarite Buddhist movement in India is an explicit preferential option for the poor: Dalit communities converted en masse to escape caste oppression
- Socially Engaged Buddhism (Thich Nhat Hanh, Sulak Sivaraksa) directly applies Buddhist ethics to structural poverty

In Hinduism

- Seva (selfless service) has always included care for the destitute—dharmashalas (rest houses), anna dana (food gifting)
- Ramakrishna Mission's social work was explicitly a preferential option for the poor framed in Hindu theology
- Merton was struck by how Hindu contemplatives like Ramana Maharshi attracted the powerless and the suffering

In Islam

- Zakat is specifically directed to eight categories of recipients, most of them poor or indebted—structural, not discretionary
- The Qur'an repeatedly pairs faith with care for orphans, the poor, and the traveler—justice for the vulnerable is a marker of true belief
- Sadaqa jariya (ongoing charity) creates lasting benefit for the most vulnerable

In Judaism

- The gleaning laws (pe'ah, leket, shikheha) in the Torah mandated that farmers leave portions of their harvest for the poor and the stranger—a structural preferential option
- The Jubilee year's debt release and land redistribution reset the conditions of poverty—radical structural concern
- Prophetic literature (Amos, Isaiah, Micah) grounds justice for the poor in covenant obligation, not charity

6. Care for Creation (Stewardship of the Earth)

Catholic Social Teaching, developed especially in *Laudato Si'* and *Laudate Deum*, holds that the earth is a gift entrusted to humanity as stewards, not owners. Our relationship to creation reflects our relationship to God and to one another.

In *Magnifica Humanitas*, Leo connects ecological crisis to AI: data centers consume enormous energy, AI-driven extraction industries accelerate environmental harm, and algorithmic systems optimize for profit while externalizing ecological costs.

In Buddhism

- The Buddha's enlightenment occurred under a tree—natural settings are sacred in Buddhist practice
- The five precepts include not taking life—extended by many Buddhists to ecological ethics
- Contemporary Buddhist environmental movements (eco-dharma) ground care for creation in the teaching of interbeing: we cannot separate ourselves from the earth

In Hinduism

- Prakriti (nature) is itself sacred—rivers, mountains, forests are not merely resources but manifestations of the divine
- The cow is sacred; the Ganges is sacred; trees are worshipped—ecological reverence is embedded in practice
- Chipko movement: Hindu women hugged trees to prevent deforestation, citing the sacred nature of the forest

In Islam

- Khalifa (stewardship): humans are trustees of creation, accountable to God for how they manage it
- The Qur'an speaks of mizan (balance)—God created the earth in balance and humans must not disrupt it
- Islamic eco-theology: the principle of la darar (do no harm) applies to the environment

In Judaism

- Bal tashchit (do not destroy): the Torah forbids wanton destruction, even in war—a foundational environmental ethic
- Shabbat is an ecological practice: one day each week the land rests, workers rest, animals rest—creation breathes
- The sabbatical year (shemittah) requires that farmland lie fallow every seven years—structural care for the earth

7. Rights and Responsibilities

Catholic Social Teaching affirms that every person has fundamental rights—to life, to work, to participation in society—and that these rights come with corresponding responsibilities to the community. Rights are not simply individual entitlements but relational and social.

In Magnifica Humanitas, Leo insists on the right to human oversight of AI, the right not to be subject to automated decisions without explanation, and the responsibility of technologists to consider the full human impact of the systems they build.

In Buddhism

- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was affirmed by Buddhist leaders—the Dalai Lama grounds rights in Buddha-nature
- Buddhist ethics emphasize reciprocal obligations: rights arise within a web of interdependence, not in isolation
- Merton's engagement with Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh centered on their shared opposition to the Vietnam War—rights and responsibilities in conflict

In Hinduism

- The concept of dharma includes rights: one's station in life carries both entitlements and obligations
- Gandhi's concept of swaraj (self-rule) included economic and social rights—freedom from exploitation as a human right
- Ambedkar's constitution of India explicitly grounds rights in human dignity, drawing on both Western and Hindu-Buddhist sources

In Islam

- The Medina Charter (622 CE) is considered one of the earliest constitutional documents guaranteeing rights to diverse communities
- Maqasid al-Shari'a (objectives of Islamic law): protection of life, intellect, family, property, and religion—a framework of rights and responsibilities
- The concept of amana (trust) establishes responsibility: those who hold power are accountable to God for how they use it

In Judaism

- The 613 commandments (mitzvot) are understood as a complete framework of rights and responsibilities—individual and communal
- Dina d'malkhuta dina (the law of the land is the law): Jews have obligations to the civic order, not only internal community law
- Heschel's theology of the prophets grounds rights in the radical demands of a God who hears the cry of the oppressed

Ten-Week Session Outline

Session 1: The Monk and the Machine

Introduction to Merton and the AI challenge. Who was Thomas Merton, and why does his journey across traditions matter now? What does “genuine encounter” mean, and what makes it irreducible to computation?

CST Pillar in Focus: *Human Dignity. Opening question: What does it mean to recognize the dignity of the person you are meeting—or the tradition you are studying?*

Session 2: Buddhism — Emptiness, Presence, and the Limits of the Algorithm

Merton’s encounter with Zen and Tibetan Buddhism. What did he find? What does the Buddhist teaching of anatta (no-fixed self) offer a world in which AI generates a self-profile for every user?

CST Pillars in Focus: *Human Dignity, Solidarity. The bodhisattva ideal as a model of solidarity; mindfulness as resistance to algorithmic distraction.*

Session 3: Buddhism — Compassion, Community, and the Common Good

The sangha as a living model of the common good. Metta and karuna in practice. How do Buddhist social ethics (Engaged Buddhism) connect to CST?

CST Pillars in Focus: *Common Good, Preferential Option for the Poor. Buddhist social movements alongside CST’s structural ethics.*

Session 4: Hinduism — The Sacred Self and the Image of God

Merton’s reading of Vedanta and his dialogue with Hindu teachers. Atman-Brahman and imago Dei. The sacred in every person—and the violence done when that sacredness is denied.

CST Pillars in Focus: *Human Dignity, Care for Creation. Prakriti as sacred nature; ahimsa as the ethic of the image of God.*

Session 5: Hinduism — Dharma, Service, and Subsidiarity

Karma yoga and the selfless action tradition. Gandhi’s ashram model. How does the Hindu concept of duty (dharma) in community resonate with CST’s principle of subsidiarity?

CST Pillars in Focus: *Subsidiarity, Common Good. Sarvodaya as development of all; gram swaraj as local self-governance.*

Session 6: Islam — Surrender, Dignity, and the Human Vocation

Merton's engagement with Sufi mysticism and Islamic theology. What does it mean to be a khalifa—a steward—of creation? How does Islamic understanding of karama (dignity) converge with and challenge Christian anthropology?

CST Pillars in Focus: *Human Dignity, Rights and Responsibilities. The Qur'anic address to individual conscience; the Medina Charter as an early rights document.*

Session 7: Islam — Justice, Zakat, and the Common Good

Islamic economic ethics: zakat, waqf, the prohibition of riba (usury). How does Islam institutionalize care for the poor in ways that CST finds resonant? What does Magnifica Humanitas say about AI-driven financial exclusion?

CST Pillars in Focus: *Common Good, Preferential Option for the Poor, Solidarity. The umma as global solidarity; maslaha as public welfare.*

Session 8: Judaism — The Prophetic Tradition and the Repair of the World

Merton's friendship with Abraham Joshua Heschel. What did Heschel's prophetic theology teach Merton about justice? What is tikkun olam and how does it interact with CST's social vision?

CST Pillars in Focus: *Preferential Option for the Poor, Solidarity. The prophets' demand for justice; Heschel's march as solidarity in action.*

Session 9: Judaism — Sabbath, Shemitah, and the Limits of Technology

The Sabbath as resistance. Shemitah as structural ecological ethics. What does the Jewish tradition's insistence on rest, release, and renewal offer an AI age that never stops?

CST Pillars in Focus: *Care for Creation, Subsidiarity, Rights and Responsibilities. Bal tashchit; the gleaning laws; the Jubilee year.*

Session 10: Beyond the Algorithm — What Wisdom AI Cannot Generate

A synthesis session. Returning to Merton's method: what is genuine encounter, and what does it require? How do the Seven Pillars of Catholic Social Teaching appear across the four traditions we have studied? What can participants now share?

All Seven CST Pillars in conversation. Final reflection: where has this course taken us that no search engine could?

Beyond the Algorithm

Thomas Merton, World Religions, and the Wisdom AI Cannot Generate or Replace

Fons Vitae Series

The following volumes form the reading backbone of this course. Participants do not need to purchase all volumes; the facilitator should have all nine and assign targeted reading each week.

#	Volume Title	Primary Use
1	<i>Merton & Buddhism</i>	Weeks 2,3, 4, 8
2	<i>Merton & Zen</i>	Weeks 2, 3, 4, 8
3	<i>Merton & Hinduism</i>	Weeks 4, 5, 8
4	<i>Merton & Indian Thought</i>	Weeks 5, 8
5	<i>Merton & Judaism</i>	Weeks 6, 8, 9
6	<i>Merton & Islam</i>	Weeks 6, 7, 8
7	<i>Merton & Sufi Tradition</i>	Weeks 7, 8
8	<i>Merton & the Dialogue of Traditions</i>	Weeks 2, 9
9	<i>Merton & Catholic Identity</i>	Weeks 9, 10