

## Seven Lessons for Inter-faith Dialogue and Thomas Merton

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Between 1962 and 1965 the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church expanded the parameters of interfaith dialogue in ways that few could have anticipated. The sealed enclosures of sectarian certitude gave way to cautious encounters, then curious interest and finally open dialogue. It was a defining moment in the life of the Church. While others searched for connections between the various Christian communities, Thomas Merton also looked deeper and found ways to dialogue with great world religions other than Christianity. To accomplish this task, Merton drew upon lessons learned at various stages of his life. An examination of Merton's autobiographical writings provides the path for the discovery of seven lessons learned in his own life and suggests a pattern for our own.

This essay demonstrates that Merton had insights not typical to the times in which they occurred and that his learning had an experiential base. Merton learned that a meaningful dialogue between different religions would not be well served by theological debate alone or by merely comparing religious practices. He found that such dialogue would necessarily draw people together and therefore it would be impossible to accept a person while denigrating their faith expression. Merton discovered that a meeting-ground for dialogue is possible in the 'Mystical' response to events and relationships and that these responses can stir in the soul of any person. By reflecting on his own conversion to Catholicism, he came to an appreciation of the need to go beyond an exchange of concepts to an experiential dialogue. He also shows an appreciation for moving away from proselytizing during interfaith dialogue to an encounter between faith-filled persons from differing traditions. Perhaps Merton's greatest contributions to interfaith dialogue come in his will-

ingness to seek personal conversions and to see these changes as gifts given for the betterment of all.

When Merton was born in January 1915, his parents were living in Prades, a village in southern France. Owen Merton was an Anglican from New Zealand. Ruth Jenkins was a Quaker from the United States of America. They were art students living in Paris when they met and married. The Great War forced them to seek their fortunes in the south of France and it was there that Tom (as his mother insisted he be named) was born. They moved back and forth between France and America until Ruth died of stomach cancer when Tom was only six years old. Ten years later, Owen died of a brain tumour. In Tom's autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, we learn of his early faith development, insights, questions and eventual conversion to Roman Catholicism. But it is through the lenticle of his monastic vocation that we see the church of his youth, even as his own life began to shape and change the church in which he was to become a priest and a monk.

There is a passage in his autobiography where Thomas Merton describes an encounter that would set a pattern for later dialogue. His love of a family by the name of Privat challenged his own beliefs and his way of looking at others. The Privats lived in Murat, in the Catholic province of Auvergne, and the time was the winter of 1926. Tom was 11 years old. His description of this peasant couple is not unlike the portraits found in Gaugin's paintings. Short, stolid and Catholic to the core, their diet was rich in butter, milk and daily devotions. Tom was sent to the Privat's farm to put meat on his bones and get over his inclination to suffer frequent bouts of influenza while attending school in Montauban. During a quiet moment one evening, the conversation switched to religion. The Privats questioned the seeming lack of faith in his young life and Tom responded with an attempt to justify pluralism within Protestantism. He was not successful. The Privats were not to be taught by the boy with the big ideas. On the other hand, the boy would never forget what they taught him. He says, "They did not answer me with any argument. They simply looked at one another and shrugged and Monsieur Privat said quietly and sadly: "*Mais c'est impossible*" ...I wanted them to argue, and they despised argument'.<sup>1</sup> Such was the environment and the stance of the church in the time of Tom's youth. It was provincial, peasant, missionary, dismissive and solidly sure of itself. There was no argument. There never would be. This first lesson from the days of his youth

1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1948), pp. 57-58.

was retained by Tom until his death: that *faith is not for wars and debates but dialogue*.

The second lesson is similar to the first: *one cannot ignore the person and attack their faith expression*. It is obvious from his description of the event that Tom loved the Privats and that they loved him. Who they were and the context in which they live mattered greatly in the process of understanding their faith. Who we are is as important as what we believe. *Dialogue is relational*.

Tom was not always amenable to the faith expressions of other people. He could be rebellious and he wore his obstinacy like a badge of independence. He wrote:

I remember that in that year, when we stood in chapel and recited the Apostle's Creed, I used to keep my lips tight shut, with full deliberation and of set purpose, by way of declaring my own creed which was: 'I believe in nothing'. Or at least I thought I believed in nothing.<sup>2</sup>

While attending school in Oakham, England, he opposed Buggy Jerwood's translation of 1 Cor. 13 when he interpreted *charity* as *gentlemanliness, fair play and sportsmanship*.<sup>3</sup> He found Plato and Socrates to be intolerable and Descartes' *Cogito ergo sum* to be illusory.<sup>4</sup> He wrote, 'There can hardly have been any serious intellectual reason for my dislike of these philosophers, although I do have a kind of congenital distaste for philosophical idealism'.<sup>5</sup> His '*congenital distaste*' must have been inherited from Pop, his mother's father, who lived a life of American pragmatism and self-determination and who threw money at problems in the hope that they would disappear. But there was more than this distaste at work in Tom's heart. He buried himself in the jazz of Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong and the Old King Olivers.<sup>6</sup> He found himself divided in sentiment like the black jazz singer Josephine Baker whom he had once heard sing '*J'ai deux amours, mon pays et Paris*'.<sup>7</sup> He wanted to be free of the beliefs of others but this was not always easy. In the days just prior to the death of his father, Owen Merton painted '*irate byzantine saints with beards and great halos*'.<sup>8</sup> It seems that this both challenged Tom Merton and confused him. How could he love his father and argue with Owen's need to express his faith in religious art? How could he make sense of

2. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 98.

3. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 73.

4. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 75.

5. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 75.

6. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 78.

7. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 84.

8. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 83.

these actions? Was it the disease of his brain tumour or was something else happening in the final days of his father's life? The impact was profound and the experience led him to a new realization, a third lesson, *that beyond philosophy, beyond institutional religion, 'mystical' responses to events and relationships stir in the soul of every man*. Later he would write:

After all, from my very childhood, I had understood that the artistic experience, at its highest, was actually a natural analogue of mystical experience. It produced a kind of intuitive perception of reality through a sort of affective identification with the object contemplated – a kind of perception that the Thomists call 'connatural'<sup>9</sup>

At the very time when Tom Merton needed his father to be a partner in the experience of becoming a man; at the time when he needed someone to counsel him on the practical aspects of relationship with God and others; at that moment, Owen died. The legacy of the father lived on in the son. Memories of the few precious years with Owen punctuate the opening chapters of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Whenever Owen is mentioned, there is great longing and deep loss in the words of Thomas Merton. Had Owen lived, things could have been different. The father who had worked barefoot in his vegetable garden would have appreciated the agricultural part of the monastic work of his son and the rhythm of the seasons in the liturgy. They would have been able to discuss so many things; things like pacifism and Gandhi. Instead, Gandhi came to England a few months after Owen died. Did Tom see a connection between struggles of the father of the new India and his own father's struggle to live? Gandhi marched to the sea to gather salt. Owen painted pictures of angry saints. Both actions seemed futile considering the size and empire of their opponents. Both were eventually overtaken but in the end both were victorious. We cannot be sure of the full connection between the two men, but when describing Owen some years later, Tom is not afraid to describe his father as a 'great soul' (a *mahatma*<sup>10</sup>). On that occasion he wrote: 'Of us all, Father was the only one who really had any kind of faith'.<sup>11</sup>

9. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 202.

10. When Merton was still a student in Oakham, he wrote a controversial paper on the life and works of Gandhi and argued with the football captain about the fact that Gandhi was right (cf. Thomas Merton, 'A Tribute to Gandhi', in *idem*, *Seeds of Destruction* [New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964], p. 222). His use of the term *great soul* or *Mahatma* is not a term Merton would have used lightly. It was a poetically loaded term. Obviously he saw his father and Gandhi in some synchronous way that joined fatherhood to justice and rightness, and goodness and the other values usually attributed to a faith or creed.

11. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 83.

How could he dismiss these ideas without dismissing the person who held the beliefs? *Mais, c'est impossible*. By holding on to his father's memory Tom would have something to believe in. He might not have realized it in the beginning but it would prove to be the mustard seed of his own faith. To hold onto the person he remembered and believed in, he would have to allow himself to be challenged by the beliefs no matter how minuscule their observable reality. Moral values and belief systems are not culturally dictated. The serious practitioner of any faith will always be one who has examined faith seriously and then chosen to live by it. In the beginning Tom was more curious than committed.

For a time he busied himself by avoiding the question of what Owen believed. Then, while in Rome on his 'grand tour' during the summer vacation following his eighteenth birthday, something happened which changed him at a very deep level. If Tom was anything at this time, he was a Protestant; a bright, reflective, intelligent, but unpracticed Protestant. Had he been a Catholic, he would have been caught up in feelings of pride and triumph as he visited the ancient churches with their mosaics and statues. But because he was a Protestant and a sometime agnostic, Catholic culture of this magnitude would have hit him with great force. Rome was not a homecoming. It was a faith experience, and his father and art were connected to it. The sense of having been visited by his dead father lead him to a deep moral conversion and a desire for prayer.<sup>12</sup> He needed to pray and to do so as publically as he could. The next day, no longer tight-lipped, he went to the Dominican church of Santa Sabina and prayed the Lord's Prayer with all the faith he had in him. In his autobiography he tells of this event and then adds a very interesting comment which has a sense of compassion and understanding for the feelings of others. 'Another thing which Catholics do not realize about converts is the tremendous, agonizing embarrassment and self-consciousness which they feel about praying publicly in a Catholic Church'.<sup>13</sup> Here, the reader can recognize a fourth lesson learned by the young Merton: *that one cannot understand the depth of feelings and faith experiences of another person unless one has experienced and wrestled with them in his or her own life*. This compassion, this willingness to 'suffer with' the other opens us to the appreciation of the greatness of how other people respond to the Divine call.

After a disastrous year at Cambridge, Merton enrolled at Columbia University in the heart of New York City. Because of his literary interests and abilities, he spent time as editor of the year book, the *Columbian* and

12. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 111.

13. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 113.

was art editor for *Jester*, the school journal. His circle of friends at Columbia introduced him to the next phase of his interfaith odyssey. Tom Merton and Ad Reinhardt, the artist, mingled with a group who were either dabbling in communism or in mysticism. For most of the students, this quest for the 'mystical' was merely innovative, curious, and contemporary. For Merton, it was more. He seized every opportunity available to understand his own life, to reflect and observe the inner processes and workings of his own troubled spirit. He sensed that his direction as an artist, author and poet was within. He needed to understand, and the best way to explore this labyrinth was through dialogue and appreciation of what was happening in the lives of those around him. Merton gave up on Communism after a few meetings, but his search for the mystical lead him to a Hindu monk called Dr Bramachari, a devotee of Lord Jagad-Bondu. Bramachari was wise in his approach to the young student for he was willing to explain the externals of his own Hindu practices but not the faith level at which he lived.<sup>14</sup> Here was a fifth lesson: *the goal of interfaith dialogue is not conversion or ecclesial cloning but the honest, authentic, informed meeting of two persons who stand in integrated traditional paths which are tested and true.* If one person has had full formation in their path, and the other is of a lesser level of formation, then the dialogue cannot reach its full potential until some measure of equity has been established. We cannot borrow the faith experiences of another. By understanding ourselves; by being willing to take the steps on our own path and by struggling to own that which is God-given; then we can meet others on their journey. The fact that Bramachari stayed at the level of practices indicates that this is where Tom and his friends were on their own journeys and Bramachari chose to meet them there. Rather than discuss dogma and philosophy they talked about the segregation employed by missionaries working in India and their comfortable manner of living which gave a negative witness to Christian teachings.<sup>15</sup>

Bramachari recognized Tom's needs and his abilities and suggested that he read up on the mysticism of Christianity, books such as *The Confessions of St Augustine*, *The Imitation of Christ*, and *The Ignatian Spiritual Exercises*.<sup>16</sup> This posed a problem for Merton in that he had already read Augustine and Thomas à Kempis. He had some fear of the institutional church that caused him to panic whenever he was surrounded by it. On one occasion, his first visit to St Bonaventure's College in Olean, New

14. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 195.

15. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 196.

16. Edward Rice, *The Man in the Sycamore Tree: The Good Times and Hard Life of Thomas Merton* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), p. 33.

York, he refused to get out of the car despite the urging of his very close friend Bob Lax. He wasn't sure why he felt the way he did but Merton finally decided that there were too many crosses and too many holy statues. 'It made me very uncomfortable. I had to flee'.<sup>17</sup>

On another occasion, he bought a book at Scribner's in New York. It was *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* by Etienne Gilson. While returning to his home on Long Island, he discovered the *nihil obstat* and *imprimatur* on the inside of the cover. 'The feeling of disgust and deception struck me like a knife in the pit of the stomach. I felt as if I had been cheated! They should have warned me that it was a Catholic book! Then I would never have bought it'.<sup>18</sup> It took some time before he read the book. Only then did he realize his own prejudices and biased thinking. He not only looked at the message of the book but he examined his own process of change. Here was a sixth lesson to be learned: *the more we meet others in their faith, and the deeper the encounter, the more we are invited to change in our own lives, to challenge our own prejudices, to root out the darkness and blindness of our own quest, and to experience fully the power of the lights given by God.* He later commented 'For as far as the light of God is concerned we are owls. It blinds us and as soon as it strikes us we are in darkness'.<sup>19</sup>

During this same period he had become interested in the study of Buddhism through a reading of Aldous Huxley's *Ends and Means* and a series of Buddhist texts which had been edited by the French Jesuit, Father Léon Weiger.<sup>20</sup> There was something in the Oriental thought that fascinated him, drew him, and compelled him to keep reading even though he found the aphorism difficult to comprehend. He had encountered some Oriental mannerisms in the reading of the Bible, especially in the book of Job, which had a connection to the study of William Blake on whose art and poetry he did his Master's thesis. Within the circle of his closest friends were Bob Lax, Bob Gerdy and Seymour Freedgood. All of them were Jews. Merton could have found God by going toward Judaism or Buddhism. But in the end, on 16 November 1938 after much soul-searching, maturing and responding to the call of God, he was baptized a Catholic, with Ed Rice as his sponsor and Bob Lax, Bob Gerdy and Seymour Freedgood in attendance.<sup>21</sup>

Over the next few years, Tom Merton continued to write. He taught briefly at St Bonaventure's College in Olean, New York, volunteered at

17. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 201.

18. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 171.

19. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 170.

20. Rice, *The Man in the Sycamore Tree*, p. 13.

21. Rice, *The Man in the Sycamore Tree*, p. 32.

Friendship House<sup>22</sup> in Harlem, and took decidedly Catholic holidays to Bermuda and Cuba. On occasions and always to his own surprise, he was caught up in moments of 'mystical' insight. These experiences broke through his normal levels of awareness much like what had happened in Rome when his dead father's presence penetrated his inner darkness. When he attended Mass in the Church of St Francis in Havana, he witnessed children singing '*Creo en Dios*' at the time of the Consecration. The experience, which began with human listening and delight, was suddenly elevated to the level of profound insight and divine awareness. This was a transforming moment for the newly baptized Merton. It happened suddenly without any anticipation. What was humanly brilliant became divinely brilliant. He then adds the following comment: 'And yet the thing that struck me most of all was that this light was in a certain sense "ordinary" – it was a light (and this most of all was what took my breath away) that was offered to all, to everybody, and there was nothing fancy or strange about it.'<sup>23</sup>

These moments of great insight were always personal lessons to Thomas Merton. *The seventh lesson is that these moments of insight were not his alone. They were offered to everyone. What surprised him most was that these insights seemed so ordinary after the fact.*

Then to the surprise of his friends and the draft board (three days after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor), he disappeared into the cloistered life of one of the strictest Catholic monastic orders in America. For all intents and purposes, his departure from the world on 10 December 1941 should have been the end of all interfaith endeavours.

When his autobiography appeared in print eight years later, it was his conversion to Catholicism that made the headlines. Few readers would know that almost one-third of the original text had not passed the scrutiny of the monastic editors and that this portion of the book was never published.<sup>24</sup> Of what remained, the references to Gandhi, Communism and the other religions were regarded as aberrations or detours en route

22. Friendship House was founded by Catherine De Hueck Doherty as an outreach for the poor, she is also affectionately referred to as *the baroness* because she was first married to a member of the nobility in her native Russia. She authored a number of books on this apostolate and later located the training of her associates in Combermere Ontario.

23. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, pp. 284-85.

24. The fact that one-third of the autobiography of Thomas Merton was never published is a comment made by Robert Giroux. Robert had been a classmate of Merton's at Columbia University and was the one who was instrumental in having the work published. His comment was made during the filming of *Merton: A Film Biography* by Paul Wilkes and Audrey L. Glynn (First Run Features Home Videos).



to the heart of the Church Triumphant. Then came other books: books of poetry, books of theology, books on prayer and the lives of a few saints. These were all quite acceptable, if not predictable for a Trappist monk. But suddenly, like weeds among the wheat, Merton surprised everyone with *The Wisdom of the Desert* (1960), *Gandhi on Non-Violence* (1965), *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (1965), *Mystics and Zen Masters* (1967) and *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (1968). In *Catholic World*, he published an article entitled 'Christian Culture Needs Oriental Wisdom'. In his book *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1965) there were references to D.T. Suzuki who wrote extensively on Zen Buddhism and to Louis Massignon who spent the better part of his life in dialogue with Islam and Sufism. Merton spoke of Taoism, Tibetan Monasteries and the Shakers in the chapter entitled 'The Madman runs to the East'. Where did all this come from? What was this monk trying to do? Was he still Catholic? Was he still a monk? Conservative Catholics had enough on their plate at this time. They were living through the shock of the Second Vatican Council (It would be years before many even knew there were documents on Ecumenism and non-Christian Religions, to say nothing of reading them.) They had the war in Vietnam; priests like the Berrigans pouring blood on draft records; Martin Luther King, race riots and non-violent marches for integration; folk singers like Joan Baez protesting the war along with Thich Nhat Hanh, an itinerant Buddhist monk from North Vietnam preaching peace here in America and now there was an all-too-vocal Trappist who was friend to them all and writing books that some might suggest no Catholic should read.

Merton's interest in other world religions was not an aberration or a bizarre monastic hobby. It was the result of his prayer life, his self-examination, and desire to continue growing through the shared experiences of others who were on a similar quest. As a contemplative monk he explored contemplative traditions wherever he found them, especially those which combined poetry and art with the mystical expression. His writings had opened to the general public an understanding of contemplative prayer. For many, this was a major shift in their spirituality and prayer life. The popularity of his books proved there was a hunger for God that was not being addressed by the conventional forms of spirituality. In some cases, his teachings helped us to understand the attainability of certain forms of prayer previously thought to be the prerogative of saints and mystics. Without denying the worth and value of prayer forms learned from parents and teachers, he invited contemporaries to go deeper and to see the roots of traditions.

Merton's words also rang bells of recognition in the hearts and minds of those who read him in translation. Around the world, people asked

'Who was this monk of the West who speaks to the heart of people in the East?' Merton helped them see that there was depth and profound spiritual life in the centre of the seemingly baroque or renaissance institution of the Roman Catholic Church. Suddenly, not only was dialogue possible, but there was also something to talk about.

There are many examples of how perceptive and sensitive Merton was in the act of dialogue. He showed that he could go quickly to the heart of the matter by poetically writing on several levels at the same time. One example of this is found in the preface to the Japanese edition of *The New Man* (1961). It had been translated by Yasuwo Kikama, and Merton was delighted to be able to communicate with the people who had been through the pain of war and nuclear holocaust. He began with Christ's words to Nicodemus in John 3: 'You must be born again'. Not only was the dialogue between Nicodemus and Christ appropriate for the book but Merton showed a great sympathy with Japanese culture. By commenting on this one passage, Merton was able to call the reader to a higher level of personal reflection as a preparation for reading his book. He did this in several ways. Merton knew *haiku* poems and the *cha-no-yu* (tea ceremonies) with their magnificent gardens and how these aspects of Japanese culture ritualized the seasonal flow of Japanese life. He knew the contrast between the *samurai* who willingly gives his life for his lord as opposed to the *ronin* who is without a lord to serve. Merton would also have known that the word *kamikaze* meant 'divine wind'. In this preface we see Merton threading his way between traditions of Shinto, Zen Buddhism and the Christian gospel:

These 'higher religions' answer a deeper need in man: a need that cannot be satisfied merely by the ritual celebration of man's oneness with nature — his joy in the return of spring! Man seeks to be liberated from mere natural necessity, from servitude to fertility and seasons, from the round of birth, growth and death. Man is not content with slavery to need: making his living, raising his family, and leaving a good name to his posterity. There is in the depths of man's heart a voice which says 'You must be born again'.<sup>25</sup>

Then Merton presented the image employed by Jesus when he spoke of the wind blowing where it will. This is the Spirit of God, this Divine Wind, this Kamikazi. In sentiment at least, and never with a direct statement, he has introduced a feeling so close to the Japanese psyche, that this alone compels them to be interested and to feel invited into Merton's

25. Thomas Merton, 'Preface to the Japanese Edition of *The New Man* October 1967'. in Robert E. Daggy (ed.), *Introductions East and West: The Foreign Prefaces of Thomas Merton* (Oakville, Ontario: Mosaic Press, 1981), pp. 107-16 (110).

world and reflections. Having made this connection, he shows them his heart:

To be born again is to be born beyond egoism, beyond selfishness, beyond individuality, in Christ. To be born of flesh is to be born into the human race with its fighting, its hatreds, its loves, its passions, its struggles, its appetites. To be born of spirit is to be born into God (or the Kingdom of God) beyond hatred, beyond struggle, in peace, love, joy, self-effacement, service, gentleness, humility, strength.<sup>26</sup>

It is as if Merton has declared his own culture (with its bomb) to be *ronin* while showing what the culture could be if it wanted to be truly *samurai*. These are concepts and ideas with which the Japanese reader could identify. The translation was presented compassionately and with a poetry that had all the clarity of the shout of a Zen master.

Within the Catholic Church, Merton was not alone in dialogue with the East. At the beginning of this century, Charles de Foucauld lived as a hermit in the midst of the Muslim Tuareg of the Sahara. His was a witness of the gospel of presence in prayer and sacrifice. Bede Griffiths, a Benedictine monk of Prinknash Abbey, left England when invited to join a Shantivanam, a Christian monastic community which had embraced the customs and style of the ashram. There he became a leader in the Christian-Hindu dialogue. Mother Teresa of Calcutta is perhaps the best known for she left the security of her community of Loretto to go out into the streets, armed only with trust in providence and a heart full of compassion. 'I've always said we should help a Hindu become a better Hindu, a Muslim become a better Muslim, a Catholic become a better Catholic'.<sup>27</sup> When she died some years later, her witness was praised by Sikh, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Jain and Christian.

Merton's approach to other religions was different. For the most part he stayed at Gethsemani. He chose to dialogue with religions that had a mystical tradition and an expression in art and poetry that paralleled the mystical traditions of Christianity. Rather than seek syncretisms of signs and symbols he sought to meet others at the level of the heart. Using his considerable linguistic sensitivity and voluminous knowledge of his own traditions, Merton sought out those who had experiences like his own and walked in ways that made them his brothers and sisters before God. Merton was all too aware of how easily we can dismiss the writings and the teachings of other traditions simply by labelling one as *pantheism* and another *quietism*. He felt that the study of religions merely

26. Merton, 'Preface', p. 113.

27. Paul McKenna, 'Mother Teresa, Interfaith Ambassador', *Scarboro Missions* 79.2 (February 1998), p. 8.

by comparing rituals was not adequate or effective. His quest was for the shared spiritual or aesthetic experience. '[T]he 'universality' and 'catholicity' which are essential to the Church necessarily imply an ability and a readiness to enter into dialogue with all that is pure, wise, profound, and humane in every kind of culture. In this one sense at least a dialogue with Oriental wisdom becomes necessary. A Christian culture that is not capable of such a dialogue would show, by that very fact, that it lacked catholicity'.<sup>28</sup>

During the time that Merton was Master of Novices, he dedicated a lot of time to the exploration of other faith traditions: the Sufi, Lao Tzu, Zen Buddhism and the Shakers. He was aided on his journey by a host of friends and associates, some of whom he got to meet and dialogue with in person. He felt that it was important for not only the monks of his monastery, but for all Christians. In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, in the chapter entitled, 'The Night Spirit and the Dawn Air' he writes: '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... 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 Catholic: and certainly no breath of the Spirit with which to affirm it.'<sup>29</sup>

One of those who aided Merton in this process of self-discovery was Louis Massignon, a man who had spent a lifetime in dialogue with Islam. The reading of Massignon's work was a turning-point for Merton, an awakening, and, as we shall see, a springboard for one of his moments of profound 'mystical' insight. If we are going to experience, to feel with every fiber of our skin, the reality of the truth before which we stand, we will need to learn the language that owns these experiences. Only when they have become part of our being can we say that we truly know them and begin to live them. Merton writes, 'Massignon has some deeply moving pages in the *Mardis de Dar-es Salam*: about the desert, the tears of Agar, the Muslims, the "*point vierge*" of the spirit, the center of our nothingness where, in apparent despair, one meets God — and is found completely in His mercy.'<sup>30</sup> Empowered with such a concept, Merton begins a process of self-reflection that culminates in his famous moment of truth of 19 March 1958 in Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut.

28. Thomas Merton, 'Christian Culture Needs Oriental Wisdom', in Thomas P. McDonnell (ed.), *A Thomas Merton Reader* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966), pp. 319-26 (326).

29. Thomas Merton. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), p. 129.

30. Merton, *Conjectures*, pp. 135-36.

At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God...which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of *absolute poverty* is the pure glory of God in us... I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere.<sup>31</sup>

Not wanting to remain only with concepts and ideas discovered in books authored by strangers, Merton also corresponded with some people in the hope that their friendship would lead them deeper into personal dialogue and experience. One of these was Abdul Aziz. He was an Algerian psychoanalyst and a specialist on Sufism.<sup>32</sup> In one of his letters he writes:

I have a Moslem friend who feels himself urged to pray for me, and I pray for him: but when he gets the urge to pray for me on the *night of destiny* (a key point in the fast of Ramadan) I usually get a whacking cross of some sort. I don't know usually when Ramadan is, or the night of destiny (it varies), but I can generally tell if I get knocked on the head some time in March that Abdul Aziz is praying for me. I send him books about St John of the Cross and he sends me some about the Sufis. Great people.<sup>33</sup>

It was statements like these, so full of his own inner conviction, his joy and his enthusiasm, that caught the imagination of those who read Merton. What is this seeing, this insight? What was this Wisdom that comes to us on street corners and crowds into our dreams?<sup>34</sup> We began to realize that this man was leading us to an appreciation of the powerful presence of God in other traditions and we wanted to experience them as well. Suddenly the enigmatic story-telling of the Zen masters found a new place in our hearts. Each new piece of the puzzle added new color and definition to what we already knew. It was so fascinating and surprisingly easy; almost entertaining.

Another Zen master, when asked if a monk should read the sutras, replied in characteristic Zen style: 'There are no byroads and no crossroads here;

31. Merton, *Conjectures*, pp. 141-42.

32. Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity* (ed. Patrick Hart, New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1990), p. 265.

33. Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity* (ed. Patrick Hart; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990), p. 172.

34. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Vocation* (Journals, 3; 1953-60; ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), p. 176. Merton had a dream about Wisdom. She came to him as a young Jewish girl and identified herself as someone called Proverb. Several days later he wrote her a letter.

the mountains are all the year round fresh and green; east or west, in whichever direction you may have a fine walk'. The monk asked for more explicit instructions. The master replied: 'It is not the sun's fault if the blind cannot see their way.'<sup>35</sup>

Having brought us to an appreciation of insights by others, Merton shows us how to find similar forms in our own culture and how this can have importance for us. He crosses borders with his bounding connectiveness. He not only draws disparate ideas into the same neighborhood but then makes it possible for us to live and to learn from the connections. Once, when discussing the moment in the bullfight when the bull is killed, he refers to this as the *moment of truth*. In short order, he also sees the *moment of truth* in the resolution of a koan by the Zen practitioner. But before he explores the connections to an illogical conclusion, he resolves the problem with a truism. 'Zen sees life itself as a spiritual Bullfight. Spaniards simply externalize it'.<sup>36</sup>

Merton enjoyed Zen. It gave him a whole new way to understand his life of contemplation especially in the hermitage years. He confessed that his writing of *The Way of Chuang Tzu* was something he enjoyed more than any other he could remember. When he got to meet Thich Nhat Hanh it was like meeting Chuang Tzu in the flesh. Merton calls Nhat Hanh 'my brother...'. 'He is more my brother than many who are nearer to me in race and nationality, because he and I see things exactly the same way'.<sup>37</sup> Both were monks; both had lost brothers in the midst of war, and both wrote poems to their dead brothers. They met in their opposition to what was happening in the war in Vietnam. Thich Nhat Hann was from North Vietnam. Merton was from America. As the world would have it, they should have been enemies. They met and embraced as brothers.

For one so committed to dialogue with the Eastern Masters, it is not surprising that Merton's final moment of awakening happened in Sri Lanka at the temple of Polonnaruwa. He went alone, and barefoot in the wet grass. He was a Catholic monk at a Buddhist shrine with a Muslim aesthetic.<sup>38</sup> In this, his moment of truth, Merton found that everything connects. When he wrote about the event four days later, he worried that

35. Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1969), p. 220.

36. Merton *A Search for Solitude*, p. 174.

37. Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton on Peace* (London: Mowbrays, 1976), pp. 152-53.

38. 'The absence of shadow in Persian miniatures reveals that they spring from the world of Archetypes which reflects the Light from the Divine'. Is this what Merton meant by going beyond the shadow and the disguise? Cf. Laleh Bakhtiar, *Sufi: Expressions of the Mystic Quest* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1976), pp. 14-15.

he had diminished the experience by sharing it with others in a conversation at table. In reading his journal entry, one gets the feeling that the event was more than he thought possible to describe and yet he writes paradoxically, "The thing about all this is that there is no puzzle, no problem, and no "mystery". All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear'.<sup>39</sup> The resolution of his own personal quest has become the conundrum of those who wonder what Merton meant when he described the event as going beyond the shadow and the disguise. A koan? A parable? A window or a gate? What matters is clear. What is not clear does not matter.

Did Thomas Merton attain true enlightenment? Did his years of studying Zen prepare him for a moment of *satori* (Zen enlightenment)? He was never able to tell us. Merton died of accidental electrocution little more than one week later. In *The Man in the Sycamore Tree* by Ed Rice, we are told that in some Buddhist traditions, the reincarnation of a Buddha is not recognized until his death and then alligators will come and eat a dog. Apparently this happened 12 December 1968, on the grounds of the conference Merton attended at the time of his death and that this was witnessed by the abbots and monks.<sup>40</sup> The Dalai Lama called Merton a 'Catholic *geshe*' (a learned monk)<sup>41</sup>. Perhaps he did achieve enlightenment.

Somewhere, and somehow, the lessons Merton learned in his own life found their way into his writings in spite of the fact that he was a monk living in silence in the midst of the Kentucky Knobs. Merton teaches us seven lessons: (1) that dialogue is relational; not debate; (2) that persons are more important than faith expressions; (3) that contemplation and mystical prayer are a meeting ground for dialogue and are available to us and to all; (4) that we come to understand by experience, not by concept; (5) that interfaith dialogue can be an 'honest encounter' without seeking the 'ecclesial conversion' of the other; (6) that interfaith dialogue challenges us to entertain change in our own hearts and (7) that such change is not personal gain, but God-given through us to others. What Merton experienced, he owned. What he owned, he shared. What he shared, changed his community, his church and his world. It continues. He invites us to see what he has seen. These lights require an awakening

39. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey* (Journals, 7; 1967-1968; ed. Patrick Hart, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), p. 323.

40. Rice, *The Man in the Sycamore Tree*, p. 10.

41. Pierre-François de Béthune, OSB, 'Preface', in Donald W. Mitchell and James A. Wiseman, OSB (eds.), *The Gethsemani Encounter: A Dialogue on the Spiritual Life by Buddhist and Christian Monastics* (New York: Continuum, 1999), pp. xi-xvi (xi).

that is not easy. 'Here is an unspeakable secret: paradise is all around us and we do not understand...' Wisdom', cries the dawn deacon, but we do not attend'.<sup>42</sup>

42. Merton, *Conjectures*, p. 118.