

Deep Ecumenism in the Mystical Thought of D. T. Suzuki and Thomas Merton

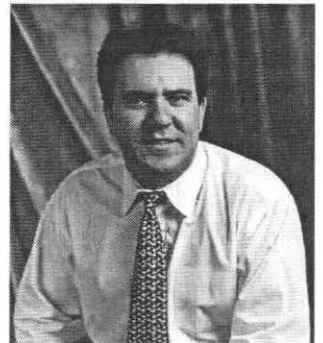
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Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki (1870-1966) and Thomas Merton (1915-1968) have undoubtedly influenced many generations all over the world. Their contribution to the field of comparative mysticism can be examined through a correlation of Suzuki's eight chief characteristics of enlightenment with Merton's mystical writings and experiences. By doing so, additional light will be shed on the essential role that mysticism plays in the life and thought of D. T. Suzuki and Thomas Merton. What follows will serve as a reminder of how relevant Suzuki and Merton are in the history of modern religious thought.

Merton meets Suzuki

Generally speaking, true mystics share with each other an overwhelming experience of a reality that is bigger than themselves. It is precisely here at the level of their experiential faith that an authentic religious dialogue among all world religions can be established. The considerable amount of information resulting from the study of mystical phenomena points towards the necessity for the scholar of comparative mysticism to collect and to analyze the reports of mystics in other lands and other times. The remarkable similarities found in the mystics' writings of all times are truly impressive facts of the spiritual history that bind us all as human beings. However, adopting this universalistic view does not imply that all mystics experience or describe reality the same way. In fact, each one of them experiences the divine according to their respective degrees of finitude and to their historical circumstances. In other words, the mystic may drink from the same source but each mystic describes the mystical experience differently, since each one has a unique personality and a set of particular circumstances that shape his or her own writings.

Clearly Merton rejected a certain type of perennial philosophy which confuses a hypothesis with an absolute dogma. For instance, "the mystics' in all religions are all experiencing the same thing and are all alike" is an example of such a "concordist" school of thought.¹ Merton correctly understood the challenge that some perennial philosophers pose to us by turning a sound hypothesis into a scientific truth, without undergoing a process of verification. In this sense Merton was not a perennial philosopher. As Alexander Lipski has pointed out: "Merton warned against the common glib assumption that mystics have identical experiences and that 'All religions thus meet at the top.' All comparisons have therefore to be undertaken with great caution, but for the sake of furthering mutual



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understanding between the various religions, the venture had to be carried out."²

Merton learned from experience that the world's mystical traditions may disagree in matters of doctrinal interpretation, but his real interest in the comparative study of mysticism was to find common spiritual ground among them. As Merton rightly suggested in his conversations with D. T. Suzuki:

There are many differences in the doctrines of the two religions, but I am deeply gratified to find, in this dialogue with Dr. Suzuki, that thanks to his penetrating intuitions into Western mystical thought, we can so easily and agreeably communicate with one another on the deepest and most important level. I feel that in talking to him I am talking to a "fellow citizen," to one who, though his beliefs in many respects differ from mine, shares a common spiritual climate. This unity of outlook and purpose is supremely significant (*ZBA* 138).

Merton's mystical vision led him to believe that a true dialogue between Christianity and Zen can only be satisfied in true contemplation at the level of mystical communion, not in the discursive attempt to build different speculative theologies for dogmatic purposes. For Merton, the key to a fruitful dialogue between Eastern and Western mystics lies in the degree of openness and trust in those who are willing to share their mystical experiences; and this kind of exchange can only take place at the level of spiritual experience.

Merton saw in Suzuki a reliable interpreter of Christianity precisely because the Zen scholar was in tune with the spiritual teachings of primitive Christianity, especially through his study of Christian symbols. Merton said that "Dr. Suzuki was perfectly at home in this atmosphere and perfectly able to handle these traditional symbols. In fact he was far more at home with them [the Church Fathers] than many Western theologians" (*ZBA* 64).

In December, 1964, Merton traveled to Columbia University in New York to meet this kindred soul from Japan with whom he had been corresponding since the late 1950s. Merton called Suzuki the "True Man of No Title," referring to the mystical name given to the person who has attained enlightenment in Taoism and in Zen Buddhism (*ZBA* 61). They celebrated this first meeting with a tea ceremony in Butler Hall, a ritual performed by Suzuki's secretary, Miss Mihoko Okamura. After the ceremony, Merton wrote the following about his existential encounter with Suzuki:

It was my good fortune to meet Dr. Suzuki and to have a couple of all too short conversations with him. The experience was not only rewarding, but I would say it was unforgettable. . . . He seemed to me to embody all the indefinable qualities of the "Superior Men" of the ancient Asian, Taoist, Confucian and Buddhist traditions. . . . In meeting Dr. Suzuki and drinking a cup of tea with him I felt I had met this one man. It was like finally arriving at one's own home (*ZBA* 60-61).

As Lipski suggested, "It is not surprising that Merton considered the tea ceremony to have features in common with the Eucharist, that those who participate in the ceremony experienced a spirit of communion" (Lipski 24-25). The simple act of performing the tea ceremony as a ritual, observed Merton, is a vivid example of the sacramental nature of Japanese Zen Buddhism, since the sacred is realized

in the secular. As Merton's favorite poet, William Blake, said in "Auguries of Innocence":

To see the world in a grain of sand
 And Heaven in a wild flower,
 Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
 And Eternity in an hour.³

East Meets West: Definitions and Characteristics of a Mystical Experience

The word "mysticism," together with its synonym, "contemplation," is ambiguous in meaning and has suffered distortions throughout time. Both Suzuki and Merton spent a great part of their lives studying the great mystics and their writings. Yet, scholars like Harvey Egan have questioned or denied altogether the possibility that Merton was a mystic.⁴ They describe Merton as a mystical theologian in the modern sense of the word, meaning one who wrote about mysticism without experiencing the divine. However, Merton not only wrote about mysticism. Clearly Merton's mystical writings come from his heart; that is to say, his mystical poems and commentaries come from his own deep mystical experiences and his own understanding of what has happened at the deepest center of his soul.

Merton's notion of mysticism took in his later years a Zen Buddhist perspective. On May 12, 1967, Merton wrote a letter to Masao Abe, a Zen scholar, saying that "metaphysical experience" is not a purely abstract formulation but rather

the basic intuition of being the direct grasp of the ground of reality, which is essential to a true and lived metaphysics. . . . The basic metaphysical intuition is close to the kind of religious intuition which opens out into mysticism. On this level I think we come very close to what Buddhism is saying. On this level Zen seems to me something very close to home, very alive, very helpful, indeed necessary. In Christian metaphysical-and-mystical experience there is something very close to Zen.⁵

Zen, unlike Christianity, is neither a philosophical system nor a religion in the modern sense of the word, especially since "Zen is decidedly not a system founded upon logic and analysis."⁶ Moreover, the experience of *satori*, or what Suzuki called Zen enlightenment, takes place not in the realm of the intellect (*ratio*), but rather at the intuitional-sapiential level (*intellectus*), where there is no second-hand experience. Zen shares with Christian mysticism a desire to experience ultimate reality as it is, without intermediaries. No one can really experience that which is, without undergoing a spiritual journey. Mediators and signposts are helpful up to a point. The person alone must stand still and leave mediators behind so that he or she might encounter the Nothing which is the All.

Zen masters teach us how to live our lives as if every single moment is a glimpse of Eternity. Zen, contrary to what some observers have said, is not a "mere quietism"⁷ because quietism implies withdrawal from the worldly senses, and Zen has nothing to do with the extremist ascetic ideal. Asceticism does play an important role in preparing oneself to attain *satori*, as it does in Christian mysticism. Thus, asceticism is not an end in itself.

To understand the true meaning of Zen is to live fully in the presence of the Eternal Now, in the

midst of ordinary life. We, therefore, find that in Zen there is no longer a gap between the sacred and the secular. As D. T. Suzuki described, “Zen is a mysticism of its own order” (Suzuki, *Introduction* 45) where the dichotomy between the sacred and the secular disappears. However, Zen is not to be confused with a form of pantheism. Zen defies all categories. For Suzuki, Zen is “the art of seeing into the nature of one’s being, and it points the way from bondage to freedom” (Suzuki, *Zen* 3). Zen cannot be understood without *satori*. “*Satori* is the *raison d’être* of Zen without which Zen is no Zen” (Suzuki, *Introduction* 95). Furthermore, *satori* is “the opening of the mind flower,” or “the removing of the bar,” or “the brightening up of the mind-works” (Suzuki, *Zen* 85). Thus the Zen Buddhist goal is to see into the nature of one’s own Nature, or what Merton called the True Self. This intuitive experience called *satori* is described as a sudden state of enlightenment in which the Zen practitioner acquires a new viewpoint by means of the decentering of the self.

For Merton, the goal of Christian mysticism is to know and to love God, which is to experience the divine at the deepest center of the soul. The way to prepare for this mystical union is to learn how to die to the old self so that the new self learns how to live in the presence of the divine. Both Suzuki and Merton put mystical experience first. Suzuki’s and Merton’s writings show how their criteria of what constitutes a mystical experience are similar. Suzuki made a significant contribution to the comparative study of mysticism with his eight chief characteristics of *satori*, which are elucidated in his book, *Zen Buddhism*. These eight major characteristics are: irrationality, intuitive insight, authoritativeness, affirmation, sense of the beyond, impersonal tone, feeling of exaltation, and momentariness. Suzuki’s list added a few new mystical characteristics to William James’ four distinguished marks of religious experience: ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity.

From an Eastern perspective, Suzuki’s first characteristic, the ‘irrationality,’ shares James’ ineffable quality. For James, ineffability means that any attempt to give expression to a direct experience with the divine will fail, since “no adequate report of its content can be given in words.”⁸ The only way to know the divine is by experience. This is the way of the mystic. Feeling rather than intellect is the mystic’s quality. Nonetheless, the mystic theologian or philosopher often attempts to articulate his or her own mystical experiences through writing. The fact that the mystical encounter with the divine is essentially ineffable does not prevent the mystics from leaving a vast literature on the subject. In the end, there is no radical split between experience and articulation, experiential faith and intuitive reason, because they both go hand in hand. In the case of Zen too, pure experience is devoid of any logical language, even though Zen Buddhists use language as a useful instrument that can guide the practitioner in his or her own spiritual journey. As Suzuki put it: “*satori* is not a conclusion to be reached by reasoning” (Suzuki, *Zen* 103).

For Merton, ineffability means that one remains speechless while experiencing the divine. This mystical encounter with the divine is wordless. The mystic cannot fully articulate the essence of the Godhead because God is not an object. The only thing the mystic can do is to point to that ultimate reality that is hidden everywhere, and yet found nowhere. Merton’s paradoxical observation is of great importance for an interfaith dialogue because his major interest in the study of world religions was not academic, but rather existential. Merton said the following during his trip to Asia: “[T]he 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.”⁹

Merton described his own mystical experience in his journals. Perhaps the most famous description is that of Polonnaruwa. He said that he could not write adequately what he felt while he was contemplating the giant Buddha statues of Polonnaruwa. Merton experienced peace in its fullness, resting in complete silence before the extraordinary faces of the Buddhas. There was a sense of gratitude and awe, Merton said,

of relief and thankfulness at the *obvious* clarity of the figures, the clarity and fluidity of shape and line . . . and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious. . . . All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear. . . . [E]verything is emptiness and everything is compassion. I don't know when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination. Surely, with Mahabalipuram and Polonnaruwa my Asian pilgrimage has come clear and purified itself. I mean, I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for (*AJ* 233-36).

Merton's preference for the apophatic mode of thought brought him closer to Suzuki's Zen Buddhist experience. Both mystics found common ground in the mystical language of silence and in the paradoxical nature of the mystical life. This is perhaps the reason why the mystical language of nothingness or emptiness is so attractive to both of them. Suzuki would say: "zero equals infinity" (*ZBA* 65). And Merton would respond: "Perfect poverty is recovered only when perfect emptiness is perfect fullness" (*ZBA* 111). Coincidentally, the Zen saying of "zero = infinity and infinity = zero" is best expressed in the teaching of St. John of the Cross on *la Nada y el Todo* (the Nothing and the All), which Merton was so fond of (*ZBA* 110).

Suzuki's second characteristic is the "intuitive insight," which echoes James' noetic quality. James wrote: mystical states have a noetic or a cognitive quality as well since they convey "states of knowledge" (James 380), resulting in a deeper insight and understanding into the nature of things. Another way of naming this "intuitive insight" in Zen Buddhism is *satori* or *kensho*, "meaning 'to see essence or nature'" (Suzuki, *Zen* 104). For Suzuki, this unitive experience is against all forms of dualism. For Zen Buddhists, the goal of life is to reach total awareness of the oneness of all things, or the thusness of ultimate reality, which can be expressed only in negative terms. Similarly, Merton wrote about his own mystical experiences of feeling at one with everything. The first experience of oneness, which "may well be described as 'mystical'"¹⁰ took place in Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the midst of the business and the shopping district, where he said: "I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers."¹¹ This awakening moment was described as an epiphany when Merton later said: "There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun" (*CGB* 141).

Who would have thought that the Trappist monk will experience God in the midst of a business center or in front of a Buddhist statue? Merton's unitive experiences are also accompanied by a sense of "clarity," of enlightenment, or illumination. This sense of clarity has a noetic quality because a mystical encounter with ultimate reality provides the mystic with new insights about who we are in relation to everything else. Merton wrote about this illuminative state before the Louisville experience when he said: "He who receives the grace of this kind of religious illumination is

given a freedom and an experience which leave him no longer fully and completely subject to the forces of nature, to his own bodily and emotional needs, to the merely external and human dictates of society, the tyranny of dictatorships" (CGB 75).

Suzuki's third characteristic is "authoritativeness" in the sense that "it cannot be denied by outsiders who have no such experience" (Suzuki, *Zen* 104). The validity of this experience has an intrinsic value only for the person who has become one with ultimate reality. According to Merton, the mystical encounter with ultimate reality has an authoritative quality for the person who is experiencing the divine. But this event has no power over other people, unless they undergo a similar spiritual journey where they feel grasped by a power greater than themselves.

Suzuki's fourth characteristic is "affirmation." The Zen Buddhist experience is life-affirming. The seeker of the Truth who has reached the summit returns to the marketplace fully equipped to deal with the mundane. Ordinary experience is no longer seen the same way after having attained *satori*. Merton illustrated this experience with a popular Zen saying: "before I grasped Zen, the mountains were nothing but mountains and the rivers nothing but rivers. When I got into Zen, the mountains were no longer mountains and the rivers no longer rivers. But when I understood Zen, the mountains were only mountains and the rivers only rivers" (ZBA 140). Merton talked about a spiritual feeling of "arriving at home," of looking at the world with new eyes and of seeing in it the presence of the divine. This kind of experiential faith brings a sense of certainty to the person who is experiencing ultimate reality.

Suzuki's fifth characteristic, the "sense of beyond," points to the transcendental aspect of the divine, which is experienced through a creative encounter with the No-thing-ness. This "sense of beyond" corresponds to James' fourth mark of being "grasped by a power greater than us." The mystic feels "grasped and held by a superior power" (James 381). These moments are always experienced as gifts, as something given. This state is "never merely interruptive" (James 381) and is what mystical theologians called infused contemplation or receptivity. Merton said that "[p]erfect openness, total receptivity, born of complete self-surrender, bring us into uninhibited contact with God. In finding him we find our true selves. We return to the true order he has willed for us."¹² For Merton, mystical receptivity does not mean total passivity. We remain active even while we are united with God. True detachment is not pure negation or pure indifference in the quietistic sense; rather, it is total reliance upon God, total abandonment to the will of God, without seeking the fruits of our labor. We need to lose ourselves in God so that we can open ourselves to experiencing the divine from within.

Suzuki's sixth characteristic is the "impersonal tone" that is frequently associated with the Asian experience, in contradistinction with the personal tone of the West. For instance, the most apparent difference between Suzuki and Merton is the fact that the former chose the impersonal language of Eastern mysticism, while Merton used the personal and affective language of Western mysticism. In other words, where Suzuki finds compassion (*karuna*), Merton finds charity (*caritas*). Thus the gap that separates Suzuki's and Merton's language is, in my opinion, semantic and cultural, even though both used interchangeably impersonal-personal expressions. For instance, Merton pointed out recalling his last words with Suzuki, the Zen Buddhist scholar said: "The most important thing is Love." And Merton added: "I must say that as a Christian I was profoundly moved [by Suzuki's statement]" (ZBA 62). According to Merton, the mystic is one who is intimately experiencing the love of God at the deepest center of the soul. By God's grace, the human soul becomes one with

the divine by participation. Merton, following the lines of St. John of the Cross, defined infused contemplation as “the secret knowledge of God by a union of love.”

For Merton, the Godhead of the mystics is the ineffable ultimate reality which is not “personal” in an anthropomorphic sense, but nonetheless is “personal” in so much as there is an ultra-loving true Self pervading the whole universe, who is the Formless, the Original Mind, the Buddha (or “the Enlightened One”) and the Christic (or “the Anointed One”) Mind, *sunyata*, or the Void. Merton wrote:

The points Dr. Suzuki has raised are of the highest importance. First of all it is clear that the strongly personalistic tone of Christian mysticism, even when it is “apophatic,” generally seems to prohibit a full equation with Zen experience. In cautiously walking around the distinction between “God and Godhead” I am simply avoiding a thorny theological problem. This distinction, of a clearly dualistic character, has been technically condemned by the Church (*ZBA* 135).

To put it in simple terms, Merton was defending himself from Suzuki’s criticism that “Father Merton’s emptiness . . . does not go far and deep enough . . . Father Merton’s emptiness is still on the level of God as Creator and does not go up to the Godhead” (*ZBA* 133). However the truth is that Merton was well aware of this “thorny theological problem,” and he would not hesitate to say that God is both the Creator of all things and the Godhead “in His transcendent, ineffable reality which to Dr. Suzuki is ‘Godhead’ If this is what he means, I think his view is thoroughly acceptable and I heartily concur with it” (*ZBA* 135). Suzuki and Merton might differ in the way they formulate or explain their thoughts and experiences because they are ultimately shaped and influenced by their respective cultural and theological traditions; but in essence one might ask, what if what they are pointing to is that source from which all things come?

Suzuki’s seventh characteristic is a “feeling of exaltation.” It is an expression of the ecstatic experience in Zen Buddhism. It is described as a blissful state by which the seeker is sought and grasped in oneness with all that it is. On the other hand, Merton warned us of the dangers of confusing mystical or infused contemplation with secondary phenomena such as ecstasies, raptures, stigmata, and so on. These gifts are the secondary effects produced by the grace of God, which is infused in the human soul. Merton believed that we cannot reach God by our own efforts alone. Nonetheless, he also said that we must work out our own salvation by preparing our soul to receive God’s grace. Thus, Merton defined the mystical experience as an awareness of being grasped by the ground of Being. Additionally, Merton saw the necessity of integrating the two modes of contemplation known in Christian mysticism as acquired and infused. The former mode of contemplation requires human effort so that the soul can be prepared to receive mystically the grace of God; infused contemplation is a pure gift of God. For Merton, infused contemplation is a “deeper and simpler intuitive form of receptivity, in which, if one can be said to ‘meditate’ at all, one does so only by receiving the light with passive and loving attention.”¹³ In other words, the soul receives this loving knowledge passively without being the agent of this transformative union. Or to put it mildly, the human soul feels grasped by a greater power.

Suzuki’s eighth characteristic is “momentariness,” also a quality shared by James. Transient experiences are typically characteristic of the mystical state of consciousness. These states rarely

last very long. At most, James said, they last two hours. Suzuki wrote: "This abrupt experience of *satori* then, opens up in one moment (*ekamuhurtena*) an altogether new vista, and the whole existence is appraised from quite a new angle of observation" (Suzuki, *Zen* 108). For Merton, the mystical experience is extended over a whole life, leaving a permanent mark in the human soul. This experience definitely changes the person. This is what the Christian tradition called *metanoia*, or a change of heart.

The two most famous mystical expressions of this type of sudden enlightenment in Merton's corpus are found in his visits to Louisville and to the giant Buddha statues in Polonnaruwa. Let me begin with Merton's famous description in Louisville. Merton wrote: "I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs" (*CGB* 140). Merton's mystical vision of oneness in the business center of Louisville had a great impact in his life. His whole world was shattered by this sudden experience. He woke up from "a dream of separateness" where the secular and the sacred are no longer seen as divorced (*CGB* 140). He also said that he felt "the immense joy of being *man*, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate" (*CGB* 141). Also, Merton reported that "it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes" (*CGB* 142).

The other major transformative mystical experience that Merton had was during his visit to Polonnaruwa. He said: "Looking at these figures I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious" (*AJ* 233, 235). Merton's "holy vision" in Polonnaruwa opened his soul to new levels of reality. He saw what he was "obscurely looking for" (*AJ* 236). Ultimately, Merton's sudden enlightenment brought him a sense of inner clarity and peace, which enriched his faith in God, in humanity, and in the whole universe.

Suzuki's and Merton's Spiritual Legacies

To conclude, D. T. Suzuki's and Thomas Merton's definition of mysticism did include a broader view of the relationship between the self and ultimate reality. Both Suzuki and Merton were able to communicate, in a simple yet direct language, their understanding of the mystical experience in our contemporary world. For Suzuki, there is no need in Zen Buddhism to go beyond the inner or true Self, because the soul is identical to the Godhead, the No-thing-ness, or the Uncreated Self. Even though in Merton's earlier works we see a tendency to separate the natural from the supernatural, the secular from the sacred, the self from the divine, the later Merton acknowledged that

The intellectual and Platonizing speculations of St. Augustine put us in a very different experiential climate from what we have just discussed in Zen, and it is therefore not easy to say where to place the "inmost self" of which Augustine speaks. There is always a possibility that what an Eastern mystic describes as Self is what the Western mystic will describe as God, because we shall see presently that the mystical union between the soul and God renders them in some sense "undivided" (though metaphysically distinct) in spiritual experience. And the fact that the Eastern mystic, not conditioned by centuries of theological debate, may

not be inclined to reflect on the fine points of metaphysical distinction does not necessarily mean that he has not experienced the presence of God when he speaks of knowing the Inmost Self.¹⁴

Furthermore, Raymond Bailey has suggested that “the Zen intuitive experience is at the core of the religious experience in the East.” In fact, he said:

Merton was attracted by the Zen [and Suzuki’s teachings] mode of spiritual enlightenment, *Satori*, “a spiritual enlightenment, a bursting open of the inner core of the spirit to reveal the inmost self.” This enlightenment is invested with no extraordinary or supernatural elements, but is rather a natural occurrence within the inner self, which has disposed itself to the experience by the opening of itself to reality. When the false self has been conquered, “the monk experiences a kind of inner explosion that blasts his false exterior self to pieces.” Little imagination is required to see the Zen *Sunyata* (void) as a natural analogue of the “unknowing” of the Christian apophatic tradition where God is experienced.¹⁵

However,

Merton sees the difference between Christianity and Buddhism in the fact that “emptiness” for the Buddhist seems to be a complete negation of personality, whereas “purity of heart” for the Christian means a supreme and transcendent fulfillment of personality. . . . The difference, in part at least, is one of language: the Zen language of “Emptiness” being more radical, austere, and ruthless, and the Christian language of “purity of heart” expressing itself more in metaphorical terms and concrete imagery, though always with the realization that one must penetrate the surface and reach the inner depths (Shannon 194-95).

For the later Merton, mysticism was not reduced to a dualistic worldview that separated the sacred from the secular. The genuine mystic is constantly seeking the presence of the divine in all things. In later years, Merton moved away from his earlier years as a Trappist monk withdrawing from the world in the hope of finding God alone, to embrace the world as it is. Merton also moved away from a narrow theism to encompass a panentheistic vision of reality, following the Pauline message that God shall be “all in all.” The problem with classical theism is that it puts too much emphasis on divine transcendence by portraying a distant God who is not present in the world. On the other hand, pantheism stresses the divine immanence by seeing God as everything. Merton’s pantheism holds the tension between the classical theist and the pantheist, and at the same time moves beyond them by declaring that God is in the world, but not of the world. Clearly Merton drew a distinction between God equals everything (pantheism) and God is present in everything (panentheism). Merton made the following observation at the end of the Fourth and Walnut passage of *Conjectures*: “This little point of nothingness and of *absolute poverty* is the pure glory of God in us. . . . It is in everybody. . . . I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere” (CGB 142).

Both Suzuki and Merton saw the divine reflected in all things and developed a sense of inter-

connectedness, having its spiritual roots in their personal encounters with the source of life. From this experience of oneness, both mystics are able to reach out to the world in a compassionate way, and in doing so they do not ignore their ethical responsibilities towards both the stranger and the neighbor.¹⁶

1. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968) 43; subsequent references will be cited as “ZBA” parenthetically in the text.
2. Alexander Lipski, *Thomas Merton and Asia: His Quest for Utopia* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1983) 31-32; subsequent references will be cited as “Lipski” parenthetically in the text.
3. William Blake, *Blake’s Poetry and Designs*, ed. Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979) 209.
4. Harvey D. Egan, *An Anthology of Christian Mysticism* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996) 15.
5. Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994) 332.
6. D. T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991) 38; subsequent references will be cited as “Suzuki, *Introduction*” parenthetically in the text.
7. D. T. Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956) 21; subsequent references will be cited as “Suzuki, *Zen*” parenthetically in the text.
8. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985) 380; subsequent references will be cited as “James” parenthetically in the text.
9. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 308; subsequent references will be cited as “AJ” parenthetically in the text.
10. William H. Shannon, *Thomas Merton’s Dark Path: The Inner Experience of a Contemplative* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1981) xii; subsequent references will be cited as “Shannon” parenthetically in the text.
11. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 140; subsequent references will be cited as “CGB” parenthetically in the text.
12. Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Crossroad, 1995) 146.
13. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 53.
14. Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation*, ed. William H. Shannon (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2003) 13.
15. Raymond Bailey, *Thomas Merton on Mysticism* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978) 170.
16. An earlier version of this article was presented at the Unitarian Church in Bloomington, IN on July 31, 2005.