In 2015, the one hundredth anniversary of his birth, Thomas Merton’s contribution to Christian spirituality is receiving heightened attention. For example, the fourteenth general meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society (ITMS) was held at Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky, June 4-7, 2015. The 500 or so participants at “Merton 100: Living the Legacy” included Christian and non-Christian believers and scholars from across the continent and abroad. The presentations made at conference clearly demonstrated how Merton’s followers have continued to develop his emphasis on contemplation, compassion, and unity in such fields as spiritual theology, social justice, environment, racism, feminism, liberation, literature, and interreligious dialogue.

For Merton, all these issues are based on union with God through contemplation, which can be considered the dominant theme of his life and literary output.¹ The complete awakening of identity through contemplation was at the center of his views,² and it was certainly the main aspiration of his entire spiritual journey.

In the process of developing his understanding of contemplation, Merton entered into dialogue with Eastern traditions, including Zen, and these spiritual traditions influenced his view of the relation of contemplation to self-transcendence and the search for his own true self.³ The insights he derived from this dialogue provided him an experiential approach to contemplation and the awakening to God through nothingness. Self-transcendence facilitated Merton’s dialogue with Asian religions, especially with Zen Buddhism. Recently, however, some scholars have suggested that Merton’s understanding of Buddhism was not only imperfect and incomplete but also limited.⁴ For instance, John

¹ William H. Shannon points out that “contemplation was the explicit theme, or at least the implied background, of everything that Merton wrote.” See: William H. Shannon, Thomas Merton’s Dark Path: The Inner Experience of a Contemplative (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1982), 4.
² John Howard Griffin, Follow the Ecstasy: Thomas Merton, the Hermitage Years, 1965-1968 (Fort Worth, Tex.: JHG Editions/Latitudes Press, 1983), 23.
⁴ John P. Keenan claims that “we cannot look to Merton for any adequate understanding of Buddhism. Because of the limitation of sources available to him in his time, his understanding of Zen Buddhism. . . . It is not enough—as Merton learned to do from Suzuki—to appeal to a simple, non-discriminative experience of truth and reality.” See: John P. Keenan, “The Limits of Thomas Merton’s Understanding of Buddhism,” in Merton and Buddhism: Wisdom,
P. Keenan argues that “[Merton] never was able to delve into the textual and historical sources of Buddhist thought and practice. . . . [Thus] we must go beyond Merton’s understanding of Buddhism to engage in the tasks of dialogue that remain before us.” 5 Commenting on Keenan’s argument, John D. Dadosky states in his article, “Merton’s Dialogue with Zen: Pioneering or Passé?” that “while [Merton’s] knowledge of Buddhism may have been pioneering for its time, and in some ways it might be now passé, what is truly going forward in Merton’s engagement with Buddhism is his success at interreligious dialogue.” 6 Dadosky concludes that beyond “some Western arrogance,” Merton’s knowledge of Buddhism was sufficient for our time and the friendship between Daisetz T. Suzuki and Merton “provides a model for interreligious relating that we can all learn from.” 7 Today, Merton’s limited knowledge of Buddhism can be modified, yet his transcendent experience and paths of dialogue still provide a model for interreligious dialogue. 8

The experience of self-transcendence or self-transformation in one’s spiritual inner-self can be used as a key to Merton’s understanding of Zen Buddhism. Merton’s Zen encounters enriched his religious practice and had a positive effect on others. 9 Self-transcendence of the inner-self is an elusive, mystical, and tedious process. But without such spiritual evolution, dialogue with people of other religions may remain at an immature or surface level. Merton believed that interreligious dialogue must be concentrated on the really essential and “be sought in the area of true self-transcendence and enlightenment. It is to be sought in the transformation of consciousness in its ultimate ground, as well as in its highest and most authentic devotional love. . . .” 10

Merton’s journey toward his inner-self through his continuous spiritual development, his aptitude for being in relationship with and learning from others, and his transcendent

5 Keenan, 131.
7 Ibid., 71-73.
8 In fact, Merton was unable to obtain greater understanding of Buddhism as a result of his sudden death and his limited contextual environment. Nonetheless, he provided one of the key elements for opening the door for significant dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity.
experiences offer a personal and spiritual model that enhances interreligious dialogue. Using this paradigm, Merton's followers are now attempting to overcome his limitations, such as his over-reliance on Suzuki. They now seek alternative strategies derived from his writing to promote dialogue with other religions and cultures in our time.

Merton's Discovery of Zen Buddhism
Merton's encounter with Zen had a significant influence on his contemplative life. In his study of Zen he wanted to go beyond the mere attainment of intellectual knowledge of other religious doctrines. The most important reason, for such exploration, was spiritual enlightenment in his own monastic life. In her article “Unfolding of a New World: Thomas Merton & Buddhism,” Bonnie B. Thurston divides Merton’s acquaintance with Buddhism into three periods: pre-monastic, monastic, and Asia. The evidence of Merton’s interest in Zen prior to his entrance into the monastery is very limited, but in the book, *The Inner Experience*, which was published in 1959, he presented the fruit of a deep interest in Zen that began in the mid-1950s. In the introduction, William H. Shannon claims that this book is the first time in his writings that Merton linked Christian contemplation to Eastern religious thought. Doing so, he said, “did not signify an abrupt departure from the past, but rather a fulfillment of a development that had begun about twenty years earlier.” Merton had, in fact, been reading books about Eastern though since

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11 Merton stated that “I think we have now reached a stage of . . . religious maturity at which it may be possible for someone to remain perfectly faithful to a Christian or Western monastic commitment, and yet learn in depth from . . . a Buddhist or Hindu discipline and experience.” See ibid., 313.

12 Thurston points out that “since his death in 1968, a great many Christians have wondered about Merton’s immersion in Buddhism, and many Merton scholars have written about it.” See: Bonnie B. Thurston, “Unfolding of a New World: Thomas Merton & Buddhism,” in *Merton & Buddhism*, xiii.


14 Larry A. Fader claims that “Merton’s studies of Zen were his central focus among Oriental religions. . . . He was undoubtedly influenced by Oriental religions beyond this comparative level, and integrated them into his own beliefs concerning the essential thrust of religion.” See: Larry A. Fader, “Beyond the Birds of Appetite: Thomas Merton’s Encounter with Zen,” *Biography* 2, no. 3 (Summer 1979): 234, 243.

15 Thurston, 15-22.


17 Shannon claims that in 1959, the first draft of *The Inner Experience* was written to revise the views on contemplation that Merton had expressed in his previous books, *What is Contemplation?* and *Seeds of Contemplation*. In 1968, he made additions and minor corrections in the 1959 text. See: Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation*, ed. William H. Shannon (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2003), 24. Hereafter, IE.

18 MacCormick, 807.
1937. I will therefore divide Merton’s experience with Buddhism into three periods: The Exploratory Period (1937 to the mid-1950s), The Transformational Period (1959 to 1968), and The Extensive and Enlightened Period (1968).

**The Exploratory Period (1937 to the mid-1950s)**

In the exploratory period, Merton interest in Asian religions led him, in the final months of 1937, to Aldous Huxley’s book *Ends and Means*. When Merton initially encountered Asian thought, he considered the practice of Zen to be little more than a useful practical tool. He also believed it led to nihilism or heresy because of what he considered its life-denying emphasis on self-emptying. Merton painted a harsh picture of Eastern religions in general, describing them as “pantheist, immanentist, and absorptionist.”

In the mid-1950’s, however, Merton began to explore Zen more fully when he found some similarities between the spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Zen Buddhists. These elements included a search for the true self, an orientation towards self-transcendence, the use of *koans* or the equivalent, and acceptance of suffering in the self-emptying process.

**The Transformational Period (1959 to 1968)**

After writing his book, *The Inner Experience*, and prior to his journey to Asia, Merton studied Zen and Mahayana Buddhism so assiduously that this time can be called his Period of Transformation through Zen (1959-1968). Following the publication of his book *The Wisdom of the Desert* in 1959, Merton began a dialogue with D.T. Suzuki, who interpreted Zen for the Western world. Merton stated that “[the] uniqueness of Dr. Suzuki’s work lies in the directness with which an Asian thinker has been able to communicate his own experience of a profound and ancient tradition in a Western language.” Merton attained a radical and rich understanding of Zen through reading Suzuki’s books, corresponding

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19 With regard to Huxley’s acceptance of Buddhism, Merton noted that “it seems to me that in discarding his family’s tradition of materialism he [Huxley] had followed the old Protestant groove back into the heresies that make the material creation evil of itself. . . . Nevertheless, that would account for his sympathies for Buddhism, and for the nihilistic character which he preferred to give to his mysticism and even to his ethics.” See: Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998), 204. Hereafter, SSM. MacCormick suggests that through Huxley’s book Merton began to be interested in Asian mysticism. As noted above, he claims that Merton’s deep understanding of Zen in the last decade of his life did not “signify an abrupt departure from the past, but rather a fulfillment of a development that had begun about twenty years earlier.” See: MacCormick, 806-807; SSM, 225.

20 Cf.: Ibid., 205.


23 Ibid., 63. Thurston argues that “during the monastic years Merton’s study focused on the Mahayana tradition of Zen, perhaps because it was most readily available to him in an English translation. There is no question but that Suzuki was formative in his understanding of Zen.” See: Thurston, 17.
with him, and meeting with him. He modified his earlier thoughts about Zen by noting that “it is quite false to imagine that Zen is a sort of individualistic, subjective parity. . . . It is not a subtle form of spiritual self-gratification. . . . Nor is it by any means a simple withdrawal from the outer world of matter to an inner world of spirit.” Under the influence of Suzuki, Merton’s understanding of Zen contributed to his spiritual transformation, especially to the integration of contemplation and action. His interest in social justice and in other Asian religions emerged from this expanded world view. Larry A. Fader, in his article, “Beyond the Birds of Appetite,” claims that “in Buddhism Merton found a significant example of the reconciliation he sought between the contemplative life and action that grows out of a profound social consciousness. The later attitude Merton exhibited coincided with his aroused interest in Zen.”

Moreover, through friendship with Suzuki, Merton saw the possibility of interreligious dialogue between Zen and Christianity in “a common spiritual climate.” He noted,

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.

Merton recognized that Zen could help Christians attain spiritual growth and integration. Moreover, it could also transform modern Western culture in a profound way. Merton believed that sharing common spiritual ground in fellowship with Zen could contribute to spiritual healing and a transformation of consciousness for his contemporaries.

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24 Merton’s correspondence with Suzuki began in the late 1950s and continued until Suzuki’s death in 1966. Hart argues that “Dr. Suzuki felt that Thomas Merton was one of the few Westerners who really understood what Zen was all about.” See: AJ, xxvii.

25 Thomas Merton, Mystics and Zen Masters (New York: Dell, 1967), 13. Hereafter, MZM. Merton comments that a Buddhist neither “simply turns away from a world . . . [nor] cultivates meditation in order to enter a trance and eventually a complete negative state of Nirvana. But Buddhist ‘mindfulness,’ far from being contemptuous of life, is extremely solicitious [sic] for all life.” See: ZBA, 93.

26 Fader, 234.

27 ZBA, 138.

28 Ibid., 138.

29 Merton stated that “the impact of Zen on the west, striking with its fullest force right after World War II, in the midst of the existentialist upheaval . . . with western religion and philosophy in a state of crisis and with the consciousness of man threatened by the deepest alienation, the work and personal influence of Dr. Suzuki proved to be both timely and fruitful. . . .” See ibid., 59.
In 1966, Merton met the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, when he visited the Abbey of Gethsemani during a lecture tour urging the end of the Vietnamese War. Their meeting was very short, but their spiritual friendship continued through correspondence.\textsuperscript{30} Merton wrote,

\begin{quote}
Nhat Hanh is \textit{my brother}... We are both monks, and we have lived the monastic life about the same number of years... I have far more in common with [him] than I have with many Americans... [These] are the bonds of a new solidarity and a \textit{new brotherhood}...."
\end{quote}

In his dialogue with this Buddhist monk, Merton found a spiritual solidarity and a unity in brotherhood that called him to be one with his Buddhist brother in addressing grave social problems in the world of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{32}

\textbf{The Extensive and Enlightened Period (1968)}

The “Extensive and Enlightened Period” began in 1968 when Merton journeyed to Asia. Merton was invited to a conference of Asian Catholic monastics organized by A.I.M. in suburban Bangkok in 1968.\textsuperscript{33} At that time, his enthusiasm for Zen lead him to accept the journey to Asia in order to have a “face-to-face, monk-to-monk” encounter with Buddhists.\textsuperscript{34} Before his accidental death in Bangkok, Merton had become especially fascinated with Tibetan (Vajrayana) Buddhism. Thurston points out that “Merton had passed through... the stage of kenosis, self-emptying, and was spurning nothing. He possessed something of the ‘pure perception’ that is developed by practicing... Tibetan Buddhism.”\textsuperscript{35} Moreover, at Polonnaruwa in 1968, Merton experienced a kind of spiritual enlightenment before the statue of the Buddha. Regarding this transcendent experience,

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Merton stated that “I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half tired vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious. . . .” There was no doubt that in dialogue with Zen Merton obtained new spiritual enlightenment, which provided him with a new understanding of the world and others.

Merton embraced Buddhism through continuous study, conversation, and practice. He hoped that these efforts would contribute to his monastic renewal and facilitate interreligious dialogue. His sudden death truncated his initial dialogue with Eastern monks. Such interreligious dialogue was still embryonic because boundaries were still firmly in place between Christianity and the religions of the East. Nonetheless inroads continue to be made by those who follow Merton’s way. In short, Zen appears to have been the key that opened the door to Merton’s inner spiritual self as well as a portal that facilitated interreligious dialogue. Through his understanding of Zen, Merton provided Christians with the possibility of learning Eastern wisdom without abandoning their Christian faith and beliefs.

Merton’s Experience of Self-Transcendence and Zen
Both Christianity and Zen contributed to Merton’s spiritual journey and allowed him to discover his true self through detachment from the ego. Although his journey originated in a Christian monastic cloister, it expanded to encompass the entire world through dialogue with Eastern religions. In this respect, Merton commented that “we are plagued today with the heritage of that Cartesian self-awareness, which assumed that the empirical ego is the starting point of an infallible intellectual process to truth and spirit. . . .” Contrary to Descartes, he claimed that the central goal of monasticism is the elimination of an

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38 Thurston claims that “before Asia, it focused on Suzuki and Zen, in Asia on the Tibetans. Most importantly, throughout his life, Merton had personal contact with practitioners, monks and lamas as well as with scholars of Buddhism. Practice, existential commitment, made all the difference.” See: Thurston, 22. Merton noted that “I believe that some of us need to do [a Buddhist or Hindu discipline and experience] in order to improve the quality of our own monastic life and to help in the task of monastic renewal which has been undertaken within the Western Church.” See: AJ, 313.
39 With regard to Zen Buddhism, MacCormick points out that “basically there are two ways of defining Zen, a word derived from the Sanskrit term *dhyana* and translated as ‘meditation’ or ‘contemplation.’ First . . . Zen is Zen *Buddhism* . . . . The second way of defining Zen states that in essence it is separable from any particular structure, system, or religious tradition, including Buddhism. It is a ‘meta-religion.’” See: MacCormick, 803. Merton wrote that “Zen is consciousness unstructured by particular form or particular system, a trans-cultural, trans-religious, trans-formed consciousness. It is therefore in a sense ‘void.’ But it can shine through this or that system, religious or irreligious, just as light can shine through glass that is blue, or green, or red, or yellow.” See: ZBA, 4.
40 MZM, 26 [Emphasis added].
empirical ego through self-transcendence within any religious tradition. He noted that “[the] superficial ‘I’ is not our real self . . . Nothing could be more alien to contemplation than the cogito ergo sum of Descartes . . . Contemplation is . . . not so much ‘mine’ but ‘myself’ in existential mystery.”

Beyond Cartesian self-awareness, Merton saw that “[the] whole question of ‘ego-self’ and ‘person’ [are] a matter of crucial importance for the dialogue between Eastern and Western religion.”

Merton’s encounters with Zen led him to conclude that the inner-self is not “a part of our being . . . [but] a new and indefinable quality of our living being . . . [and] cannot be held and studied as object, because it is not ‘a thing.’” Moreover, he wrote that “only when there is no self left as a ‘place’ in which God acts, only when God acts purely in Himself, do we at last recover our ‘true self’ (which is in Zen terms ‘no-self’).” In Zen, “no-self” (anatta) does not precisely indicate “not the ego-self. This Self is the Void [No-mind].” If so, how could Merton reconcile finding the true self in God with the “no-self” in Zen beyond a subject-object relationship in Christianity, since there is no subject-object relationship in Zen?

In response to this question, Merton attempted to overcome the split between subject and object with regard to the discovery of the inner-self in Christianity and Zen. While Zen seeks the immediate disappearance of a subject-object duality through an experience of enlightenment, Christianity sees “an infinite metaphysical gulf between the being of God and the being of the soul, between the ‘I’ of the Almighty and our own inner ‘I,’ [between the subject and the object].” Despite the metaphysical gap between God and self, Merton claimed that “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’ in spiritual experience.”

Merton acknowledged that the transcendence of integration between the subject and the object was possible in Christ, since “in the Incarnation . . .

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42 ZBA, 74, 77.
43 IE, 6-7.
44 ZBA, 10.
45 Ibid., 74.
46 IE, 12, 20. Merton stated that “Zen is the ontological awareness of pure being beyond subject and object, an immediate grasp of being in its ‘suchness’ and ‘thusness.’” See: MZM, 14. Zen Buddhism teaches that the subject-object relationship with one’s self will become one and then disappear when Enlightenment is obtained. William Johnston comments that “what he [Merton] stated well and with rough clarity is that Zen goes beyond all categories and all duality. . . . In certain areas of apophatic experience the subject-object relationship disappears, and this is . . . simply another way of experiencing God.” See: William Johnston, Christian Zen (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 23.
47 IE, 13.
[Christ] has become not only one of us but even our very selves.” Through discovering the true self in Christ (Logos), one’s self can be “divinized in Christ” and lives in His freedom and love. The awakened person can come to the realization that there is no separation between the subject and the object, and that everything is one: “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me (Gal. 2:20).” Merton noted that “by a paradox beyond all human expression, God and the [inner-self] seem to have but one single ‘I.’ They are (by divine grace) as though one single person. They breathe and live and act as one.” Through detachment from ego and dying to one’s self by imitating Christ’s kenosis, one may take part in the mystical relationship between the Father and the Son through the gifts of the Holy Spirit, beyond the relationship between subject and object. Merton proposed that “[the] experience of the Cross and of self-emptying be central in the life of the Christian so that [one] may fully receive the Holy Spirit and know all the riches of God in and through Christ (John 14: 16-17, 26; 15:26-27; 16:7-15).”

Moreover, by going beyond the subject-object relationship in Christianity, Merton not only found a connection between the true self and no-self but also used Zen to inspire his own self-transcendence. Joseph Raab argues that “[Zen] helped [Merton] to achieve and to understand the radical self-emptying . . . as facilitating the fulfillment of intentional consciousness in religious experience.” Merton surrendered his inner-self through the practice of kenosis, the self-emptying of ego. He confessed that “everything is emptiness and everything is compassion . . . my Asian pilgrimage has come clear and purified itself . . . The whole thing is very much a Zen garden . . . .” Thus Merton’s expression resonates with “the full Christian expression of the dialectic of fullness and emptiness, todo y nada, void and infinity.” Raab points out that “Merton had described the experience as ‘being lost in a transcendent subject’ or as ‘an un-self-conscious reaching out in love’ where there is no

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48 SS, 381.
49 LL, 200; NSC, 38; LH, 60. Finley points out that one’s struggle in finding a true self is a blessing that arises when one becomes a new being through the contemplation of God in Christ, and that is made possible by participating in Christ’s contemplation of the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit. Hence, in Finley’s view, through finding the true self, Merton could become Godlike, and also become God’s own action. See: Finley, 107; Thomas Merton, What Are These Wounds?: The Life of a Cistercian Mystic, Saint Lutgarde of Aywières (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1950), 14.
50 Christopher Pramuk argues that “liberation is the dawning awareness of our true selves already living ‘in Christ,’ which is to say, resting in the womb of God, in creation, and in one another. It is, as Merton described his experience at Fourth and Walnut, ‘like waking from a dream of separateness.’” See: Christopher Pramuk, “‘Something Breaks Through a Little’: The Marriage of Zen and Sophia in the Life of Thomas Merton,” Buddhist-Christian Studies 28 (2008): 70; ZBA, 5, 75, 117.
51 IE, 18.
52 ZBA, 56.
54 AJ, 235-236.
55 MZM, 212.
thought of self." Merton realized that the true self may become a bridge for connecting Christianity and Buddhism via the process of self-emptying or *kenosis*. He urged Christians to begin removing boundaries between contemplation and action, between the cloister and the world, and between the East and West. He also urged that “what is really essential to the monastic quest . . . is to be sought in the area of true self-transcendence and enlightenment.” Merton found a nexus for interreligious dialogue through fusing the Christian concept of “new birth” of the inner-self with Buddhist enlightenment of the inner-self.

**Merton’s Three Paths to Interreligious Dialogue with Zen**

Paul F. Knitter provides helpful models for exploring Christian attitudes towards other world religions: the replacement model (there is only one true religion), the fulfilment model (one model fulfills many religions), the mutuality model (many true religions called into dialogue), and the acceptance model (there are many true religions: so be it).

In the mutuality model, he introduces the concept of a “religious-mystical bridge,” which supposes that the same Divine Mystery or Reality is experienced differently within the different religious traditions. The differences call for dialogue among the religions. In fact, the religious-mystical experience can be experienced differently and interpreted within its own cultural and traditional context (e.g., God as personal and as supra-personal, or no-thing), yet because of the “different types of differences,” it can provide mutual enrichment and challenge for one another. This profound experience can become a source for interreligious dialogue with Eastern religions, instead of a dialogue that is concerned with creeds and dogmas.

John B. Cobb claims that despite the “profoundly different” experience of Buddhists and Christians, dialogue between them does not bring about “contradictions” but rather is “mutually complementary . . . [with] enriching contrasts” for a mutually transformative dialogue.

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56 Raab, 195.
57 AJ, 316.
58 Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 201-204. Hereafter, CWA.
60 Ibid., 125.
61 Using the perspectives of Stephen Katz, James Price, and Bernard Lonergan, Dadosky argues that religious-mystical experience is not the same since it is experienced and interpreted within its own cultural and traditional context. Through understanding the “different types of differences,” the religious-mystical experience can become a source for interreligious dialogue “in a spirit of friendship” and provide “the best context for mutual enrichment, for mutual challenge.” Thus, religious experience can be a starting point of dialogue and of learning from the “different types of differences,” and can provide mutual enrichment, thus extending the common horizon for each other. See: Dadosky, 62-71.
Generally, the sharing of religious-mystical experience can help one achieve self-transcendence, a common aim for those committed to spiritual practice, whether as monks or laity. Monasticism in many religions encourages attaining self-transcendence through ascetical practices that are often very similar. The experience of self-transcendence can lead to greater open-mindedness towards others, which can be expressed as the fruits of love and compassion. Merton’s dialogue with Zen can also be described in terms of 1) monastic practice, 2) emptiness and the apophatic mystical way, and 3) compassion and love as its fruit. Through these types of dialogue, Merton’s contemplative life was more enriched, more open, and more fruitful.64

Monastic Practices in Zen and Christianity
Merton proposed that Christian and Zen monasticism follow similar paths of spiritual practice in order to achieve self-transcendence or enlightenment. Both forms of monasticism would be mutually enriched by sharing their practical treasures. Indeed, Merton’s interior horizon was developed synergistically through the study and practice of Zen.65 Merton stated that “the practice of Zen aims at the deepening, purification, and transformation of consciousness. . . . It seeks the most radical transformation . . . [of] the pure ontological subject, at once unique and universal, no longer ‘individual.’”66 Merton realized that the transformed experience of self is cultivated by the practice of the “‘bare attention’ [concept] of Zen. . . . It just sees. . . . Learning to see in this manner is the basic and fundamental exercise of Buddhist meditation.”67 Merton saw that in Christian tradition, through the illumination of God’s Light, one disappears into God, and “the eye wherein I see God is the same eye wherein God sees me.”68 With the eyes of God, the awakened person simply and just sees in Christ what it sees without conceptual prejudices or verbal distortions.69 He also learned that ultimately Zen meditation could assist one in becoming free from “self” as “all evils and defilements start from [one’s] attachment to [self].” 70 Through liberation from the self, a practitioner could begin to achieve

65 Ibid., 184.
66 MZM, 237-238.
67 ZBA, 53.
68 ZBA, 57; cf., NSC, 134-135.
69 IE, 20, 11; ZBA, 53.
enlightenment, namely, “perfect emptiness” and “perfect fullness.”

Merton sought to obtain enlightenment as a Western monk through Buddhist monasticism. He stated that “I come [to Asia] as a pilgrim who is anxious . . . to drink from ancient sources of monastic vision and experience. I seek not only to learn more about religion and about monastic life, but to become a better and more enlightened monk myself.”

Buddhist and Christian monks can both agree that “the same insight has inspired and moved . . . true monastics throughout history: ascetical life, mortification, self-abandonment, [and] stripping of the self . . . [have] always served as means to the end of achieving union with the most perfect Being,” and have done so through mutual learning with regard to monastic practices. Gilbert G. Hardy suggests that “monastic life offers a constant reminder to all in the monastery of the task of *stripping the self of the self*; the prescribed practices of purification aim at total self-renewal. . . . It is only by achieving [the] state of spiritual freedom [that a monk reaches] the ‘emptiness’ of Buddhist aspirations.”

Thus, both Christian and Zen monasticism aim to achieve spiritual freedom through varied yet common paths of spiritual practice.

The insights offered by Zen led Merton to conclude that the monastic practices of Christianity and Zen have in common the elements of guidance by a spiritual director or master, and the utilization of practical tools in order to attain new spiritual depths. He stated that “. . . in Asian traditions as well as in Christian monasticism, there has been considerable stress on the need for a guide or spiritual father, an experienced elder who knows how to bring the less experienced to a decisive point of breakthrough where this ‘new being’ is attained.” In Zen practice, the Roshi (Old Master) uses a *koan* which is a kind of nonsense question or story to test a practitioner’s progress. The Zen practitioner struggles with breaking open the *koan* so that he or she may be led to a gradual deepening of consciousness “. . . in which one experiences reality not indirectly or mediately but directly, in which clinging to no experience and to no awareness as such, one is simply ‘aware’.”

Merton reflected that

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71 ZBA, 111.
72 AJ, 313.
74 Ibid., 36 [Emphasis added].
75 CWA, 202. Merton notes that “strictly speaking, Christian monasticism is less dependent on the aid of a guide than some of the other traditions. In Sufism and Zen the spiritual master is as essential as the analyst in psychoanalysis.” See ibid., 202.
76 Merton stated that “the purpose of the Zen *koan* is to bring the student by ardent and severe interior practice, and the guidance and supervision of his Roshi, to a state of pure consciousness which is no longer a ‘consciousness of.’ The *koan* is a means of breaking through . . . problems and false solutions.” See: Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton on Zen* (London: Sheldon Press, 1976), 87.
77 Ibid., 71.
Zen meditation is not quietist tranquility, and Zen practice is not tolerant of drifting. It repeatedly demands and even forces an active response. This is the function of the *koan*, of the long periods of *zazen* meditation (upon the *koan*), and frequent interviews with the Roshi.\(^78\)

Christian monastic discipline also consists of various practices, such as prayer, meditation, *Lectio Divina*, sacramental liturgy, obedience, and simple work. With a master, Zen *koans* and Christian monastic disciplines are tools for inner development. As Zen *koans* are generative of insight and transformation of one’s inner-self, so also Christian monastic discipline helps to facilitate spiritual rebirth of the inner-self through the grace of God. Merton states, however, that “Christian monasticism . . . might compensate, to some extent, for the lack of an experienced and charismatic teacher. But if there is no sense at all of the urgency of inner development, no aspiration to growth and ‘rebirth’. . . something essential is missing.”\(^79\) Merton believed that the aim of monastic practice is rebirth through purification and transformation, and the monk can live “in peace, in wisdom, in creativity, in love” because of a “more complete identity [towards] a more profoundly fruitful existence.”\(^80\) Although the “language and practice of Zen are much more radical, austere, and ruthless,” Christian monks may utilize the practice of Zen, such as *zazen* meditation and *koans* to facilitate breaking the boundary of self-centeredness and attaining spiritual rebirth.\(^81\) Thus, Zen and Christian monks can dialogue about their mutual practices and their mutual inner-religious experience through sharing similar monastic methods.

**Sūnyata (Emptiness) and the Apophatic Mystical Way**

Merton brought the apophatic mystical traditions of Christianity and the contemplative values of Christian monasticism into dialogue with the cryptic and enigmatic expression of emptiness in Zen.\(^82\) Merton connected the concept of emptiness in Christian spirituality to Zen from the perspective of John Cassian, Meister Eckhart, and John of the Cross.\(^83\) He believed that the “essential nakedness’ [of Ruysbroeck’s mysticism]...correspond[ed] to Dr. Suzuki’s emptiness of the ‘Godhead’” and that “a fuller and truer expression of Zen in

\(^78\) Ibid., 84.

\(^79\) CWA, 202.

\(^80\) Ibid., 202-203.

\(^81\) ZBA, 118.

\(^82\) Carr points out that “[the] way of ‘non-knowing’ had powerful affinities, [Merton] thought, with the early desert tradition, with the cryptic and enigmatic expressions of Zen, and with the possibilities suggested in the mystical aspects of Hinduism and Islam.” See: Anne Carr, “Merton’s East-West Reflections,” *Horizons* 21, no. 2 (1994): 246.

\(^83\) Through John Cassian’s understanding of purity of heart, which is the “intermediate end of the spiritual life,” Merton strove to describe the emptiness of Zen. Yet, he stated that although purity of heart “roughly [corresponds] to Dr. Suzuki’s term ‘emptiness’ . . . [the] qualification might conceivably constitute a significant difference” between the two, since “the ultimate end of the monk’s striving in the desert” is not purity of heart, but the Kingdom of God “which does not enter into the realm of Zen.” See: ZBA, 131-132.
Christian experience [was] given by Meister Eckhart. Eckhart, the thirteenth-century mystical theologian, noted that all concepts of God must be abandoned in the deepest contemplation: “The soul must exist in a free nothingness. That we should forsake God is altogether what God intends, for as long as the soul has God, knows God, and is aware of God, [it] is far from God.” D. T. Suzuki noted, “As I interpret Eckhart, God is at once the place where He works and the work itself. The place is zero or ‘Emptiness as Being,’ whereas the work which is carried on in the zero-place is infinity or ‘Emptiness as Becoming.’”

Merton proposed that this meaning of emptiness in Zen could be compared with the negative way (via negativa) or apophatic theology of Saint John of the Cross. He suggested that “St. John of the Cross compares [the human] to a window through which the light of God is shining. If the windowpane is clean of every stain, it is completely transparent, we do not see it at all: it is ‘empty’ and nothing is seen but the light.” Zen does not concern itself with the Christian conceptualization of God and thus “cannot be properly judged as a mere doctrine,” even though “one is entitled to discover sophisticated analogies between the Zen experience of Void (Sunnyata, emptiness) and the experience of God in the ‘unknowing’ of apophatic Christian mysticism.” Merton realized that the basic notion of emptiness could integrate Zen and Christianity since “both religions [have] the [concept] of emptiness in which one has attained [an] egoless ‘primary state of being.’” Merton intuited that “the [person] who has truly found his spiritual nakedness, who has realized he is empty . . . has fully recovered the divine likeness, and is now fully his true Self because he is lost in God. He is one with God . . . and hence knows nothing of any ego in himself. All he knows is love.” Merton also realized, however, that a human life is ongoing process towards the fully divinized self, which will be completely possible in paradise. Paradoxically, Merton saw that Paradise itself was neither the Kingdom of God nor the ultimate end of contemplative life: “Paradise is not yet heaven. Paradise is not the final goal of the spiritual life. It is...a return to the true beginning.”

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84 Ibid., 136, 9.
85 Meister Eckhart, Selected Writings, trans. Oliver Davies (London: Penguin Books, 1994), 244 [Emphasis added]. Suzuki believed that when Eckhart described God’s “breaking-through” in non-dualistic terms, he drew nearest to Zen Emptiness (Sambodhi). See: ZBA, 114. However, Tracy argues that there is not an exact match between Eckhart’s “nothingness” and the “absolute nothingness” of Zen thought since “Eckhart’s dialectic . . . demands a move which Buddhism does not.” See: David Tracy, Dialogue with the Other: The Inter-Religious Dialogue (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1990), 88-90.
86 ZBA, 110.
87 Ibid., 119.
88 Ibid., 35.
89 Fader, 245.
90 ZBA, 129.
91 Ibid., 131.
process of arriving at the fully divinized self was ongoing and dialectical. For instance, after attaining experience of enlightenment in Polonnaruwa, he still tried to seek his more fully divinized self.

It is true that Merton found a final integration with other religions through the concept of emptiness. He remarked that “the state of insight which is final integration implies an openness, an ‘emptiness,’ a ‘poverty’ similar to those described in such detail not only by the Rhenish mystics, by Saint John of the Cross . . . but also by the Sufis, the early Taoist masters and [the] Zen Buddhists.”\(^92\) Indeed, the Void, emptiness, the absolute nakedness of self at the end of Zen training, can remind Christians that “the discovery of the true self in God, paradise, or divinization, is at once the dissipation of an illusion [i.e., the false-self].”\(^93\) Through dying to self in Christ, Christians can be transformed into Christ, and can achieve fullness in Christ. When they achieve graced self-emptiness, they can experience self-transcendence or enlightenment. This experience can facilitate dialogue with others and can provide both mutual enrichment and mutual challenge. Furthermore, the awakened life is revealed by its fruit of openness, love, and compassion.

**Compassion and Love: the Fruit of Enlightenment and Divinization**

The enlightenment or self-transcendence of an awakened person is generally revealed by love, compassion, and openness to those beyond one’s own culture or religion. Merton’s experience of self-transcendence not only removed the boundary of self-absorption, but also helped him to achieve a universal perspective.\(^94\) With regard to the relationship between union with God, relationship with others, and his quest to find his true self, Merton states, “this inner ‘I,’ who is always alone, is always universal: for in this inmost ‘I’ my own solitude meets the solitude of every other [person] and the solitude of God. . . . This ‘I’ is Christ Himself, living in us; and we, in Him, living in the Father.”\(^95\) Merton describes this dynamic process as a divinization (*theosis*) of the human being.\(^96\) Through divinization or self-transcendence, his integrated self began to experience the reality of his true self already living in Christ beyond interior and exterior self-boundaries. Merton felt

\(^{92}\) CWA, 206-207.

\(^{93}\) Carr, “Merton’s East-West Reflections,” 250.

\(^{94}\) Pramuk states that “the grace of discovering our ‘true self’ in Christ, the ‘hidden ground of Love,’ frees us to respond ‘in a full and living manner’ to every human being, every tree, flower, and bird, even the lowliest objects, with the new eyes of faith.” See: Pramuk, 70.

\(^{95}\) Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960), 207. Merton wrote that “the secret of my identity is hidden in the love and mercy of God. . . . If I find Him I will find myself and if I find my true self I will find Him.” See: NSC, 35-36.

\(^{96}\) Merton stated that “[Divinization] is the ultimate in [one’s] self-realization, for when it is perfected, [one] not only discovers [one’s] true self, but finds [oneself] to be mystically one with the God by whom [one] has been elevated and transformed.” See: Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1961), 48.
that he had awoken from “a dream of separateness” and that his actions were transformed towards working for the world with love and compassion.97

Those who achieve divinization or self-transcendence can open their minds to others and share their experience with others through love and compassion. Anne Carr points out that “Christian traditions of ‘divinization’ . . . [were] for Merton especially significant in the interreligious dialogue. . . . Paradise is not heaven but is its threshold or door. It is a place on earth.”98 Zen and Christianity can dialogue with each other in actions of love and compassion since the awakened in both religions have a responsibility for others.99 Merton confesses the responsibility of one who is awakened: “My solitude is not my own, for I see now how much it belongs to [others] – and that I have a responsibility for it in their regard, not just my own.”100 Merton began to live for others because of his spiritual experience and his new awareness.101 With regard to Zen’s enlightenment, Ruben L.F. Habito notes that “the Zen life is after all nothing but one lived in fidelity to each moment, wherein ‘just being there is enough.’ It is a life, lived in each moment, ‘just being there’ . . . totally open, hearing the cries of the world, and responding to the call that each moment brings.”102 Merton noted that:

Christian charity seeks to realize oneness with the other “in Christ.” Buddhist compassion seeks to heal the brokenness of division and illusion and to find wholeness not in an abstract metaphysical “one” or even a pantheist immanence but in Nirvana—the void which is Absolute Reality and Absolute Love. In either case the highest illumination of love is an explosion of the power of Love’s evidence in which all the psychological limits of an “experiencing” subject are dissolved and what remains is the transcendent clarity of love itself, realized in the ego-less subject in a mystery beyond comprehension. . . .103

99 Raab suggests that “in the case of Thomas Merton contemplative experience blossoms into action, his quest for personal transformation is mirrored by his search for social transformation and his dialogues with non-Christians reflect the total scope of this quest. For Merton, the authentic appropriation of experience can only be judged by its fruits, and its fruits are both personal and social, but always expressed.” See: Raab, 47.
100 CGB, 142 [Emphasis added].
101 Raab claims that “the fullness of human life, for Thomas Merton, has everything to do with freedom and responsibility, it is an intersubjective reality and not an individualistic achievement.” See: Raab, 40.
103 ZBA, 86-87.
In Buddhism, “Nirvana is found in the midst of the world around us, truth is not somewhere else.” Likewise, in Christian terms, the reign of God is among us (Luke 17:21) and already has begun in the here-and-now. Love and compassion for others and the world are the fruit of an awakening that goes beyond religious and cultural boundaries. For example, Merton, the pacifist worked for peace during the Vietnam War. In love and compassion, awakened Buddhists and Christians can cooperate with each other to address current social problems.

Merton found a vocation similar to that of the Bodhisattva of Zen who has attained enlightenment but postpones nirvana in order to help others to attain enlightenment with great compassion, love and sympathy. Merton stated that “I remember Dr. Suzuki saying . . . ‘the most important thing is Love!’ I must say that as a Christian I was profoundly moved. Truly Prajna [transcendental wisdom] and Karuna [compassion] are one (as the Buddhist says), or Caritas (love) is indeed the highest knowledge.”

Thus, sharing Love with others is the final destination and the fruit of self-transcendence in both traditions. Raab points out, “It is the affirmation of [the] primordial and transcendental communion that facilitates the loving of neighbors as ourselves, because, for Merton this communion is in the ‘hidden ground of Love.’” In short, Merton believed that interreligious dialogue had to be based on spiritual formation that sought true self-transcendence and the transformation of consciousness. This enlightenment is externalized as openness, love, and compassion for others.

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104 Ibid., 87. Harold Kasimow argues that “Nirvana is not . . . ‘a state of perfect indifference with regard to the world.’ Rather, it is seeing the world with new, awakened eyes. . . . After attaining nirvana, the Buddha did not leave the world, but devoted the next forty-five years to teaching humanity how to attain joy by becoming more fully present to the world.” See: Harold Kasimow, “John Paul II Interreligious Dialogue: An Overview,” in John Paul II and Interreligious Dialogue, eds. Byron L. Sherwin & Harold Kasimow (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 11.

105 Merton’s intention for a better world through dialogue with Buddhist monastics has begun to blossom. For instance, Buddhist and Christian religious leaders from the United States gathered in Rome to consider how they might work together to address pressing social problems in four major metropolitan areas of the United States. On June 24, 2015, Pope Francis spoke to the gathering: “[This] is a visit of fraternity, of dialogue, and of friendship. And this is good. This is healthy. And in these moments, which are wounded by war and hatred, these small gestures are seeds of peace and fraternity.” The meeting was a response to Pope Francis’ invitation to a “dialogue of fraternity” as a basis for addressing social ills together. See: Pope Francis, “Pope Francis Meets with Buddhist Leaders: ‘These Small Gestures are Seeds of Peace.’” (24 June 2015). http://www.romereports.com/2015/06/24/pope-francis-meets-with-buddhist-leaders-oethese-small-gestures-are-seeds-of-peace. Accessed Aug. 6, 2015.


107 ZBA, 62.


109 AJ, 316.
Beyond Merton’s Understanding of Zen
*The Limits of Merton’s Buddhism and the Integrated Encounter*

Recently, some scholars have suggested that Merton’s understanding of Buddhism was not only imperfect and incomplete but also was limited. For instance, Keenan argues:

>[W]e cannot look to Merton for any adequate understanding of Buddhism. Because of the limitation of sources available to him in his time, his understanding of Zen Buddhism . . . was just too pure and too naïve, too simplistic. . . . Moreover, Zen is but one school of Buddhism among many. . . .

Dadosky claims that “Merton’s knowledge of Buddhism is compromised because his reliance on Suzuki seems to be more of a residual effect of a backlash against the scholarship of Suzuki.” But, he also comments that “Keenan’s claim that we cannot rely on Merton for knowledge of Buddhism is not really fair. Any serious student of Buddhism, including Merton himself, recognizes that our knowledge develops and continues to develop. . . .” Fader claims that “Merton’s encounter with Suzuki and with the Japanese scholar’s interpretation of Zen is an example of what religious dialogue can be at best, and a testimony to Merton’s courageous dedication to truth.” Furthermore, Dadosky suggests that Merton’s life can also provide an example of one who engaged in interreligious dialogue as a “method of mutual self-mediation” with friendship. In short, Merton expanded the horizon for interreligious dialogue through mutual learning and sharing of religious experience between Zen and Christianity, even though his vision of Zen was limited by his environment.

Keenan’s other argument regarding interreligious dialogue vis-à-vis Merton’s vision is to approach it through an intellectual comparison and a common humanity. He claims that “after forty years of conversation, people tire of dialogue, because it so often rehearses the same old ground about our common humanity, offering no new insight and no new

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10 Keenan, 123, 126-127.
11 Dadosky, 71. Dadosky points out that “many scholars now criticize Suzuki because they disagree with his interpretation of Zen and because his success as a popularizer has led to misconceptions by Western scholars. These critics not only believe Suzuki misrepresents Zen, but they believe he ignores the various complex lineages of various schools and the doctrinal aspects as well.” See ibid., 54.
12 Ibid., 72.
13 Fader, 252.
14 Dadosky, 70-71.
15 Fader argues that “although Thomas Merton may have misinterpreted certain points and drawn some conclusions with respect to the relationship between Zen and Christianity which are problematic from the Zen perspective, his understanding and restatement of Zen is generally accurate and incisive.” See: Fader, 251.
approach. . . . All well and good, but that does grow tedious.”

It is true that over the last forty years, intellectual dialogue has tended to be overemphasized and overestimated by Christian dialoguers. However, few Buddhists were interested in Christian intellectual discussions, which challenged Buddhist faith and practice. Knowledge and truth-claims not gained by experience are not a valid base for spiritual growth in Buddhism. If it is to bear fruit, Buddhist-Christian dialogue has to shift from theory to praxis. Praxis does not exclude theory, but focuses on doing first (social engagement) with knowing (intellectual dialogue) through awakening (dialogue on spirituality).

This new direction may be described as an integrated encounter, which effectively focuses on sharing various experiences and wisdom learned in spiritual practice as well as in social engagement. Winston L. King, a scholar of religious studies focused on Buddhism, argues that “there should always, or as often as possible, be some component of experiential encounter—shared worship, experience, endeavor, meditation—in Buddhist-Christian dialogue. It cannot substitute for theological effort, but it must be a continual companion and ingredient of it.” Through the integrated encounter, Buddhists and Christians can be in a communion of religious experience regarding their mutual spiritual transformation, and cooperate with each other in a relationship of fraternity for the purpose of transforming human consciousness, since they agree that “the root problem of the world’s suffering is not social structures, but human consciousness.”

Archbishop Michael L. Fitzgerald claims that “the relationship of fraternity is based on the common origin of human beings, but also on the way God’s Spirit is at work in human hearts.” Raab suggests that “a horizon [of anthropology] lends itself more readily to a discussion of the human journey, and its fulfillment, as a foundation for interreligious dialogue . . . [including] the ‘religious’ or ‘spiritual’ as a legitimate category of human experience, understanding, and reflection.” This dialogue with others through sharing common

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116 Keenan, 129.


121 Raab, 43.
horizons may contain the possibility of a “horizon of transcendence.” Carr claims that “Merton’s conviction was that despite the significant differences among the religions, certain commonalities could be discovered. In the spiritual family . . . something beyond verbal differentiation and communication was possible.”

In short, despite the limits of Merton’s knowledge of Zen and various challenges for interreligious dialogue, Merton’s attitude towards non-Christians can provide a good model for the dialogue of contemporary Christians with other religions and for an enhanced spiritual life. Through Merton’s openness to those who were not Christian, Christians can see that “their sacred scriptures, prayers and rituals, moral practices, ascetical and monastic traditions can be a source of inspiration and spiritual enrichment” for them, because of “the saving presence of the Logos and the Holy Spirit” in them.

Monastic Interreligious Dialogue: Continuous Development of Merton’s Way

Buddhist-Christian dialogue, which in the past focused on intellectual exchange, now attempts to seek a new form of encounter to foster spiritual maturity and transformation of human consciousness. Common to both religions was monasticism which focuses on spiritual practice beyond intellectual knowledge. The monasticism of both religions highlights the radical commitment to their religious ideals with common spiritual practices, such as detachment, solitude, silence, worship, meditation, celibacy, and communal life, to cultivate the experience of enlightenment. Thus, Christian monastics and spiritual practitioners can very easily become dialogic partners with Buddhists in striving for “intermonastic communion.” Thomas Merton believed that dialogue with Buddhists first has to be based on communion before communication, beyond the power of doctrine. Buddhist and Christian monastics can experientially explore the realities of each religion by means of sharing monastic discipline in intermonastic communion. Leopold Ratnasekera notes, “Today, as we advocate inter-religious dialogue, an area that can help significantly in such conversations and common undertakings is the inter-monastic dialogue between the Buddhist Sangha and...Christian [monastery]...” On November 21, 2014, Pope Francis encouraged dialogue through monasticism and its development in his “Letter to All Consecrated People”:

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122 Ibid., 150-151.
125 AJ, 316.
126 Ibid., 314-317.
Nor can we forget that the phenomenon of monasticism and of other expressions of religious fraternity is present in all the great religions. There are instances, some long-standing, of inter-monastic dialogue involving the Catholic Church and certain of the great religious traditions. I trust that the Year of Consecrated Life will be an opportunity to review the progress made, to make consecrated persons aware of this dialogue, and to consider what further steps can be taken towards greater mutual understanding and greater cooperation in the many common areas of service to human life.128

In both religions, monasticism is a spiritual tradition that has treasured various spiritual values and practical ways to cultivate the experience of enlightenment. Pope Francis, who was aware of the value of monasticism for future interreligious dialogue, including Buddhist-Christian encounters, recommends a review of the progress of monastic interreligious dialogue to seek further steps, for all human life, through the way of encounter. All monastic traditions might be reformed through dialogue.

Monastic interreligious dialogue may provide one opportunity for deepening the relationship between non-Christianity and Christianity that can bear fruit. Agnes Wilkins, in her article, “Thomas Merton’s Encounter with Islam,” suggests that “Thomas Merton discovered that his contemplative life could be a ‘bridge’ to the heart of other religions. His particular genius was with Zen, but we now have ample evidence that his monastic life also aided the dialogue with Islam.”129 Many religions have treasured monasticism in order to foster their religious beliefs. Merton studied non-Christian monastic practices as well as their particularities, and tried to learn from the monasticism of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism, as well as the spiritual practices of Islam in order to “become a better and more enlightened monk.”130 In 1968, Thomas Merton, who certainly merits being called one of the pioneers of monastic interreligious dialogue,131 suggested that dialogue between East and West be from the perspective of monastic experience,132 a suggestion that was, in part, responded to by the creation of European and North American sub-commissions for

130 AJ, 313.
132 Through Asian experience, Merton’s belief, namely, the importance of a monastic dialogue was reinforced. He stated, “Catholic monasticism . . . is in a better position for dialogue with Asia at the moment because of the climate of openness following Vatican II. Catholic monasticism . . . could also apply very well to Hindu and Buddhist philosophies, disciplines, [and] experiences.” See ibid., 311.
monastic interreligious dialogue, about which more will be said presently. Moreover, as Alois Pieris points out, “it was really not in Asia that Merton discovered the East; there he only recognized and named what he had already sought and found in his own monastic cell. . . . The West can recover its Eastern sense by dialoguing with its own monks.”

Merton’s expectation of monastic interreligious dialogue has been actualized through various forms for today’s world. Following the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and Merton’s death (1968), few monks and nuns were engaged in Buddhist-Catholic dialogue. This is probably due to the fact, according to Professor Ovey N. Mohammed, that “the ‘Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religion’ did not specify suitable areas for dialogue between Catholics and Buddhists.”

Five years after Merton’s death, however, there was a first attempt at interreligious dialogue through monastic and religious experience. In 1974, the Benedictine Confederation and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue realized that “intermonastic dialogue needed to be more systematically organized.”

Finally, in 1978, the “North American Board for East West Dialogue” (NABEWD), whose name was subsequently changed to “Monastic Interreligious Dialogue” (MID) and, in Europe “Dialogue Interreligieux Monastique/Monastic Interreligious Dialogue” (DIMMID) were established as sub-commissions of A.I.M. in order to facilitate interreligious and intermonastic dialogue between monastics and contemplative practitioners of other religious traditions. In 1994, DIMMID became an independent secretariat of the Benedictine confederation that eventually included four commissions (Europe, North America, India/Sri Lanka, and Australia). The North American commission organized the first Gethsemani encounter in July, 1996, in response to a suggestion the Dalai Lama made at the 1993 Parliament of the World’s Religions that dialogue be continued in a monastic setting, specifically Merton’s abbey in Kentucky. In 2015, the fourth gathering was held at the same place under the theme of “Spiritual Maturation” with sharing of meditative practices from both Buddhist and Christian monasticism.

The DIMMID commissions have continued dialogue through various spiritual exchanges, especially at the level of religious experience and practice. For example, William Skudlarek notes that the first “Gethsemani Encounter” involved “over 100 participants.

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136 Mitchell & Wiseman, xvii.
137 Ibid., xii.
from Benedictine, Cistercian and Camaldolese monasteries as well as from Tibetan, Zen and Theravada Buddhist centers in Asia.”

In this meeting they shared methods of meditation and ways of responding to suffering and anger. Skudlarek goes on to note that “the Gethsemani Encounter was primarily a monastic rather than a theological interreligious dialogue . . . [The] reason for meeting was not to discuss doctrine but to describe their own praxis and to learn about other expressions of the monastic life.” This dialogue on spiritual practices may accompany the “conceptual dialogue” and ‘social dialogue’ that Merton also engaged in. Using monasticism as a bridge to other religions, monks of various religions can engage in mutual sharing and learn collectively from each other at a spiritual level to facilitate “mutual creative transformation.”

Monastic interreligious dialogue can contribute not only to fostering spirituality within individuals but can also spiritually transform communal groups both inside and outside the formal Church. According to Merton, “this monastic ‘work’ or ‘discipline’ is not merely an individual affair. It is at once personal and communal.” In short, monastic interreligious dialogue can contribute not only to fostering spirituality within individuals, but can also spiritually transform communal groups both inside and outside the formal Buddhist Sangha and Christian monastery.

Conclusion
Thomas Merton realized that the “Inner-self” was common to all. The inner-self contains the seed of self-transcendence, and many religions aim at self-transcendence through

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139 Ibid., 83. Interestingly, at the end of the meeting, Korean Buddhist, Jinwol Sunim confesses that “I used to tell my Buddhist congregation to ignore other religions, but I feel very comfortable here, very close. So, I think if we climb up the mountain, maybe at the top – at the peak – we can see each other and get together.” See: Tim Vivian, “The Gethsemani Encounter: A Dialogue on the Spiritual Life by Buddhist and Christian Monastics,” *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (1999): 133.


141 Ibid., 543.


The Pope stated that “I am happy that a Commission for Interreligious Monastic Dialogue is carrying out [the] work in close contact with the Secretariat for Non-Christians. . . . Through monastic hospitality, monks] offer a setting wherein a meeting of mind and heart can take place, a meeting characterized by a shared sense of brotherhood in the on human family that opens the way of ever deeper spiritual dialogue.” See: Catholic Church, *Interreligious Dialogue: The Official Teaching of the Catholic Church (1963-1995)*, ed. Francesco Gioia (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1997), 377 (no. 592).

143 AJ, 310.
similar kinds of spiritual practice. Through integration of the inner-self, Merton was not only able to experience his own self-transcendence but could also dialogue with other religions, particularly Asian religions. Merton believed that authentic social work and interreligious dialogue had to be based on one’s growth at the spiritual level. Merton took the inner-self not only as the connecting point between God or the Absolute and the human person but as an intersecting point between the East and the West. He realized that integration of one’s inner-self can bring about a new identity and a spiritual rebirth in Christ in whom there is no Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free (Gal. 3:28). In 1968, Merton clearly stated in his last Bangkok address, “Marxism and Monastic Perspective,” that “there is no longer Asian or European for the Christian.... [All] dialectical approaches go beyond the thesis and the antithesis . . . black and white, [and] East and West. We accept the division, we work with the division and we go beyond the division.” The address shows us that Merton desired to transcend all structures and all division, and to dialogue with others beyond culture and religion. He was neither an unfaithful Catholic monk nor did he become a Buddhist monk before his death, but he was a monk awake to the truth of all monasticism, since through the Holy Spirit, he experienced the same Sacred in other religions.

Eastern religious traditions, particularly Zen, influenced the transcendence of Merton’s inner-self, and “certainly had an impact on his views of monastic life and contemplation.” He realized that both losing oneself in Christ and in the no-self of the Void of Zen are connected with self-transcendence. Beyond Buddhist “existential and ontological” self-emptiness and Christian “theological and personal” self-emptiness, “there is and can be no fulfillment and no salvation.” Buddhists and Christians can encounter each other from a deep spiritual level through self-transcendence. They can share their religious experience since those who experience self-transcendence are no longer in isolation but are able to accept others with openness, freedom, and love, and to dialogue with others at a mature level. Merton’s dialogue with non-Christian religious and his work for social justice were the fruit of his own commitment to self-transcendence. Merton believed his action to be one of “openness to gift; gift from God and gift from others” and “he discovered such gifts by fidelity to his own interior core.” Through Merton’s

144 Raab points out that “self-transcendence . . . is a fundamental issue in Merton’s dialogue with Suzuki, but more importantly this ‘self-transcendence’ is the central concern of his life.” See: Raab, 11.
145 CWA, 201-212.
146 AJ, 340-341.
147 Merton noted, “If I affirm myself as a Catholic merely by denying all that is Muslim, Jewish, Protestant, Hindu, Buddhist, etc., in the end I will find that there is not much left for me to affirm as a Catholic: and certainly no breath of the Spirit with which to affirm it.” See: CGB, 133; cf., James M. Hanson, “Was Jesus a Buddhist?” Buddhist-Studies 25 (2005): 85.
149 ZBA, 76, 87.
150 AJ, 307; Raab, 203.
openness, he realized that “[Zen and Christianity] can well complement each other, and for this reason Zen is perfectly compatible with Christian belief and indeed with Christian mysticism.”  Merton’s openness also provides “a challenge to those Christians who would believe that their commitment to Christ precludes a genuine openness to non-Christians, or that it precludes the Christian from really learning from the other.”

Following monastic “ways” of various religions may help to achieve the self-transcendence or self-transformation of one’s self as it is implicit in Merton’s own way. Self-transcendence as a universal ground and goal of the human spiritual journey is a starting point for monastic interreligious dialogue. Merton saw such potential. Although scholars have admitted the limitation of Merton’s knowledge of Buddhism, Merton’s various attempts at understanding and dialogue with non-Christians still continues to motivate interreligious dialogue. For example, the approach espoused by Raab i.e. self-transcendence; by Dadosky i.e. through friendship (as in Merton and Suzuki); by Skudlarek i.e. through monastic interreligious dialogue. These approaches are all interrelated because, as Merton advocated, they call one beyond the ego-self.

John Paul II stressed finding the true self in his address to the leaders of the various religions in Korea. He said, “Religions today have a more vital role than ever to play in a society in rapid evolution such as Korea. In a sense, just as the individual must find his true self by transcending himself and strive to achieve harmony with the universe and with others, so too must a society, a culture, the community of human beings seek to foster the spiritual values that are its soul.” Merton saw, “spiritual disaster threatening the modern world . . . the loss of the self, the loss of the human, the loss of the natural, the loss of wisdom.” Yet he saw that the transformation of consciousness, which many religious traditions try to facilitate, could offer a remedy for such universal societal ills. Dialogue through praxis has to be based on and sustained by “profound nirvanic realization,” for without which mystical grounding, the dialogue of spiritual praxis is reduced to mere activism. Monastic interreligious dialogue can provide monastics with a model for overcoming basic human difficulties (e.g., suffering and anger), a model for self-transcendence, a model for developing true friendship, and a model for solving social

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151 ZBA, 47.
152 Raab, 204.
153 Hardy claims that “if the radical quest of harmony within Being is universal, the monastic quest is a particular, specific way to meet that challenge [a radical transformation in Being . . . Whichever the ‘way,’ monastic life . . . [is] the radical quest of a single, simple, and transcendent goal.” See: Hardy, 32-33.
problems at a deep spiritual level beyond religious and cultural boundaries. These models owe much to the contributions of Thomas Merton.
APPENDIX

[The Periods of Merton’s Discovery of Buddhism in the Process of His Spiritual Journey]

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<td>Enlightenment: Everything is Emptiness and Compassion</td>
<td>Transcendence of all structures in the Holy Spirit</td>
<td>Interreligious Dialogue through Monasticism</td>
<td>Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (The Gethsemani Encounter 1991)</td>
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- Polonnaruwa Epiphany (1968: Before the Statue of Buddha)
- Engagement in Social Justice
- Encounter with Zen & Oriental Traditions
- Self-Transcendence and the True Self

- Louisville Epiphany (1958: Among the People)
- Conversion & Beginning a Monastic Life

- Havana Epiphany (1940: in the Church)
- Struggling with his Contemplative Life

- An Athlete
- The Belly of a Big Fish (Jonas)

- Fall in Love with M. (1960)
  - Struggling with Monastic Community and Censorship

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