

# Listening Deeply, Living Deeply

Review of

*Thomas Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh:  
Engaged Spirituality in an Age of Globalization*

By Robert H. King

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The first chapter of Thich Nhat Hanh's 1995 book *Living Buddha, Living Christ* contains a quotation which can serve to frame Robert King's new work: "For dialogue to be fruitful, we need to live deeply our own tradition and, at the same time, listen deeply to others" (7). King thinks Thomas Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh have "listened deeply" and thus have provided models of how to listen and how to act, models that are of ongoing importance and influence. Recently retired from Millsaps College as professor of philosophy and religion and a practitioner of Buddhism who no longer assumes "that taking up a new religion [means] giving up one's old religion" (177), Robert King has written a book in which the Christian, Cistercian monk, Thomas Merton and the Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh are exemplars of "engaged spirituality" understood from a global perspective. King begins by describing his work as "a personal exploration of a particular theme within their work: the theme of contemplation and action" (4). He believes each man, in his own way, has both engaged deeply in the dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity and gone beyond dialogue to action on behalf of others.

The volume opens with a description of the meeting at the Abbey of Gethsemani on May 26, 1966 between Merton and Nhat Hanh and includes brief biographies of both. Chapters 2 and 3 treat Merton and Nhat Hanh respectively and focus on the interplay of contemplation and action in their practice, while Chapter 4 discusses each man's encounter and dialogue with the other's tradition. The volume closes with chapters on engaged spirituality in an age of globalization and places that issue in the context of spiritual movements like "Contemplative Renewal" (the centering prayer movement), of the growth of Buddhism in America, and of "global heroes" like Gandhi, Martin Luther King, A. T. Ariyaratne and Joanna Macy, whose lives model this engaged spirituality.

The book is not so much a comparison of Merton and Nhat Hanh, who met only once, as it is a tracing of their parallel developments, a description of how each came to the "new paradigm of religious encounter" (34) called "engaged spirituality" with its "three basic elements: contemplative practice, social action, and interreligious dialogue" (35). The student of Merton will not find a great deal here that is new. We know that Merton "opened out" from a narrow Roman Catholicism to a Christian Catholicism and, finally, embraced the Reality in other religions (in particular, Buddhism

and the Sufi traditions of Islam). King's discussion of Merton is limited by his decision to focus primarily on *The Sign of Jonas* (1953) and the two editions of *Seeds/New Seeds of Contemplation* (1949, 1962). This is not to fault his account of Merton's gradual opening to social issues and to world religions, which are accurately presented as deeply inter-connected.

Because I am less knowledgeable about Vietnamese history and Buddhism, the chapter on Nhat Hanh was more engaging to me. I found the recital of modern Vietnamese history particularly clarifying. As he traced Merton's development in his social/historical context, King likewise traces Nhat Hanh's, and in the process provides important insights about the turbulent 1960s and 70s and into Nhat Hanh's own growth. In spite of having read and admired several of the Buddhist monk's books, I did not know, for example, that his early career was "academic," and I was again impressed by the personal suffering of this exile for peace.

Again, the chapter "Entering into Dialogue" is not primarily about the dialogue between Merton and Nhat Hanh, which was very brief, but about each one's engagement with the "other" religion. King describes the Merton-D. T. Suzuki exchanges and Merton's Asian journey (focusing appropriately on the experience at Polonnaruwa [118-21]), then Nhat Hanh's dialogue with Daniel Berrigan (which includes a significant discussion of the self-immolations which occurred in the context of the peace movement [123-27]).

In Chapter 5 and the Epilogue King traces the influence of the lives and writings of Merton and Nhat Hanh (and others who practice engaged spirituality). I found this the least focused part of the book, perhaps because King attempts to make the discussion global. He discusses the Centering Prayer movement, the "secularization" of contemplation, and the legacy of Gandhi and others whose deep lives of prayer welled up into "engagement," into social action. King wants to demonstrate how the two seminal thinkers on whom the book focuses model what Raimundo Pannikar calls intrareligious dialogue, which embraces the whole person and leads him or her to action, to serve others. In this light, Merton and Nhat Hanh are "heroes" in Joseph Campbell's sense of that term, even though "they failed in most of the causes to which they committed themselves" (183-84). This I found a wonderful insight, a koan for Westerners, the concept of a hero of failure.

King writes well, and his personal approach is evident throughout the book. There is nothing dull or plodding in this volume. However, I had a slight problem with presentation of material because I am a very linear, beginning-middle-end thinker. I like chronology; it helps me "get things straight." King often presents events in the life of or writings by Merton and Nhat Hanh "out of order." He will mention something, drop it, then "double back" to discuss it later. This made it more difficult for me to follow his comparisons (as did his reticence to cite or repeat in the text dates of books and articles). Perhaps others will not experience my problem.

It may be presumptuous of me to suggest, but I think the subtitle of the book, "Engaged Spirituality in an Age of Globalization," is what it is really "about." Merton and Nhat Hanh are examples of the larger issue that King addresses, that of the "opening out" of spirituality in our time. What really interests him is the way opening to religious traditions not one's own, sharing their practices, results in opening to others and to the plight of the world we all share. It is in this sense that King makes a contribution to Merton studies. He helps us to shift to a "wide-angle lens" as we begin to assess Merton's ongoing influence in a new century. He helps us to understand that Merton was, indeed, a pioneer in understanding the deep connectedness of contemplation and action. Contemplative prayer, meditation, helps us to see. And part of what we see, and understand ourselves to be related to and

even complicit in, is the suffering of others. And once enlightened, we must, of necessity, act.

But Merton was a pioneer among pioneers. Nhat Hanh (and David Steindl-Rast and others) blaze a similar trail. Merton, himself, was correct. Nhat Hanh was his brother in what he, himself, described as “the bonds of a new solidarity and new brotherhood [sic] which is beginning to be evident on all the five continents and which cuts across all political, religious and cultural lines to unite young men and women in every country in something that is more concrete than an ideal and more alive than a program” (106). What is this “something”? Isn’t it deep, personal engagement in a life of prayer that, of necessity, leads to public commitment and to action on behalf of others? Isn’t it, in Buddhist terms, “waking up” so that, in the words of Nhat Hanh “the door of my heart can be left open, / the door of compassion”? (104). What King calls this “new kind of spirituality” (1) is, in my view, one of the oldest and most authentic spiritualities. We see it in the Buddha’s Great Renunciations, his compassion for all sentient beings. We see it in Jesus on the Cross. Robert King’s book can serve as another signpost on their Way.