

**OPENNESS AND FIDELITY:
THOMAS MERTON'S DIALOGUE WITH D. T. SUZUKI,
AND SELF-TRANSCENDENCE**

by
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by Joseph Quinn Raab

Abstract:

This dissertation demonstrates that a Christian can remain faithful to his or her doctrinal heritage, even to a normative christology/soteriology, and yet genuinely open to and able to learn from non-Christians about the human quest for truth. This integration of openness and fidelity involves no self-contradiction and no compromise of doctrinal orthodoxy because both openness to the other and fidelity to the Apostolic Kerygma are fruits of one's fidelity to one's self at best. The integration of openness and fidelity is thus explained as the fruit of authentic subjectivity. In this regard, this work provides a resource for the present discussions concerning interreligious dialogue and theological models of world religions that assists Christians in resolving an apparent dialectical tension that obtains between Christian orthodoxy and openness to the wisdom of non-Christian religions.

Thomas Merton is the central figure in my dissertation because his dialogical practice illustrates very well this combination of openness and fidelity. Merton's dialogue with D. T. Suzuki exemplifies his achievement of appropriating Zen insight at no cost to his Catholic faith commitments. A theoretical understanding of self-transcendence grounds my interpretation and explanation of Merton's achievement in his dialogue with Suzuki, and Merton's life and dialogue serve to illustrate just what self-transcendence means. I rely on Bernard Lonergan's theory of intentional consciousness as a way to make explicit Merton's self-transcending journey and as a way to interpret and explain what (methodically) is happening in his dialogue with Suzuki.

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Abbreviations of Works by Thomas Merton:
(see Selected Bibliography for full references)

AJ	<i>The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton</i>
AT	<i>The Ascent to Truth</i>
CGB	<i>Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander</i>
CP	<i>The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton</i>
CWA	<i>Contemplation in a World of Action</i>
DQ	<i>Disputed Questions</i>
HGL	<i>The Hidden Ground of Love</i>
LE	<i>The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton</i>
LL	<i>Love and Living</i>
MJ	<i>The Monastic Journey</i>
MZM	<i>Mystics and Zen Masters</i>
NSC	<i>New Seeds of Contemplation</i>
NM	<i>The New Man</i>
NMI	<i>No Man is an Island</i>
RJ	<i>The Road to Joy</i>
RM	<i>Run to the Mountain</i>
RU	<i>Raids on the Unspeakable</i>
SSM	<i>The Seven Storey Mountain</i>
SJ	<i>The Sign of Jonas</i>
TMR	<i>The Thomas Merton Reader</i>
TM:SM	<i>Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master</i>
WD	<i>Wisdom of the Desert</i>
ZBA	<i>Zen and the Birds of Appetite</i>
ZR	<i>The Zen Revival</i>

Chapter One

Self-Transcendence and Dialogue

1. Introduction:

Thomas Merton was certainly speaking of his own achievement when he penned the following words in October of 1968, just two months before his death:

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 (*AJ*, 313).

Indeed, by the time Merton had written these words he had already learned a great deal from Zen Buddhists, Hindus, and Sufis about the human quest for liberation from suffering and illusion, and concerning human knowledge and divine wisdom regarding the fulfillment of that quest. But what does it mean for a Christian to be "perfectly faithful" and yet "learn in depth" from non-Christian peoples and traditions? How does one do that? The following dissertation provides a critical examination of Merton's dialogue with the Zen scholar Dr. D. T. Suzuki, that elucidates the "religious maturity" that is manifested in Merton's "perfect fidelity" to his faith commitments and his capacity to learn from Suzuki in and through their dialogue.

Even though thirty years have elapsed since the dialogue between Thomas Merton and D. T. Suzuki took place, Merton's performance in that dialogue, and his subsequent understanding of the relationship

between his Catholicism and his Zen still stands as a paradigm and a prophesy for Catholics and other Christians in dialogue. It is important for Christians today to be able to recover and understand Merton's achievement of authentically uniting fidelity and openness in dialogue; an integration without compromise or contradiction.

2. Interreligious Dialogue in the Contemporary Context, and an Overview of the Present Work:

David Tracy suggested, almost a decade ago, that "there is no more difficult or pressing question on the present theological horizon than that of inter-religious dialogue."¹ This theological question intends a proper understanding of the relationship among world religions, of the Christian gospel in the face of the historical continuation of religious diversity. Paul Knitter has given us a thoroughly impressive survey of past and contemporary positions held by Christians concerning the meaning of religious pluralism and the value of non-Christian traditions.² That is to say, he has given us a survey of Christian "answers" to that most pressing question. Jacques Dupuis has reminded us that a Christian's *theological* response to the question of inter-religious dialogue, as opposed to a philosophical or phenomenological response, will be determinately informed by one's understanding and affirmation of the apostolic

¹David Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other* (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1992), p. 27.

²Paul Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985).

kerygma testifying that Jesus of Nazareth died and was raised and that God has made him Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36).³

The ongoing encounters between Christians and people of different religions continue to raise questions about the viability of universal truth claims, and as the hermeneutic suspicion of the late modern era grows into the deconstruction of positions that have led dominant traditions to marginalize particular cultures, women, and the poor, it becomes increasingly difficult for Catholic Christians to assert the magisterial position regarding the uniqueness of Jesus and the normativity of his salvific act for all peoples, if this assertion is judged as just another form of cultural or religious imperialism masquerading as "good news."

In light of all of this, seemingly intelligent and responsible Catholic theologians are suggesting that the way to sufficiently address the question of religious pluralism is for Christians to move beyond an affirmation of the normativity of Jesus Christ's incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection for human liberation and salvation, believing that making that affirmation precludes the possibility to be genuinely open to what others say about the human journey and its ultimate fulfillment.⁴

Paul Knitter, following John Hick's Kantian model of religious language and knowledge, is calling for a "Copernican shift" in our understanding of salvation, one that focuses on Ultimate Reality as the center of salvation rather than on Jesus of Nazareth whom Christians call

³Jacques Dupuis, S. J., *Jesus Christ at the Encounter of World Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), p. 1. Translated from the French *Jésus-Christ à la rencontre des religions* (Paris: Desclée, 1989), by Robert R. Barr.

⁴Paul Knitter clearly suggests that a "theocentric" model of world religions achieves a higher viewpoint than the traditional Catholic or "Christocentric" model, and that the former, a position that renounces the "normativity" of Jesus Christ as the universal savior, facilitates "more authentic dialogue". See *No Other Name?* pp. 145-203.

the Christ. Raimundo Panikkar continues to affirm a Christ-centered soteriology, but he emphasizes the distinction between the Jesus of history and the transhistorical Christ perhaps to the point of separation, so that "Buddha" or "Mohammed" can be other saviors or Christic incarnations as well.⁵ Meanwhile, Jacques Dupuis and J. A. DiNoia⁶ continue to thoughtfully and eloquently hold the line on a Christocentric soteriology in continuity with the *Nostra Aetate* declaration of the Second Vatican Council. Amidst all of the genuine good will and thoughtful reflection that stands behind each of these positions one still wonders who is right? Who holds the position that is most intelligent, reasonable and responsible for a Christian to affirm?

The theological question of religious diversity is really an enormous one, especially when we consider all the prior questions and answers that the sincere raising of such a question presupposes. My present work is guided by the belief that the theological answer to the question of religious pluralism can only emerge if methodically prior questions are answered correctly; questions that Jacques Dupuis has called the philosophical and phenomenological. In this work I do not attempt to offer a fully comprehensive answer to this daunting and difficult question, rather I set out to answer smaller, more specific questions, and I believe those answers may provide assistance to the task of answering the larger more difficult one.

⁵See Raimundo Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*. Revised edition. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991).

⁶See J. A. DiNoia, "Varieties of Religious Aims: Beyond Exclusivism, Inclusivism and Pluralism." *Theology and Dialogue*, edited by Bruce Marshall (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

Herein I ask specific questions relevant to the dialogical practice of Thomas Merton, a person who, in my judgment, was able to keep Jesus Christ at the center of his faith⁷ while growing in openness to and understanding of non-Christian religions. It is because I believe that Merton's life and practice both challenge and oppose the position that holds that fidelity to a traditional Christology impedes openness in dialogue that I find it worthwhile to investigate Merton's legacy.

In the present work I examine Merton's engagement with Zen Buddhism, specifically his dialogue with D. T. Suzuki. The interpretation of the dialogue that I offer has the potential to provide a compass for those interested in navigating through the horns of an apparent dilemma. That dilemma confronts Christians with an ultimatum: abandon a "normative Christology" or retain such an affirmation at the expense of openness and genuine dialogue. I believe that Merton's practice of interreligious dialogue and his reflections on the human journey offer a viable way of preserving and affirming both the truth and value of traditional christological claims and an existential humility and genuine openness oriented towards learning from other traditions through dialogue about the human journey of self-transcendence.

In the following work I attempt to answer some specific questions regarding the life and legacy of Thomas Merton in such a way as to assist in answering that most pressing and difficult question of interreligious dialogue. The specific questions are: (1) how did Thomas Merton integrate knowledge and practice of Zen-Buddhism with his own Catholic

⁷George Kilcourse's *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993) is an excellent study of Merton's Christology and Christocentric spirituality.

heritage?, and (2) how did Merton understand this integration? Answering these two questions will help me to suggest what his accomplishment and subsequent understanding of it has to offer other Christians interested in interreligious dialogue, its foundations, its various purposes.

But these questions emerge against the background of Merton's life and continual self-transcending quest for truth, and answers to these questions can only be understood within that broader context. Making that broader context explicit is the task of Chapter Two entitled "Merton's Journey of Self-Transcendence and Self-Transformation."

These questions also presuppose Merton's encounter with Zen, and there are many ways of presenting this encounter, so my third Chapter, entitled "In Dialogue with Suzuki: the Specific Context" presents a fairly complete picture of Merton's dialogue with the Zen scholar Dr. D. T. Suzuki on the matter of self-transcendence through self-transformation as the specific context of the basic questions I attempt to address in this dissertation.

I address these questions in the fourth chapter entitled "Dialogue, Consciousness, and Common Horizons," and this really is where any contribution that the present work makes ought to be the clearest.

Furthermore, the basic questions are related to many others like: (1) did Merton really profit from his encounter with Zen, did it facilitate his own self-transformation and self-transcendence, and if so, how so? and (2) what purpose or value beyond his own personal enrichment did Merton affirm with regard to interreligious dialogue? These questions and Merton's answers, as well as my interpretations of and judgments

regarding those answers, make their way into my final chapter entitled "Conclusions on Consciousness, Dialogue, and Transformation."

Each chapter, then, has its own objective that if successfully attained, adds to the success of the entire project. The basic objective of Chapter Two is to present Merton's life as a self-transcending journey and to highlight some specific points of transformation within that journey. In this chapter I plan to accentuate the character of Merton's spiritual development as dialogical.⁸ But this chapter ends with a focus on a particular transformative experience that occurred very near the end of Merton's life in Polonnaruwa, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). Merton's understanding and appropriation of Zen Buddhism is a clear catalyst for this religious experience and affirming this raises the further questions that Chapters Three and Four attempt to address. However, readers familiar with the complete story of Merton's life may find this second chapter rather elementary and may wish to move ahead, but for others who are not so familiar, this chapter is important because it provides the context within which any study of Merton's dialogue with Zen, and particularly with Suzuki, must be regarded, and that is the context of his continual self-transcending quest for wisdom and for God.

The goal of the third chapter is simply to provide some specific data of Merton's encounter with Zen. In an earlier version of the present project I had hoped to write about Merton's engagement in interreligious dialogue generally, and how that engagement facilitated his own self-

⁸Daniel Helminiak notes that "there is no generally accepted understanding of the term spiritual development." Helminiak's own contribution to clarity is notable and his definition, i.e. "spiritual development is human development considered from a philosophic viewpoint concerned with normative meanings and values" is in line with the perspective of this project. See Daniel Helminiak, *Spiritual Development: An Interdisciplinary Study* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1987), p. 29.

transcendence, but that task became overwhelming as I began to discover the expanse of Merton's interests in non-Christian religions. As a mature monk he had a more than passing familiarity with religions as seemingly alien to his own as African Bantu religion and the Taoism of Chuang Tsu. *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns* contains letters Merton had written to people of nearly every major religious tradition.⁹ I decided to limit my project to an area more easily managed.

Merton's dialogue with Zen Buddhism became an obvious choice to focus on given Merton's own level of interest in that tradition and the influence of that tradition helping to facilitate his religious experience in Polonnaruwa. But Merton's encounter with Zen Buddhism is also so expansive that I decided to focus in on one particular dialogue and the third chapter is a result of such limiting. Chapter Three offers a concise but fairly complete account of the dialogue between Thomas Merton and D. T. Suzuki as it transpired through correspondence, collaborative publication, and face to face, from 1959 until Suzuki's death in 1966.

It is in Chapter Four, then, that I finally get to meeting the basic objectives of the entire project. By using the data of Chapter Three, against the background of Chapter Two, I then address the specific questions of how Merton was able to integrate openness to the other, that is Suzuki and Zen Buddhism in this instance, and genuinely learn from the other,

⁹For an idea of the breadth and depth of Merton's interreligious dialogues see *HGL* on the following: for Muslim and Sufi correspondents see letters to Reza Arasteh, pp. 40-43; and Abdul Aziz, pp. 43-67. For Jewish correspondents see letters to Abraham J. Heschel, pp. 430-436. For Hindu correspondents see letters to Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (and Dona Luisa Coomaraswamy) pp. 125-133. For Buddhist dialogue see letters to D. T. Suzuki, pp. 560-571. And for Taoist dialogue see letters to Dr. John C. H. Wu (a Catholic with Taoist roots), pp. 611-635.

while simultaneously remaining faithful to his own Christian commitments. The basic argument that I offer is that Merton was able to learn from Suzuki, appropriate the wisdom of Zen, because he correctly affirmed that his Christian faith, his affirmations of the validity and value of the apostolic kerygma as it lives in the historical community of the faithful, was not at all in contradiction to the truth and value of Zen Buddhism. He begins to recognize this and affirm this only when he begins to really listen to the other and to discover that he can say "yes" to Suzuki and still go further with his own affirmations. In the fourth chapter I demonstrate how Merton does this, and why I think he is right when he affirms this. But the conclusions I reach in Chapter Four raise further, more expansive questions and have potential implications for answers to those questions.

The objective of Chapter Five is to tentatively address some further specific questions like, what exactly did Merton gain from his encounter with Zen, and how did Merton understand the value of interreligious dialogue? And finally, what might be some of the implications of Merton's legacy for interreligious dialogue in general?

But *how* I answer all of these questions is the focus of the present chapter. For what is first in anticipation is last in execution and in order to execute I need to make my method explicit. Furthermore, these questions themselves employ potentially ambiguous terms such as "self-transcendence," "self-transformation" and "interreligious dialogue" which are central to the entire project. Thus, here in Chapter One, among other less important tasks, I introduce and explicate the tools I employ throughout the dissertation that help me to attain my basic objectives, and I define the terms that are central to this project, not only as I understand

them, but also in terms of how I judge Merton's understanding of them to be at least implicitly in accord with the way I understand and employ them herein.

It is, perhaps, an ambitious task to try to answer the questions that I have laid out in a way that is any clearer or more helpful than the answers Merton himself provides. And it is perhaps presumptuous to answer questions which have been asked and addressed by other scholars more familiar with the life and work of Thomas Merton and more knowledgeable with regard to Zen Buddhism than myself. For many Merton scholars have written on his journey of self-transcendence and search for his true self, or on his understanding of such,¹⁰ on his dialogues with Eastern traditions,¹¹ and some have even interpreted his life or writings from the viewpoint of an explicit transcendental anthropology.¹² But in this work I anticipate a kind of synthesis of these three themes resulting in an articulation of Merton's universalist understanding of the experiential fulfillment of the human journey as a foundation for his dialogue with Suzuki and for interreligious dialogue in general.

¹⁰For example, James Finley, *Merton's Palace of Nowhere: A search for God through Awareness of the True Self* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1978). Anne E. Carr, *A Search for Wisdom and Spirit: Thomas Merton's Theology of the Self* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

¹¹For example, Alexander Lipski, *Thomas Merton and Asia: His Quest for Utopia* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1983). Chalmers MacCormick, "The Zen Catholicism of Thomas Merton." *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* IX (1972), pp. 802-17. Patrick Hart, "Thomas Merton's East-West Dialogue." *Monastic Exchange* 11 (1970), p. 776.

¹²For example, Elena Malits, "Journey into the Unknown: Thomas Merton's Continuing Conversion." (Fordham University: Ph. D. Thesis, 1978). Walter Conn, Merton's 'True Self': Moral Autonomy and Religious Conversion." *Journal of Religion* 65 (1985), pp. 513-29. George Kilcourse's excellent study of Merton's Christology, and Christ-centered spirituality, integrates a transcendental anthropology as well. See his *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ* .

I am assisted in this task by a mind far superior to my own and whose insight I can appropriate and bring to bear upon my questions and upon the data Merton offers them. Throughout this dissertation, I explicate the meanings of terms and their relations by correlating those terms with human consciousness as intentional and as manifest in its various successive operations. I am, then, following the lead of Bernard Lonergan, whose study of human consciousness, and subsequent writings on method, have generated a theory of consciousness that provides an invaluable hermeneutical resource. This resource is available to anyone who would differentiate and correctly objectify the operations of his or her own consciousness and explicitly advert to that dynamic and consistently unfolding process as a tool for understanding and evaluating the positions of others. This process mediates in theoretical language the very self-transcendence which is a fundamental issue in Merton's dialogue with Suzuki, but more importantly this "self-transcendence" is the central concern of his life. Using this tool, which Lonergan labels "intentionality analysis," I can offer answers to my initial questions that I hope adhere to the implicit demands of intentional consciousness itself.

In the remainder of this introductory chapter I lay out the origins of this dissertation under the heading "Discovering Thomas Merton: a Personal Note." Here I give a brief account of my own experiences and questions that have led me to the present project. Secondly, I present an account of consciousness as intentional, drawing on the work of Bernard Lonergan, as a grounding for the meanings of the terms central to this work in the section entitled "The Dynamism of the Human Spirit and Self-Transcendence." Thirdly, in the section entitled "Differentiating Realms of Discourse" I explicate the meaning of the term "horizon" as I

use it in this work and identify the particular horizons within which this work is mostly situated. This section also explicates the foundation and role of interreligious dialogue in light of Lonergan's transcendental anthropology. Fourthly, in the section entitled "Self-Transcendence and Interreligious Dialogue," I address the phenomenon of interreligious dialogue and clarify what I understand by the term herein and the importance of it in Merton's own transformative and self-transcending journey. Finally, I offer "A Note on Limitations" of the project, or on what this dissertation is not, in order to make the scope of the project as clear and manageable as possible.

3. Discovering Thomas Merton, a Personal Note:

My choice to write on the life and work of Thomas Merton is not at all random; rather the project has grown out of me, out of a combination of interests that coalesce in both Thomas Merton and myself. A note on my discovering Thomas Merton as the central figure of my dissertation goes a long way toward communicating both the genesis and the anticipated implications of this project.

Robert Lax, speaking of his friend Thomas Merton, said:

When I was traveling, I'd met theological students and people like that who'd just encountered his books for the first time, and they'd always say, "He was talking as though he was talking from inside of me." He was so much inside himself that he was inside of everyone.¹³

¹³Paul Wilkes, ed., *Merton: By Those Who Knew Him Best* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), p. 71.

I was surprised to discover that I felt such a connection with a man who lived a medieval monastic life in the middle of the twentieth century. As a monk his normal day began at 2:00 in the morning with Matins and ended with Compline at 7:10 in the evening.¹⁴ For much of his monastic life he slept on a straw mat and bore Kentucky winters without heat, when ice formed in the stoops and fonts of the monastery. In summers he worked in the sultry fields of Gethsemani in long hooded robes with "sweat running over [his] ribs." His life was so different from my own as a married lay man and father living with all the amenities of modern North American urban culture.

The visible connections between myself and Thomas Merton are few. We are both Roman Catholics of primarily Celtic ancestry. We both enjoy teaching, writing poetry, and journaling. But Thomas Merton is a convert and I am a "cradle-Catholic." He is someone who "needs to write--just as other men breathe,"¹⁵ while for me writing is little more than a therapeutic hobby. His solitude is silent, monastic, and even eremitic; mine, if I have any at all, is the kind lived by scholars among library stacks. Our connections are more interior. I understand myself as a seeker on a journey toward living more freely, fully, authentically. I seek however feebly and at times insincerely to love God with all my heart, mind, and strength and my neighbor as myself. I seek liberation from illusion and from narcissistic self-absorption. Perhaps these facts at least

¹⁴Compline was at 7:10 p.m. most of the year and 6:10 p.m. during the winter months at Gethsemani.

¹⁵Victor A. Kramer, *Thomas Merton: Monk and Artist* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1987), p. Preface.

begin to explain why a “beatnik, peacenik, Trappist, Buddhist monk”¹⁶ seems to speak from inside of me. Reading Merton I sense that I am reading about myself, only now I read my own journey intensified by the light of his intellect, challenged by his honesty, and writ large in the power of his language. But my journey is not his and he can do nothing for me but point his finger.

I grew up with my father’s copy of Merton’s classic autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948) staring down dauntingly at me from his book shelf, but I did not read it until I had long since left home. The first books I read by Merton were on Taoism and Zen Buddhism and I had no idea that they were written by the same convert monk who is celebrated in so many Catholic homes.

As a young man I was drifting away from the tradition that had nurtured me, questioning its authenticity and sacramental life. The challenges of some difficult life experiences proved too powerful for my adolescent image/concept of God and my Catholicism that was not at all “universal.” So I distanced myself from the Church and relative to a kind of “first naiveté” the move may have been authentic. But with a persistent spiritual hunger I began reading Eastern classics such as the *Tao Te Ching*, *The Upanishads*, the *Bhagavadgita*, and the *Dhammapada*, each of which I interpreted to have profoundly similar insights and messages to the scriptures and traditions that greatly formed me. I experienced some of the fruits of what John Dunne calls “passing over,”¹⁷ though my

¹⁶The first chapter of Edward Rice’s book *The Man in the Sycamore Tree: The Good Times and Hard Life of Thomas Merton* is entitled “The Making of a Beatnik Peacenik Trappist Buddhist Monk” (Garden City: Image Books, 1972).

¹⁷See John S. Dunne, *The Way of all the Earth: Experiments in Truth and Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1972).

random reading could hardly be called serious scholarship much less cultural immersion.

Reading Western interpretations and commentaries on these spiritual classics brought me to Thomas Merton's works: *Gandhi on Non-Violence* (1965), *Mystics and Zen Masters* (1967), *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (1968), *The Way of Chuang Tsu* (1965) and *The Asian Journal* (1973). I became inspired by this author whose understandings of Zen and Taoism were praised by D. T. Suzuki¹⁸ and Dr. John C. H. Wu,¹⁹ and whose openness to Buddhism and commitment to harmony among the world's religions lauded by both Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama.²⁰

Merton had achieved some kind of integration of a traditional Catholic Christianity and Zen.²¹ His Catholicism was more universal than the one I had abandoned and his faith did not seem to be dependent on the viability of merely abstract concepts of God. My affirmation of this insight urged me to rediscover the wealth of my own tradition and the gift of my faith, recognizing that I had failed to distinguish my own limited concepts and images of God from the supraconceptual reality they meaningfully mediate; and by rejecting those concepts because they were

¹⁸"Thomas Merton was 'the most skillful interpreter of Zen Buddhism in the West...Daisetz Suzuki, the greatest scholar of Zen Buddhism in Japan, once remarked that no Westerner had ever understood Zen as well as Merton.'" This comment from Francine du Plessix Gray is printed on the back of a collection of Merton's essays entitled *Thoughts on the East* (New York: New Directions, 1995).

¹⁹See William Shannon's editorial notes in *HGL* pp. 612, 620.

²⁰See *Merton: By Those Who Knew Him Best*. Edited by Paul Wilkes (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), pp. 145-154.

²¹See Chalmers MacCormick, "The Zen-Catholicism of Thomas Merton." *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* IX (1972), pp. 802-817. And Therese Lentfoehr, "The Zen-mystical Poetry of Thomas Merton" in *Thomas Merton: Pilgrim in Process*. Edited by Donald Grayston and Michael Higgins (Toronto: Griffin House, 1983).

indeed limited, I subsequently abandoned a tradition without adequately exploring or understanding it. As a result of this search and subsequent religious experience I became a more committed Catholic with an increased appreciation for many non-Catholic religions.

However, after my initial work in theologies of world religions I suffered long under the illusory dilemma of either being authentically open to dialogue by abandoning a “normative christology” or continuing to affirm such a christology and thus admit that I then could not really listen openly to the other.²² Perhaps the editors of *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (1987) had somehow suggested to me, and I agreed, that I could not be both “open and steadfast” as Hans Küng²³ insists practitioners of dialogue should be.

Thomas Merton’s life and writings seemed to fly in the face of my belief. For in him I found a healthy integration of openness to the world’s religions and a steadfast commitment to the wealth and wisdom of his own spiritual and doctrinal heritage. At first I thought maybe the case could be made that later in his life Merton had outgrown his traditional, normative christology and had moved toward a universalistic view of religion in the form of an affirmation of some a-priori religious equality, or “common essence.” But after reading George Kilcourse’s *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton’s Christ*, I concluded that a careful reading of his later works could not support this thesis at all. His Christocentric view of salvation, and of human fulfillment, persisted till the end of his life

²²My M.A. thesis for the University of Dayton was entitled “Theological Models of World Religions and Interreligious Dialogue” (1992). Therein I supported, at least implicitly and tentatively, Knitter’s pluralistic theology of religions.

²³Hans Küng, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), pp. 94-107.

without wavering. So then the seeming paradox of Merton's steadfast commitment to his own heritage coupled with this genuine openness to and interest in the world's religions demanded my further investigation.

A new understanding of Merton's appreciation for non-Christian religions began to emerge when I shifted the focus of my attention from Merton's christology to his anthropology, not that these could ever be *separated* for Merton. I began to understand the possibility of maintaining both a universalist view of religion and a "normative christology" beyond contradiction. Examining Merton's understanding of the human person, and the person's quest for transformation and to live authentically, I began to make distinctions and to see developments I had not noticed before. It became clearer to me that Merton could affirm, from the perspective of a transcendental anthropology, meanings of Ultimate Reality correlative with the universal, human quest for self-transcendence, and to the fulfillment of that quest in what Merton called the "transcendent experience." From this perspective he could also affirm an understanding of "religions" as cultural expressions and facilitators of that quest. On the other hand, Merton could also affirm the uniqueness and normativity of Jesus Christ as the universal savior from the perspective of a further affirmation that transcends and includes the prior, based on an acceptance of the truth and value of the mediated Word of God in Christ, and through the historical extension of that Word in scripture and the traditions of the Church. He could do this precisely because these affirmations are not competing or contradictory viewpoints but they constitute different horizons.

However, where John Hick and Paul Knitter, and others who espouse a pluralistic theology of religions, suggest that the "higher viewpoint" is

theocentric and pluralistic rather than Christocentric and inclusive, Merton would argue to the contrary. Explicating this idea is a central task of Chapter Four, but the section of this introduction on horizons called "Realms of Discourse" will help in this task. Discovering Merton's integration of seeming opposites, his method of "uniting divided worlds in [himself] and transcending them in Christ (CGB, 21)," also evoked my interest in him as a person, in his quest for living authentically, part of that so famously documented in the book on my father's shelf.

I discovered by reading *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948) that Merton was always a sincere spiritual explorer though he was not always comfortable in his own skin and for a time wore his vocation like a shirt of hair. He suffered alienation and the existential dread of sensing a meaningless void at the very root of his "self." Conversion to Catholicism saved him from the illusion of ultimate meaninglessness but he continued to struggle to live authentically long after his adult baptism.

The Seven Storey Mountain tells of his conversion from a kind of atheism to Catholicism and his subsequent entrance into the Cistercian Order of Strict Observance, the Trappists, at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. But this was really a new beginning in Merton's search rather than an end.

In the early wake of his "conversion" to Catholicism Merton was already aware that he was also participating in a longer cycle of (hidden) inner transformation. On January 5, 1940 he wrote in his journal about his observations and questions using an equestrian analogy that encompasses the spectrum of "conversion" as both a fundamental change and starting point as well as a long and difficult process:

When I was fourteen I discovered something about learning to ride a horse. The first few days you don't know anything about it at all. You keep falling off . . . (and) get jogged to pieces while trotting, etc.

After about one week, suddenly, you find you can stay on, you post when the beast trots . . . etc. But you are still not a decent rider...You can simply stay on a horse . . . After that it takes a very long time to learn how to ride: how to make the horse obey any little pressure of the rein, of the leg, of the heel . . .

It takes a week to learn how to stay on, but years to become a rider. The difference between a man who continually falls off a horse and one who stays on is much greater than the difference between one who stays on and one who can really ride . . . Outwardly, anyway, the difference is greater.

In one week you travel apparently a vast distance: from a man who can't stay in the saddle you become one who can.

After that, for months and months, there seems to be no change, no progress at all (*RM*, 131).

It is the longer cycle of Merton's spiritual journey, his proverbial "learning to ride," that he allowed the world to witness through his writing. Even though he was aware that too much reflexive attention to his progress was "a great sin" (*RM*, 133), and indeed that he may not have been able to notice "progress" at all, he continued to document, analyze, and wonder how he was doing on this quest for God and "true" self. This longer cycle, that Robert Lax recognized as an expression of Merton's desire "to be a saint,"²⁴ eventually brought Merton from the deep roots of Catholicism out to interests in existentialism, Buddhism, Taoism, Sufism, and political activism. And all through his searching he wrote. Merton's quest for solitude, self-transcendence, and the ultimacy of God was lived through his dual vocation as a monk and writer.

²⁴In a discussion at Columbia University Lax asked Merton what he wanted to be and Merton replied, "a good Catholic." Lax countered by saying "No, what you ought to say is that you want to be a saint." See *SSM* pp. 237-238, and *Merton: By Those Who Knew Him Best*. Edited by Paul Wilkes (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), p. 67.

Merton's special genius for synthesizing seemingly disparate voices makes it easy to get lost in his literary forest where one happens upon:

Vallejo for instance. Or Rilke, or Rene Char, Montale, Zukofsky, Ungaretti, Edwin Muir, Quasimodo or some Greeks. Or the dry disconcerting voice of Nicanor Parra, the poet of the sneeze . . . Chuang Tsu . . . the reassuring companionship of many silent Tzus and Fus; King Tzu, Lao Tzu, Meng Tzu, Tu Fu . . . Here is also a Syrian hermit called Philoxenus. And an Algerian cenobite called Camus . . . the clanging prose of Tertullian, with the dry catarrh of Sartre . . . Angela of Foligno to Flannery O'Conner, Theresa of Avila, Juliana of Norwich . . . Raissa Maritain (*TM:SM*, 216).

Merton finds companions on his journey in Christian mystics and French atheists, in South American Marxists and Russian liberationists. Boris Pasternak, capturing the oppression of the human spirit under communist rule, is as much a companion to Merton as Ernesto Cardenal, fighting for liberation from the economic ills of Nicaragua under President Somoza. Merton recognizes companions not by their creeds nor by their political or national affiliations but by their sincerity as persons authentically seeking truth, meaning and value in the contexts of their own life-worlds.

But Thomas Merton is primarily an autobiographer. *The Seven Storey Mountain* is his watershed publication and his best subsequent writing is usually a form of personal, intimate disclosure. His personal tone makes his writing attractive to many and he is a powerful rhetorician, a persuasive writer, and a master of thick description. Merton's understanding of the quest for authenticity is extremely sensitive, reflecting a tremendous depth of personal experience and awareness of his own inauthenticity and his need for constant discernment and continual growth. But writing on the level of

description he is sometimes ambiguous, inconsistent or leaves important terms dangling with implicit meanings and thereby potentially confusing.

Merton's mature understanding of "self-transcendence" and "self-transformation" does not come to the fore until late in his writing career.²⁵ But I need to begin with an understanding of the human journey that is consonant with Merton's mature understanding in order to ground the analysis and interpretation of his earlier understandings. Highlighting the role of dialogue in Merton's own quest and achieving the further goal of explicating a foundation for interreligious dialogue on the level of an anthropology necessitates having an explanatory understanding of the human person as potentially, authentically self-transcending. Without an early and clear articulation of this foundation "the human journey" as a religious quest might indicate an idea so vague and ambiguous that the term has no meaning at all, or something so rigidly conceptualized and defined that it is purely abstract, resulting in a search for some "true self" that is merely a phantom, an idealized projection. Merton himself is keenly aware of this problem and he demonstrates this awareness in his numerous warnings about who the authentic person is not.²⁶ Establishing the meaning of "self-transcendence" from a critical

²⁵The early Merton, because of the moral character of his Christian conversion, understood the notion of "true self" only in relation to a particular faith commitment, and as a definitive break from one life and embrace of another (as seen in *SSM*). His concern to renounce his former ways causes him to neglect the precariousness and subtleties of a continual quest for self-transcendence that the later Merton clearly recognizes in such works as *NM* and especially in the essay "Final Integration: Toward a Monastic Therapy" in *CWA*.

²⁶To my knowledge, Anne Carr's work *A Search for Wisdom and Spirit: Thomas Merton's Theology of the Self* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988) is the best study available on Merton's complex and developing anthropology. The influence of Rahner's transcendental anthropology on Carr's study is clear and her basic interpretation informs and compliments mine herein.

perspective early in the dissertation provides a compass for navigating through the remaining chapters. The meaning grows out of a phenomenology of the human person, and specifically out of an explicit understanding of human consciousness in its intentional operations.

Bernard Lonergan's understanding of the human subject as a seeker of truth, meaning, value and who finds her fulfillment only in unrestricted love provides the necessary framework for this discussion. Thus I want to provide a brief sketch of Lonergan's anthropology in this chapter to clarify certain terms used throughout the dissertation and to alert the reader to the philosophical framework that supports my interpretation of Merton's dialogue with Suzuki and his thought concerning the relation between Zen-Buddhism and Catholicism. In other words, I rely on the assistance of a rigorous and clear Catholic philosopher to interpret and understand the insights of a contemplative monk and poet more clearly.²⁷ Lonergan's explications of the intentional consciousness of human subjects, and their self-transcending acts, and the reality of religious experience help to elucidate Merton's own understanding of the human quest for authenticity, and the transcultural reality of spiritual experience.²⁸ I attempt to elucidate what I judge to be the consonance between Lonergan's explanatory and theoretical account of

²⁷Merton, of course, had no affinity for "systematic" thinking, whether philosophical or theological, yet even his own Master's thesis for Columbia University was a project similar to this one. For his M.A. in English Literature, Merton relied on Jacques Maritain's philosophy of art to interpret the poetry of William Blake. Indeed Maritain's Neo-Thomistic "system" remained a profound influence on Merton. Merton's understanding of the spiritual journey as a dialectical struggle between the interior poles of "the individual" and "the person" is influenced by Maritain, among others.

²⁸Lonergan is particularly helpful in this task because his aforementioned categories can stand independently of an exclusively Christian perspective and therefore lend themselves to explicating a foundation for interreligious dialogue that is not dependent on a particular religious world view but on an understanding of the human person.

self-transcendence and Merton's poetic and descriptive accounts of the same in order to make explicit what I judge to be Merton's agreement with the foregoing analysis, which really hinges upon a theory of self-transcendence.

4. The Dynamism of the Human Consciousness and Self-Transcendence

Joann Wolski Conn, in her essay "Toward Spiritual Maturity," writes:

Self-transcendence is at the core of any definition of spirituality. This does not mean that one transcends or escapes being one's self or stops attending to oneself or caring for oneself. Rather, one acts out of the center or heart of one's self in a way that reaches out in love, freedom, and truth to others and to the unrealized dimensions of one's own capacities. One does this within the horizon of whatever one imagines or judges to be of ultimate value.²⁹

Conn goes on to say that "although the definition of spirituality may be generic, there is no generic spirituality. All spirituality is concrete, embedded in the particularities of experience."³⁰ These words indicate the difficulty of understanding the human journey, discussing it in universally accessible language and concepts, while preserving and appreciating the particularities of personal experiences and life-stories. A key to simplifying the task involves explicating "self-transcendence." For this purpose there is perhaps no clearer voice than Bernard Lonergan's.

²⁹ This essay appears in *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1993), edited by Catherine Mowry LaCugna, pp. 235-260.

³⁰ in La Cugna, *Freeing Theology*, p. 237.

Lonergeran hoped that his own efforts would shorten the labor of others, and they certainly shorten mine.³¹ But my labor is not shortened because I have climbed on Lonergan's shoulders and see beyond the scope of his vision, but merely because I can affirm the basic insights about myself that I have had as a result of reading much of his work and performing his proposed experiments in the laboratory of my own mind. Indeed I have only begun to "reach up" to Lonergan's mind. So this basic sketch of his anthropology is offered more as an acknowledgment of debt to his work, than it is a pretense to fully grasping the depth of all of his insights. I intend to employ Lonergan's transcendental anthropology strictly for functional, or practical purposes.

a. The Theory of Intentional Consciousness

Lonergeran's transcendental anthropology has its foundation in a cognitional theory, a phenomenology of the mind. And this cognitional theory is the basis of the interpretive tool I utilize throughout this work, and especially in Chapter Four and Chapter Five. The cognitional theory is nothing more than the mediation by language of what happens immediately in a consciously operating human subject. That is to say, the theory, as I affirm it, is more than a speculation or a conjecture about what may occur within human consciousness, but is the explication of what in fact does occur, and the verification of the theory rests upon

³¹Lonergeran concludes his "Introduction" to *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992, 2nd edition) with: "I can but make the contribution of a single man and then hope that others, sensitive to the same problems, will find that my efforts shorten their own labor and that my conclusions provide a base for further developments." p. 24 Hereafter cited simply as *Insight*.

anyone who would objectify the operations of his or her own consciousness and employ those very operations to reach the verification. But the subsequent affirmation of that mediation as being an accurate account of what in fact we do as consciously operating subjects allows an interpreter to take hold of "a fixed base, an invariant pattern, opening upon all further developments of understanding."³² So my understanding of Merton's quest for self-transcendence in and through self-transformation, and his dialogue with Suzuki concerning the same, is rooted in and enriched by the objectification of intentional consciousness.

By attending to his own interior consciousness, and experiencing, understanding, and affirming the successive acts or operations of his own consciousness (i.e., his own experiencing, understanding, judging, deciding) Lonergan discovered and affirmed an invariant pattern, a dynamic structure in the unfolding of consciousness that begins with experience and culminates in judgments of truth and value that call for response and action on the part of the human subject. He imagines the pattern in terms of levels of consciousness and movement through the levels increases subjectivity. Lonergan explains:

There is the *empirical* level on which we sense, perceive, imagine, feel, speak, move. There is an *intellectual* level on which we inquire, come to understand, express what we have understood, work out the presuppositions and implications of our expression. There is the *rational* level on which we reflect, marshal the evidence, pass judgment on the truth or falsity, certainty or probability, of a statement. There is the *responsible* level on which we are concerned with ourselves, our own operations, our goals, and so deliberate about possible courses of action, evaluate them, decide, and carry

³²Bernard Lonergan, *Insight*, p. 22.

out our decisions.³³

Experience gives rise to the question “what is it?” We then often have insights into the data of experience, we get the picture, get the idea, move from befuddlement to clarity, and the drive to understand reaches the level of understanding via an insight. Lonergan further notices that we are not satisfied with just any understanding, just any answer, but we desire an accurate understanding, or a correct answer. So from experience, consciousness reaches understanding in a direct or inverse insight, and from understanding we ask “is it so?” “do I really have the right idea?” This movement is from understanding to rational reflection and terminates in a judgment, or an affirmation or denial of actuality, of correctness, of certainty or probability. But beyond questions for intelligence and judgments of fact, there are questions for deliberation and judgments of value. We ask not only about truth but about value, is this good, is it worthwhile?

Within the horizon and realm of meaning established by the differentiation and objectification of one's own conscious operations, “self-transcendence” means simply that consciousness moves from experiencing to understanding, from understanding to judgment, from judgment to decision, and this movement occurs through insights and answers to the questions for intelligence, for reflection, and for deliberation raised, explicitly or implicitly by the consciously operating subject. One does not, however, cease to experience when one questions, for there is the experience of questioning, nor when one discovers the

³³Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990, 2nd edition). Hereafter cited simply as *Method*. For the thorough working out of his cognitional theory Lonergan refers his readers to *Insight*, pp. 387 ff.

answer, for there is the experience of insight, the "aha" of discovery. Yet the subject as operating intelligently is transcendent of the subject as merely attending. That is to say, one moves beyond attentive experiencing when one begins to ask questions about experience with the desire to understand and then does reach an understanding by insight. Likewise, the reflective subject is transcendent of the intelligent subject, and finally the deliberative and acting subject actualizes the subject at its existential height when one puts oneself on the line through commitment whereby one can effect others and the world.

The affirmation of consciousness as operative in its experiencing, in its questions for intelligence, reflection, and deliberation, and in its insights and answers, may lead also to the affirmation of consciousness as intentional. That is to say, affirming that our bare experiencing gives rise to curiosity, and that we ask questions for intelligence, leads to the affirmation that we seek to understand, that we intend the intelligible by our questioning. Affirming that we have direct insights into the intelligibility of what we experience, affirms that we are intellectually self-transcending. Affirming that we ask questions for reflection leads to the affirmation that we intend truth and meaning, and affirming that we sometimes have reflective insights that we judge to be accurate affirms that we are rationally self-transcending. Affirming that we ask questions for deliberation leads to the affirmation that we intend what is good and worthwhile, insofar as we affirm that we have deliberative insights that we judge to be accurate and act according to our apprehensions of value we affirm that we are morally self-transcending.

Lonergan argues that this basic structure of the mind, and its levels of conscious intending, is isomorphic³⁴ with reality as distinct from his operative consciousness. The question "what is it" arises from an experience of some kind, from an encounter. Insight brings one to an understanding of what one experiences. Affirmations of correct understandings results in knowledge of what is. The questions that emerge disclose the human spirit's passionate pursuit of understanding and being.

In other words, Lonergan's cognitional theory supports not only a transcendental anthropology by observing and demonstrating the workings of the mind intending, grasping, and affirming, but a positive epistemology and a dynamic foundation for metaphysics by explicating the value of correct understandings in light of the isomorphic structure of understanding and being.³⁵

But his metaphysics is meaningful not insofar as the terms of metaphysics describe and refer to abstract essences 'already out there now' prescinding from subjectivity, that can be intuited or known by experience;³⁶ nor because such terms erect an internally consistent and

³⁴Lonergan uses "isomorphic" (literally "same/similar structure") when discussing the relationship between individual human consciousness and the world. Reality emerges in human consciousness first in and through experience (and so can be experienced), second in understanding (and so is intelligible), and finally known by judgment (and so can be affirmed). The knowing subject comes to affirm that the operations of consciousness, i.e. (1) experiencing, (2) understanding, and (3) judging, correspond with the real as (1) it is sensible (2) it is intelligible, and (3) it is reasonable. Since the distinction between the real and the knowing subject emerges only in the third place, the subject/object dichotomy is not basic. Ultimately my own consciousness (my "self" as subject) is counted as real though I can distinguish myself as knower from the world as I know it.

³⁵*Insight* builds into explicating this isomorphism and this point culminates in Chapter 15, "The Elements of Metaphysics." Lonergan provides a concise summary of his findings and conclusions in the section of that chapter entitled "Potency and Finality," pp. 470-476

³⁶I believe that contemporary thinkers such as Jean Francois Lyotard, Richard Rorty, and Jacques Derrida are right to reject epistemological theories that rest on the belief that

coherent ideal world; rather they are meaningful insofar as such terms and relations are correlative with human consciousness; for therein lies their meaning. And this affirmation is important to my work insofar as it informs my understanding and interpretation of Merton's and Suzuki's discussion of ultimate concerns.

Understanding and affirming the correspondence of terms and relations with human consciousness is an important key to this entire project. More specifically, it is by correlating the basic terms of the Merton and Suzuki dialogue with human consciousness that I can demonstrate that terms like God, Ultimate Reality, Prajna, Absolute Mercy, the Transcendental Unconscious³⁷, can be affirmed by both Merton and Suzuki as commonly meaningful. Furthermore, by use of this approach I can establish the common meanings of Merton's term "transcendental experience" with Suzuki's "enlightenment" and with Lonergan's "religious experience."

Lonergan's method reconciles an illusory rift between subjectivity and objectivity by acknowledging that "objectivity" can only be a matter of authentic subjectivity. This is very important. Knowing is a matter of

correct accounts of reality "correspond with" and "accurately represent" what is already out there now apart from the human mind. While Lonergan does affirm that correct claims "correspond with" and "accurately represent" what is real, the protestations of these thinkers do not really undermine Lonergan's position because the real for him is not simply already out there now; because he recognizes the distinction and integration of the world as available to sensory encounter and the world as it is mediated by meaning. Lonergan holds that the problem of epistemology is not in the affirmation that truthful accounts "correspond" with what is real, rather the problem is in the failure to distinguish and integrate the infant's world of immediacy and the adult's world mediated by meaning. Cate Siejk's "Learning to Love the Questions" in *Religious Education* 94 (1999), pp. 155-172, and the entire issue of *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 73 (1999), examine post-modern critiques of epistemological paradigms in light of Catholic faith.

³⁷This is Hui Neng's term for Ultimate Reality, and as Merton asserts it should not be confused with the meaning of "unconscious" as employed in psychoanalytic discourse. Merton begins this term to use late in his dialogue with Suzuki.

self-transcendence, and genuine self-transcendence is a matter of authentic subjectivity. For Lonergan "self-transcendence" simply acknowledges that we experience, understand, judge, decide and act, while "authentic subjectivity" is a matter of how we experience, understand, judge, decide and act. The quest for increasing authenticity is a quest for developing our capacity to experience attentively, to give freedom to our questioning and our passion for understanding intelligently, to nurture a patient disinterest for judging reasonably, and to engender courage for deciding and acting responsibly. In other words, what is commonly thought of as being "objective," in this sense simply means being attentive, intelligent, reasonable, and responsible, it means being authentically subjective. For what else can we be?³⁸

b. Transformations of Consciousness

Through fidelity to the transcendental precepts (Be attentive, Be intelligent, Be reasonable, Be responsible, which correspond to our intentional acts) we seek to increase the authenticity of our lives. That is to say, by being faithful to ourselves at best, to the demands of intentional consciousness, we seek, as Merton says, to respond "to the call to fulfill certain obscure yet urgent potentialities in the ground of one's being" (CWA, 202). For Lonergan authentic subjectivity and self-transcendence leads to self-transformation that engenders further transcendence.

³⁸It is interesting that Suzuki was once asked "Why does the Occidental mentality emphasize the objective, while the Orientals are involved in the subjective?" Suzuki replied with the question "But is there any objective without the subjective?" From Francis Haar's Preface to *A Zen Life: D. T. Suzuki Remembered*, edited by Masao Abe (New York: Weatherhill, 1986), p. xi.

On the journey of intending truth, meaning and value, certain transformations of consciousness, or what Lonergan calls conversions, help bring a subject to the fulfillment of her deepest and truest desires. That is to say, intentional consciousness approximates its fulfillment not only in understanding a particular thing, but more so in understanding what it means to understand, by grasping the meaning of meaning, not only in choosing a particular good, but through the transformation that would have a subject begin to choose value over satisfaction when the two conflict. Finally, the initial fulfillment of intentional consciousness is not a result of knowledge or decision but actualized in the experience of the total, incipient fulfillment of consciousness, and that experience is of an unrestricted freedom and love.

Lonergan affirms that although any one person may, or may not, appropriate a transformation of consciousness, or undergo conversion in any sense, a person in fact may undergo conversion in every sense, and no matter what the temporal sequence of those conversions may be, they may be successively integrated within human consciousness. Lonergan writes:

Because intellectual, moral, and religious conversion all have to do with self-transcendence, it is possible, when all three occur within a single consciousness, to conceive their relations in terms of sublation. I would use this notion in Karl Rahner's sense rather than Hegel's to mean that what sublates goes beyond what is sublated, introduces something new and distinct, puts everything on a new basis, yet so far from interfering with the sublated or destroying it, on the contrary needs it, includes it, preserves all its proper features and properties, and carries them forward to a fuller realization within a richer context.³⁹

³⁹Bernard Lonergan, *Method*, p. 241.

This richer context is precisely a new horizon of meaning and value. Horizons can differ genetically within a single consciousness. For example, a person who experiences and affirms her own spiritual transformation will recognize that she now lives, in light of that transformation, in a larger, more meaningful world and is further along her personal journey than she had been. So too if that same person then experiences, understands and affirms a moral transformation, or an intellectual transformation, she will then be living within an even richer context. Further transformations do not nullify prior ones but build upon them.

The transformation of consciousness which Lonergan calls "religious conversion" transforms a person into a radical lover and is generated by an experience of unconditional love. The acceptance of and response to the experience of being in unrestricted love transvalues the operator, or the subject, performing the acts of experiencing, understanding, judging, and deciding. Although Merton felt the undertow of this experience from an early age, "as a call to a dreaded holiness," the experience itself becomes clearer and more distinct as he matures as a contemplative. In Chapter Two I suggest the ways in which Merton's religious experience and religious conversion intensify and mature throughout his life and I end with a focus on Merton's experience in Polonnaruwa as a culminating point of this intensification and maturation.

Intellectual transformation overturns the common illusion that knowing is only a matter of experiencing, or seeing, or intuiting, or grasping "the real" which is thought to be "already out there now" apart from the subject. But there are "degrees" of intellectual conversion and the initial transcendence of a naive realism is still a long way from the full

appropriation of one's self as a knower; an appropriation that occurs by understanding and affirming the role of judgment in knowing and by distinguishing the infant's world of immediacy and the adult's world mediated by meaning and then affirming their integration as one world.

Merton may never have fully objectified the operations of his own consciousness and been able to give an account of their dynamic interrelation and isomorphic relation to the world as distinct from himself, but he was transformed in the most basic sense of knowing that the real is not simply "already out there" and he was clearly advancing toward that full explication of himself as a knower. Following Walter Conn's lead, I discuss Merton's intellectual transformation in Chapter Two as related to the critical grounding of his moral conversion, but I discuss it further in Chapter Five as it is evident through the objectification of his own conscious operations that his study of Zen helped to advance.

Moral transformation elevates one beyond habitually choosing out of self-interest (no-matter how large or encompassing the self may be, i.e., an individual, family, community, nation or religious group) to concern for choosing what is actually good, even if independent of such personal preference. Again, following the lead of Walter Conn, I examine Merton's initial conversion to Catholicism as exemplary of a Christian moral conversion. But Merton's moral conversion also develops as it compels him beyond concern for his own personal salvation to concern for advancing the realization of the Kingdom of God through the reign of Love and Justice.

It is important, however, to note that although these "transformations" can be distinguished one from another they are all

mutually supportive and integral to one another in the life of Thomas Merton. His "religious conversion" impacts his moral outlook, and his moral conversion finds a critical grounding in the advancement of his intellectual conversion. Furthermore, his "religious experience" of non-limitation in love and freedom impacts his understanding of the real and so also influences his "intellectual conversion." In other words, all of these transformations are converging and operating in one self-transcending subject and can never be separated from one another.⁴⁰

For Lonergan, religious conversion and religious development are integral to one another yet distinct. The initial transformation begins with the experience of being in love in an unrestricted fashion. but the initial awareness of the experience can be fleeting and the process of authentically appropriating such an experience is arduous. "Religious conversion" in Lonergan's terms, refers to the positive, fundamental response to the initial experience of being in love unrestrictedly, a kind of saying "yes" to an offer. Religious development refers to the life-long process of coming to understand and authentically live out the implications of such an accepted experience, and of such love itself.

Lonergan's language concerning development supports Michael Mott's description of the "chief struggle of Merton's life." Mott writes:

It was a battle with a kind of self-consciousness that could be agonizing under certain conditions. Merton's courage shows in the fact that he chose to engage the struggle precisely where it was most acute . . . in his own writing and in the public aspect of religion. In his writing, especially in his journals he sought the ground of his own being beyond everything that was false. In public and private worship he sought God . . . *Merton tries to reach*

⁴⁰For Lonergan's theory of conversions, or what I refer to mostly as "transformations of consciousness," see *Method*, pp. 237-244.

*a kind of honesty that could not be defined at the beginning but that might be discovered in the very process, if it were continued for long enough, and if things did not go radically wrong*⁴¹ (italics added).

Chapter four of *Method in Theology* explicates a universal ground of religious traditions by locating that ground in the religious experience of subjects who constitute cultural communities of meaning and value. It is from the acceptance of the experienced fulfillment of conscious intentionality that one of the common meanings of "God" or "Ultimate Reality" emerges. The experience can be characterized as one of "being in love in an unrestricted manner" and Lonergan demonstrates how certain common features of living religions, which are in part expressions of religious experience, are implicit in such an experience.⁴² This explication seems to me to resonate with Merton's basic premise that the heart of all living traditions is born of a contemplative "awareness of the ground of all metaphysical speculation and mature and sapiential religious experience" (MZM, p. 203).

c. Linking the World of Immediacy with the World Mediated by Meaning

There is, however, a fundamental link between the initial experience as accepted and the resultant formulations and expressions of such an experience. Metaphorically speaking, the former takes place within an "infrastructure", or the operating consciousness of particular subjects, and

⁴¹Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), p. 93.

⁴²Bernard Lonergan, *Method*, pp. 105-109

the latter within a "suprastructure" of context, community, tradition, language, and particular horizons.⁴³ The relationship between infrastructure and suprastructure means that experience is not isolated (the only important element), or that expressions are merely accidental (nominalism). On the contrary, the attainment of self-transcendence, with regard to religious experience, is more than just experiencing and involves understanding intelligently, judging reasonably, and deciding and acting responsibly, and these latter elements involve the subject in intersubjective community.

The distinction and relation between the *infrastructure of religious experience*, or what Merton calls the "inner experience," the "transcendent experience" or "transcendental experience," and the suprastructure of religious language or expression, or what Suzuki calls "superstructure" becomes very important in my later analysis. Indeed it is only because of "suprastructure" that the two can even communicate, challenge each other and learn from each other, and it is only because of what happens at the level of infrastructure that they find that they have something in common to talk about, something important to try to understand and to affirm.

The reason for sketching out Lonergan's anthropology is not to answer all questions concerning it, but to make explicit its influence in this work. First of all, Lonergan's anthropology provides a critical account of the transcending self that is open to discovery and to realization. In other words, Lonergan's account of self-transcendence does not name a static, "known" reality, but a dynamic possibility that is "to be known"

⁴³Bernard Lonergan, "Prolegomena to the Study of the Emerging Religious Consciousness of Our Time," *A Third Collection*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), edited by Frederick Crowe.

because self-transcendence thus understood is actuated in every instance of experiencing, understanding, judging, deciding, and acting. The process is free and subject to failure. In this way, the meanings of "authentic subjectivity" and "self-transcendence" are not indicative of a person as he or she would be in some imagined pure state, but explicate what a person strives to become by making explicit what he or she does in the concrete living of his or her life. Furthermore, the grounding of this anthropology in the dynamism of intentional consciousness, provides an accessible tool that I will continually advert to in my latter analysis of Merton's quest for self-transcendence, and in his dialogue with Suzuki concerning this quest and its realization.

The meanings of "self-transcendence" and "self-transformation" as I have explicated these terms, help me to be precise and to avoid potential problems. Merton speaks of the human journey sometimes as the quest for the "true," "inner," or "real" self, and as a liberation from the "false," "external," or "illusory" self. Other times he speaks of the search to become a "person" who is authentic as opposed to an "individual" who is isolated, fragmented, and cut off from reality. Such terms are descriptively illustrative and helpful but can be confusing if they suggest an interior battle between two selves.⁴⁴ Furthermore, Merton's understanding of the "true self" concept is very subtle and I want to avoid suggesting that Merton believes that the human search for the "true self" (if understood

⁴⁴ Daniel Helminiak notes that many spiritual writers "grope to explain that there are not really two selves," an inner and an outer, a true and a false, a higher and a lower, but are restricted to metaphorical language that can not get beyond obscurantism because they lack a systematic anthropology. See *Spiritual Development: An Interdisciplinary Study* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1987), especially pp. 30-33.

as an idealized projection) grounds his dialogue with Suzuki, or provides a ground for interreligious dialogue in general.

Merton's aversion to philosophical "systems" is evident in his preference for descriptive accounts of the spiritual journey over explanatory and systematic ones (*SJ*, 8-9).⁴⁵ It is by remaining on the level of description that he avoids the pitfalls of "systems" that stagnate. Merton especially bristles against Descartes' metaphysical objectivity, and voices dismay that an unquestioned Cartesian subjectivity has become presupposed by Westerners of his day.⁴⁶ From the Cartesian metaphysic the idea of "true self" too easily becomes static and ethereal. In response to this static metaphysic Merton is continually insisting that neither the "true self" nor "God" are "objects" or "things" to be imagined as either "out there" or "in here." Discovering God, for Merton, is not a matter of grasping, intuiting, or seeing, an object, but is rather an inexhaustible revelation integral to being or becoming an authentic subject.⁴⁷ Yet an explanatory articulation of such a view requires a theoretical account of self-transcendence and the integral process of self-transformation that is not dependent upon classical conceptions of humanity in the abstract but explicative of humans in the concrete, in their actual living. Merton

⁴⁵As early as October 22, 1939 Merton records a humorous and telling conversation with himself: "...I know nothing about philosophy--know so little about it that I can't even read it carefully. But anyway, I do not aspire to be a philosopher--but to go after allegorical theology which is not argumentative: but there: I am not sure what allegorical theology *is*, but only know one thing it is *not*. And that thing--argumentativeness: well I am always obviously trying to be argumentative. Perhaps I better not argue with myself anymore..." (*RM*, 62).

⁴⁶For Merton on Cartesian subjectivity see *NSC*, 6-10 and *ZBA*, 22-23.

⁴⁷For more on this idea see Parker J. Palmer's "Contemplation Reconsidered: The Human Way In," *The Merton Annual* 8 (1995), pp. 22-37.

himself has no such explicit system so he prefers to travel and thrive in the "uncertain byways of poetry and intuition" (*SJ*, 8).

My other reason for utilizing the terms "self-transcendence" and "self-transformation" so defined, anticipates a goal of the project. I want to demonstrate Merton's belief that there is a universal ground and goal of the human journey, and that this ground provides a foundation for interreligious dialogue since all religious traditions aim to facilitate the "transformation of consciousness" to which they attest and which they express. Thus I want to avoid speaking about the human journey as a quest for the "true self." The concept of "true self" can be problematic for several reasons that are all of the same root. As already mentioned it can denote a static concept, or it can be unhelpful and ambiguous, as Helminiak's study of spiritual development affirms.⁴⁸ Thirdly, to Buddhists who affirm a doctrine of *anatta* (no-self), it can be simply confusing or even mistaken.

Finally, a word of caution is in order. In the context of the United States, personal authenticity, or the fulfillment of the human quest, is often imagined as liberation from "all restraints" and is defined as actualizing "the unencumbered" self. And this testimony to freedom and liberation is descriptively consonant with both Merton's and Suzuki's view of "enlightenment" as we shall later see. However, as Robert Bellah and his colleagues have noted, within the American context this notion

⁴⁸Daniel Helminiak notes that in the language of "spiritual development" or concerning the 'human journey' we need to purge "all talk of a multiplicity of 'inner' and 'outer' and 'deeper' and 'truer' and 'higher' and 'lower' selves. Lonergan's notion of an intrinsic principle of self-transcendence and his definition of 'authentic' render all those others obsolete. The 'true self' is merely oneself when one is acting authentically, for authenticity entails fidelity to the self-transcending dynamism of the human spirit." *Spiritual Development: An Interdisciplinary Study*, pp. 31-32.

too easily sets freedom and responsibility in opposition to one another. Freedom is conceived in individualistic terms while responsibility connotes "group" ties that are secondary and cumbersome.⁴⁹ But 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. Merton's understanding of the human journey challenges this common attitude in the United States concerning human fulfillment and should not be interpreted as an endorsement of "rugged individualism."

5. Differentiating Realms of Discourse

Merton's understanding of the quest for his own true identity in God, which is the most pervasive theme in all of his writing, is rich, subtle, and polyvalent. In his later years he is comfortable discussing the human journey not only in the language of Christian mystical tradition, but also in the terms of religious existentialism, Zen Buddhism, Neo-Thomism, and popular psychology. Although Merton recognizes that each perspective has its advantages each also has its limitations. In this work I seek to clarify Merton's understanding of this quest and its desired term within the horizons constituted by the affirmations of the transcendental orientation of the human subject, of "religious experience," and by interiorly differentiated consciousness.

The affirmation of the human person as a seeker of truth, meaning and value, opens out upon a corresponding meaning of Ultimate Reality

⁴⁹Robert N. Bellah et al. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 128-129.

as that mystery which is ultimately intended by our seeking. The acceptance of religious experience, which is the experienced fulfillment of conscious intentionality in being in love without limits, or conditions, or qualifications, or in unrestricted freedom, sets up a new horizon for a person. This means that he or she begins to see old things in new ways, and becomes opened to new experiences, and understands, judges and decides, informed by the power of such experience. This new horizon includes fuller meanings of Ultimate Reality as absolute love, goodness, freedom and holiness. Expressions and understandings of this fundamental experience emerge in all cultures and religious traditions.⁵⁰ This is what I mean by the horizon of "religious conversion" and I discuss it in Lonergan's terms in Chapter Four. It is mostly within this horizon that I understand the meaning of Merton's dialogue with Suzuki.

The horizon of "interiorly differentiated consciousness," or "interiority" is correlative not merely with the affirmation of the self as transcending, nor to the experience of the fulfillment of consciousness, but to the differentiation and objectification of consciousness as intentional in its successive operations. This horizon provides me with my hermeneutical tool, it makes my method explicit, and enables me to ground the terms of the Merton and Suzuki dialogue in the dynamism of consciousness. It is also toward this horizon that the dialogue between Merton and Suzuki moves as they attempt to be clearer in their accounts of Zen-insight and emptiness.

The horizons of transcendence, religious conversion, and interiority, however, fall short of an explicitly theological horizon as they do not

⁵⁰Bernard Lonergan, *Method*, chapter four on "Religion."

include specific understandings or interpretations of "divine revelation" as data,⁵¹ so within the horizons of this work, I do not ask or address further Christian theological questions regarding knowledge of what Merton calls "the Source" and the goal of the human journey, which for him is the One Christ. That is to say, the horizons of this work collectively constitute an anthropological horizon. Taken together, the horizons, although inclusive of meanings of the term God as that term denotes what is anticipated by the human orientation, what is experienced in the fulfillment of that orientation, and what might be called the transcendent ground of all conscious operations, still constitute what lie within a horizon immediately correlative with human consciousness. The theological horizon, insofar as the meaning of its terms depend upon an affirmation of the validity and value of divine revelation, goes beyond the merely "anthropological" horizon though is never divorced from it.

Distinguishing horizons, however, does not mean severing the anthropological from the theological, an impossibility in terms of Merton's thought. Nowhere is this impossibility made more explicit than in George Kilcourse's work *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ* (1993). Kilcourse leaves no doubt that Merton would agree with Karl Rahner that, in the end, the Christian does not separate anthropology, Christology, and theology.⁵² Later in this work I will explicate Merton's affirmations of these horizons and the successive relation among them.

⁵¹Here I mean revelation in the sense of God's "outward" self-communication. Avery Dulles, in his work *Models of Revelation*, alerts us to the multiplicity of ways people understand divine revelation, and thus to the difficulty of defining "divine revelation" beyond the affirmation that God discloses God's self to, through, and/or within human subjects. See *Models of Revelation* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1983).

⁵²Rahner says: "...Christology is the beginning and the end of anthropology, and this anthropology in its most radical actualization is for all eternity theology". In *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (Crossroad: New York, 1993

The reason for focusing on the horizon of an anthropology is two-fold. First it is within this horizon that an interpreter can affirm the points of convergence in Merton's dialogue with Suzuki that make that dialogue meaningful and valuable. Furthermore, both Merton and Suzuki come to understand their own dialogue within this horizon. The second reason for restricting the horizon and the realm of discourse, clearly related to the first, is that such a horizon lends itself more readily to a discussion of the human journey, and its fulfillment, as a foundation for interreligious dialogue, primarily because a phenomenological anthropology constitutes a realm of discourse that is broad and general enough to ground interreligious dialogue in a way that includes the "religious" or "spiritual" as a legitimate category of human experience, understanding, and reflection without raising specifically theological or christological questions. Finally, from the standpoint of method, discovering an answer to that question of interreligious dialogue, which David Tracy commented on at the beginning of this chapter depends upon sufficiently answering the prior questions that emerge within the anthropological horizon.

By seeking an understanding of Merton's quest for authentic identity and of Merton's own understanding of that from within the horizon of a phenomenological anthropology I do not intend to suggest that Merton's own understanding of the human journey is restricted to this horizon.

edition), p. 225. But Rahner is speaking of a religious, or theological anthropology informed by a particular understanding of the doctrine of the Incarnation. His formula clearly goes beyond a purely phenomenological anthropology. Rahner, like Merton, though sharing conclusions with Lonergan concerning the dynamism of mind, grounds his transcendental anthropology more explicitly in a Christology, in an understanding of Jesus Christ as the definitive point of divine/human convergence whose irrevocable incarnation transforms humanity. So out of faith based reflection on the person of Jesus, who he is and what he does for us, a theological anthropology emerges.

On the contrary, he understands his own journey largely in terms of his experience of conversion in Christ. His experience is informed by a contemplative understanding of "gratia elevans" based on an understanding of the Incarnation that is informed by Duns Scotus, and Athanasius' bold declaration that "God became man so that man might become God." It is not until his later years that he differentiates, and appreciates, a general notion of spiritual integrity or wholeness from a specifically Christian notion of holiness, previously tending to see the pursuit of the former as an illusion fortifying ego-identity or the false self and an impediment to the latter. But his reading of Erich Fromm, Reza Arasteh, D. T. Suzuki, among others widely broadens his conception of a spiritual integrity, seeing now a complementarity between psychological, spiritual integrity and a Christian notion of supernatural holiness in union with God in Christ.

I am suggesting that utilizing an explicit philosophical anthropology to interpret Merton's life and thought assists an elucidation of Merton's own implicit, and sometimes explicit, transcendental anthropology, his self-understanding, that serves to clarify and facilitate further insights regarding Merton's own understanding of the human journey as a transcultural phenomenon and basis for dialogue, which becomes increasingly clearer in his developing reflections concerning his encounters with Zen.

6. Self-Transcendence and Interreligious Dialogue

I want to demonstrate the relationship between Merton's quest for ultimacy and his interreligious dialogues in several significant ways. First

I will highlight the fact that Merton's search for his fulfillment in God is an interreligious search. That is to say that Hindus, Jews, Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, and Taoists contribute to Merton's search for God and personal authenticity from his early days as a wondering "atheist" until his last days as a mature spiritual master, and my second chapter will highlight this particular aspect of his journey. Secondly, I will accentuate the fact that Merton grows in appreciation for non-Catholic religions as wisdom traditions, and that his desire 'to drink from' their 'wells of experience' and to unite divided worlds in himself impels him to undertake fairly serious studies of some major religious traditions, especially Zen Buddhism. Finally, I seek to explicate how Merton was able to appropriate Zen-insight, integrating it with his own Catholic heritage, from the perspective of his affirmation of a point of convergence among religious traditions, namely their functional kinship of facilitating for persons a "transformation of consciousness and a liberation of the truth imprisoned in [humanity] by ignorance and error" and as living testimonies and expressions of that very transformation (A), 333).

However, I must clarify what I mean by "interreligious dialogue;" such clarification ought to answer questions concerning the foundation that I attempt to explicate. The Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples have outlined four distinct forms of dialogue, emphasizing their interrelation and refraining from claiming an order of priority among them.⁵³ The forms are:

⁵³*Dialogue and Mission*, statement of the Pontifical Secretariate for Non-Christians, "Attitudes of the Catholic Church Towards the Followers of Other Religions" in "Reflection and Directives on Dialogue and Mission," *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 84 (1984), 816-28. The forms are also discussed in *Dialogue and Proclamation*, statement of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples and the Pontifical Council on Inter-

(a) *The dialogue of life*, where people strive to live in an open and neighborly spirit . . . (b) *The dialogue of action*, in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people. (c) *The dialogue of theological exchange*, where specialists seek to deepen their understandings of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each other's spiritual values. (d) *The dialogue of religious experience*, where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the absolute.⁵⁴

Thomas Merton's journey is intensely personal and as a vowed monk dedicated to a particular theology of baptism that understands the contemplative life as one of continual rebirth and spiritual deepening through prayer, his dialogues with other seekers clearly exemplify the fourth form of dialogue. Merton clearly and consistently situates his dialogue with Suzuki within this framework, as a dialogue between "monks and Zen-men."

However, Merton's own perennial interests in issues of peace, justice and social transformation seem to intensify in his later life. He understands that personal transformation, if it is genuine, must have social implications. He becomes more outspoken concerning the abolition of war, writes about connections between Marxism and monasticism (both Christian and Buddhist).⁵⁵ His "campaign" against the Vietnam war

Religions Dialogue, *Bulletin of the Pontifical Council on Inter-Religious Dialogue* 26 (no. 2, 1991) 210-250. See also William R. Burrows, editor. *Redemption and Dialogue: Reading Redemptoris Missio and Dialogue and Proclamation* (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis, 1993) that contains the texts of both documents and commentaries on them by noted scholars.

⁵⁴From *Dialogue and Proclamation*, printed in William R. Burrows, ed., *Redemption and Dialogue*, p. 104.

⁵⁵See "Marxism and Monastic Perspectives" in *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions 1973), pp. 326-343. Merton gave this talk at the monastic conference in Bangkok on December 10, 1968 just hours before he died.

firmly grounds him as a collaborator with his "brother," Thich Nhat Hanh,⁵⁶ thus his dialogues also anticipate action and social transformation.

Herein I reflect primarily on Merton's involvement in the *dialogue of religious experience*, which helps him to understand the quest for self-transcendence and self-transformation, or for the "liberation from illusion" as a fundamental component of every spiritual seeker and religious tradition, and the experienced fulfillment of that quest in Love and Freedom as a *foundation* for dialogue. But the *dialogue of religious experience* is never divorced from the other forms of interreligious dialogue and in Merton's case perhaps its clearest connection is to the *dialogue of action*, so this form also receives treatment in the final chapter as constituting a significant *purpose* for dialogue. In other words, 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.

The quest for self-transcendence and self-transformation, both personal and universal, is a process involving suffering, set backs, mistakes and misunderstandings. Lonergan says "our advance in truth is also the correction of mistakes and errors" and our advance is not easy or

⁵⁶Merton wrote an essay "Nhat Hanh is my Brother" as a tribute to the Vietnamese Buddhist monk after Thich Nhat Hanh visited Merton at Gethsemani on May 28, 1966. See Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*, edited by William Shannon (New York: Crossroad, 1996), pp. 260-262, first appearing in Merton's book *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968).

steady.⁵⁷ But the correction of mistakes and errors is facilitated by dialogue that affords opportunities for insights, growth and advancement. The interreligious dialogue is important as an arena in which transformation can be sought on a universal and communal scale.

Merton's practice and his resultant beliefs are supported by Lonergan's theory. For Lonergan, the unity of religious experience provides the foundation for dialogue and the diversity of religious expressions presents the invitation to and challenge of dialogue. Religious experience, according to Lonergan, is universal at its core and "does not occur with labels attached; of itself it is not formulated."⁵⁸ But dialogue does not take place on the level of mere experience but involves other levels of consciousness in the process of objectification through languages and "styles of religious thinking." Lonergan suggests that it is in the movement from infrastructure to suprastructure that authenticity can either be enhanced or diminished. Suprastructure is very important in the quest for transformation and transcendence. Merton's dialogues of religious experience anticipate such, both personal and communal. It is only in affirming the link between the infrastructure of experience and suprastructure of languages, and contexts, that one can appreciate the necessity for dialogue.

If suprastructure is emphasized to the neglect of the inner experience, it is difficult to find a ground for dialogue. However, if

⁵⁷Bernard Lonergan, *Method*, p. 110.

⁵⁸Bernard Lonergan, "Prolegomena to the Study of the Emerging Religious Consciousness of Our Time," *A Third Collection* (Mahwah, N. Y.: Paulist, 1985) p. 70. Here Lonergan refers to Pannikar's diacritical theology and to several works of William Johnston (also Wilhelm Stekel and Robley Edward Whitson) to support his claim to the universality of religious experience.

infrastructure is emphasized to the neglect of tradition and historical context, it is difficult to find a reason to dialogue. Thinkers who emphasize infrastructure over suprastructure often wind up concluding that religious differences are merely accidental or only nominal. Because the experience is important, not so much the expressions, accounts and understandings of it, and because the experience is also accepted as universal (shared by contemplatives of the great traditions) it becomes easy to generalize. A Christian begins referring to Mohammed and the Buddha as possible "other saviors," or "other Christic incarnations." But such assertions neither respect the significant differences between languages of salvation, nor Buddhist claims about the Buddha, nor Muslim claims about their Prophet. So Merton, referring to suprastructure, affirms that "differences must remain" as we await "moments of greater understanding."

7. A Note on Limitations

Thomas Merton's writing corpus contains dozens of books, hundreds of articles, five volumes of published correspondence, seven volumes of personal journals, and over a thousand pages of poetry. The secondary literature on Thomas Merton is exponentially greater. I must confess that while I have read, what seems to me to be an enormous amount of relevant literature, I have not come close to reading all of it. I have, however, read enough to give me a clear sense of Merton's development as a writer and thinker, and the context that this overview provides me enables me to cogently and responsibly interpret the source that is central to this work.

Since Chapter Two attempts to provide a sense of Merton's overall journey, that chapter draws on many primary sources spanning his publishing career, and many of the most helpful and widely utilized secondary sources from among the most respected Merton scholars. But the focus of this dissertation emerges clearly in Chapter Three in Merton's dialogue with Suzuki, and since their published dialogue appears in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, and because the first part of that book contains much of Merton's more developed and mature thinking on the subject of Zen Buddhism, especially as he relates that tradition to his own, this single text becomes the prominent focus for the remainder of my work.

Thomas Merton is the person most featured in this work. For this reason I offer a chapter on the life of Merton to provide a context, but I do not provide a parallel chapter on the life of Suzuki,⁵⁹ his partner in the dialogue which emerges as a locus for interpretation, nor on Bernard Lonergan whose thought has so significantly influenced my own thinking and whose distinctions and categories find a voice in my interpretations and evaluations of that dialogue.

More importantly though, this dissertation is not on Thomas Merton per se, nor is it on Bernard Lonergan per se, rather it is on a the theme of self-transcendence and interreligious dialogue. It is Thomas Merton whose performative achievement in dialogue affords a way in to the basic question of how a person integrates religious fidelity on the one hand with genuine openness to other religions on the other hand, and it is Lonergan whose clear thinking assists me in developing explanatory

⁵⁹For an excellent examination of the Merton-Suzuki dialogue that gives more attention to what Suzuki thought about Christianity and to what he may or may not have learned from Merton, see Roger Corless's article "In Search of a Context for the Merton-Suzuki Dialogue," *The Merton Annual* 6 (1993): 76-91.

answers to the basic question that constitutes the main thrust of this work. In other words, Thomas Merton exemplifies on the level of practice what Bernard Lonergan helps me to explain on the level of theory.

Furthermore, since I am especially concerned with Merton's understanding and appropriation of Zen, I must be clear that this dissertation is not on Zen Buddhism itself. I do not pretend to know enough about this tradition in its own right to presume to focus on it in a doctoral dissertation. From the outset then, I want to put a qualifier on the subsequent judgments that I make herein concerning Zen. That qualification is that the judgments I make, although reflective of my present understanding of Zen, are only tentatively offered in light of the fact that my understandings are rooted in relatively little research and no knowledge of the languages of Sanskrit, Japanese, Cantonese or Mandarin.

Finally, Thomas Merton, D. T. Suzuki, and Bernard Lonergan all wrote before inclusive language had made its way into common usage. I have found no way of rendering their words so inclusive that does not complicate or convolute the reading of their basic assertions. Therefore, while I employ inclusive language in what I say, I do not make any such adjustments to their original words.

Chapter Two

Merton's Journey of Self-Transcendence and Self-Transformation

The most pervasive theme in all of Merton's works is the struggle for self-transcendence, and genuine identity, through continual self-transformation. His is a quest for the true self, for the "person" as opposed to the mere "individual," and this quest is simultaneously a quest for ultimate reality. Merton puts it this way:

There is only one problem on which all my existence, my peace and my happiness depend: to discover myself in discovering God. If I find Him I will find myself and if I find my true self I will find Him (NSC, 36).

For a discovery of one's "true self" is also an authentic discovery of God and others. In other words, Merton affirms that what is most personal is most communal and universal. He writes:

This inner "I," which is always alone, is always universal: for in this inmost "I" my own solitude meets the solitude of every other man and the solitude of God . . . This "I" is Christ Himself, living in us; and we, in Him, living in the Father. (DQ, 207).

Despite the fact that Thomas Merton had explicitly reserved for himself the right "not to be turned into a Catholic myth to be inflicted upon children in parochial schools"¹ the success of his autobiography established his life story among the classic accounts of Christian conversion and he has since become part of Catholic mythology, part of

¹This quote is attributed to Merton in the documentary film *Merton: A Biography in Film*, produced by Paul Wilkes/Audrey L. Glynn (New York: First Run Features, 1984).

the collective and familiar Catholic story. But another twenty years of writing followed that watershed publication and reveals the judgments about himself, others and the world endorsed in that story as merely intermediate and in some sense immature.²

The author of *The Seven Storey Mountain* was seemingly very comfortable in a privatized, other-worldly Catholic Church, and he was also quite comfortable devaluing any non-Catholic religion and dismissing "Eastern religions" as absorbtionist and pantheist. But this author's self-understanding would evolve and he would later overturn these simplistic judgments concerning other religions. Indeed, reflecting on his own corpus of writing nearly fifteen years after the publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain* Merton suggested that: "in my writing I have tried to learn a monastic lesson I could probably not have learned otherwise: to let go of my idea of myself, to take myself with more than a grain of salt" (*TMR*, 16-17).

Merton's learning to let go of his ideas about himself is part and parcel of his quest for authentic identity, not his identity as objectified in a particular self-image, idea, or concept, but his concrete identity as a subject who is "from God and for others," an authentic subject operative in his own "self-giving, in love, in letting go" (*ZBA*, 24). Throughout Merton's quest for what he calls the "true self" or "personal authenticity" he speaks of an interior tension between being and non-being, identity and non-

²William Shannon suggests that contemporary Merton scholars generally fall into one of two groups, (1) those who see Merton's later writings as a betrayal of the vision expressed in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, whether they applaud this betrayal (David Cooper), or are appalled by it (Alice von Hildebrand); and (2) those who see his later writings as going far beyond the vision of *The Seven Storey Mountain* but not betraying it (Shannon, Cunningham, Carr, Kilcourse, and many others). See Shannon's *Something of a Rebel* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1997), pp. 58-63.

identity, selflessness and solipsism. His quest for the former in each instance is ever a withdrawal from the latter.

At the risk of retelling a too familiar "Catholic myth" I provide a sketch of Merton's journey in this chapter that configures his life in terms of significant points of transformation that mark the advancement of his journey of self-transcendence and these transformations consequently impact his sense of himself in the world.

By employing an explicit theory of self-transcendence, I can discuss Merton's transformative journey as a process enhanced and encouraged through dialogue with others.³ Herein I recount (1) Merton's initial conversion to the Catholic faith in terms of a Christian moral conversion, (2) his movement to a universal concern for the world in terms of a Christian affective conversion, and (3) his experience at Polonnaruwa as one that marks the increasing clarity of the religious experience and religious conversion that has been operative throughout his life.

But by distinguishing with respect to Merton's transformative experiences and commitments I do not mean to suggest that these experiences can only be understood as generative of either a "moral transformation" or a "spiritual transformation" as I have defined these in chapter one. On the contrary, Merton's initial conversion to Catholicism, at least from within a theological horizon of interpretation, has moral, affective, and spiritual dimensions within it, as do his later transformative

³The present analysis of Merton's journey is significantly informed by Walter E. Conn's work *The Desiring Self: Rooting Pastoral Counseling and Spiritual Direction in Self-Transcendence* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), and by William H. Shannon's work *The Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story* (New York: Crossroads, 1992), and partly draws from Joseph Raab's "Encountering Others: Interpreting the Faith Development of Thomas Merton in Light of James Fowler's *Stages of Faith*", in *Religious Education* 94. (1999), pp. 140-154. Hereafter I refer to Walter Conn's work simply as *The Desiring Self*, and to Shannon's work simply as *Silent Lamp*.

moments. That is to say, from the standpoint of an affirmation of the reality of God's grace as operative in human life, Merton's entire journey can be seen as a response to such grace, and therefore a response to greater or lesser degrees of "religious experience." The point of distinguishing these conversions has to do with the dominant character of the way the generative experiences are expressed and integrated into Merton's conscious life.

I consider the first transitional and transformative movement primarily within the context of his concern for personal reform, for his own salvation, through affirming the meaning and value of life as presented to him in the teachings of Roman Catholicism. But this motivation for reform lead him to an existential commitment indicative of a moral conversion. And for him this commitment would be lived out in a life dedicated to prayer and penance within a cloistered monastery. But this commitment to meaning and value was not without its promptings at the level of experience.

Secondly, I consider his development within that tradition as leading him to a concern that embraces the whole world, a concern for social justice, for world peace, as exemplary of his continual moral conversion. But his growth in monastic life also lead to an appropriation of himself as a generative locus of meaning and value, and so advanced him toward intellectual conversion. Furthermore, his life under the tutelage of "the school of charity" as the monastery is sometimes known, also engenders and advances his growth in fulfilling his capacity for loving.

Finally, I consider Merton's growing interest in non-Christian traditions as exemplary of his desire to discover and make explicit a transcultural communion of persons in the hidden ground of Love. He

learns much through these dialogues, but perhaps most importantly, he learns practical and iconoclastic methods that enhance his capacity for self-emptying, that opens him more completely to the profoundly transformative experience of the transcendent.

1. 1938-1941: A Transformative Commitment to Meaning and Value

The Seven Storey Mountain tells the story of a young intellectual poet who discovers himself to be without meaning; wandering aimlessly in the illusory freedom of mild moral debauchery through atheism, communism and various other "isms." The story culminates in his finding an inner peace, a faith, and a center out of which to continue his quest through Christian mystical tradition. In this sense it is not an unfamiliar story. Indeed the late Bishop Fulton J. Sheen called the book a "Twentieth Century form of the *Confessions of St. Augustine*."⁴ Edward Rice said of it:

There are dozens of books with similar themes, yet this is the only one that touched a vital nerve in modern man. What makes it different from the others is its great evocation of a young man in an age when the soul of mankind had been laid open as never before, during world depression and unrest and the rise of both communism and Fascism . . . It was a confrontation of the basic alienation of man with society, with the natural and supernatural forces that had nurtured him over the centuries.⁵

The book communicates the suffering of a young boy, who loses his mother to stomach cancer when he is six years old, and his father to a

⁴Quoted on the back cover of the 1952 paper back edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

⁵Edward Rice, *The Man in The Sycamore Tree: The Good Times and Hard Life of Thomas Merton* (Garden City: Image Books, 1972), p. 65.

brain tumor when he is almost sixteen, and in between experiences much uprooting and moving about. It recounts his struggles against depression, throughout his "desperate despairing childhood."⁶ The reader discovers that the young Merton knows a terrible loneliness, isolation and nameless yearning. His own words expose the inner reality of a fearful boy who finds himself:

unable to move, with all the innumerable elements of my isolation crowding in upon me from every side: without a home: without a family: without a country: without a father, apparently without any friends, without any interior peace or confidence or light or understanding of my own- without God, too, without God (SSM, 75).

This desolation was preparing Merton for a later surrender, one which would put him more deliberately on the road toward authentic identity and communion. But before he would make that surrender more desolation was in store for him. Following the death of his father, after the pain of loss had eased, Merton found that he had been:

completely stripped of everything that impeded the movement of my own will . . . I imagined that I was free. And it would take me five or six years to discover the frightful captivity I had got myself into . . . The hard crust of my dry soul finally squeezed out all the last traces of religion that had ever been in it. There was no room for God . . . and so I became the complete twentieth-century man . . . the century of poison gas and atomic bombs . . . A man with veins full of poison and living in death (SSM, 88-9).

When he did finally have a glimpse of his own "frightful captivity" his imagined freedom exposed itself as illusory. When he was traveling in

⁶These are Merton's words quoted by Shannon in *Silent Lamp*, p. 28.

Rome, more than a year after his father's death, he had a profound experience and insight into his moral condition. This, it seems, was a significant turning point.

I was in my room . . . Suddenly it seemed to me that father . . . was there with me. The sense of his presence was as vivid and as real and as startling as if he had touched my arm or spoken to me. The whole thing passed in a flash, but in that flash, instantly, I was overwhelmed with a sudden and profound insight into the misery and corruption of my own soul, and I was pierced deeply with a light . . . and I was filled with horror at what I saw (SSM, 114).

Though his attempts at personal reform immediately following this experience were aborted and he retreated into what he later interpreted to be a kind of morbid hedonism, this was a significant step toward a surrender that would be finally ritualized in 1938 when he made an apparent "break" from his past by joining the Catholic Church. A move that set him more firmly on the path to seeking God and his own true identity.

Merton fell into his deepest depression in his first year of university studies at Clare College, Cambridge. In his rejection of moral, temporal and transcendent authority, he entered a dark period of debauchery, drinking heavily and behaving irresponsibly.⁷ He was nearing the point of self-destruction, giving thought to committing suicide when his godfather, Dr. Tom Bennet, intervened with the suggestion that Merton leave England for America to continue his studies there. Heeding the

⁷Several of Merton's biographers suggest that he had fathered a child at Cambridge, which may explain Bennet's suggestion that he leave England. Merton's official biographer, Michael Mott, discusses the incident on p. 90 of *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (1985). M. Basil Pennington mentions it on p. xii of his *Thomas Merton: Brother Monk* (1987), and William Shannon, who gives the most detailed account of these three, considers the subject on pp. 73-74 of *Silent Lamp*.

advice, Merton commenced his studies at Columbia University in New York where he met a number of people that radically changed the direction of his life. A succession of events at Columbia revived Merton's spirits and facilitated a growing hope for meaning in life.

In 1937 Merton had signed up for a course in French medieval literature and bought a copy of Gilson's *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* as a kind of primer for the course. He read the book in spite of the "nihil obstat" printed on the first page which gave him a sense of "disgust and deception...(that) struck (him) like a knife in the pit of the stomach" (*SSM*, 171). He felt that he was in for a bit of Catholic propaganda and began reading it with more than a little suspicion.

But what captivated Merton in this reading was Gilson's interpretation of *aseitas*, a concept of God that far exceeded Merton's own rejected concepts. Merton despised concepts of God that he felt were mere projections of human wishes and desires. But this notion of "the power of a being to exist absolutely in virtue of itself, not as caused by itself but requiring no cause," that Gilson had introduced to him, opened new horizons (*SSM*, 172-73). However, an intellectual grasp of the relative adequacy of a particular *concept* of God is far from an intimate experience of God; the kind of experience that can constitute religious conversion. Merton's head may have been stimulated and satisfied with Gilson's explication of *aseitas*, but this only fueled a deeper desire to experience this ultimate reality; a desire, along with its fleeting fulfillments that ultimately manifested itself in Merton's dedicating the last twenty seven years of his life to contemplative prayer.

In the same year, 1937, Merton's friend Robert Lax was talking about Huxley's *Ends and Means*. Merton went out and bought his own copy of

this book which awakened him to the real possibility of experiencing ultimate reality. Huxley's book challenged much of Merton's early anti-mystical bias and "fired his enthusiasm" for Eastern religions. Although the monk recalling this time of his life now held those Eastern religions to be mostly a jumble of "pantheism" and "nihilism" the young seeker about whom he wrote was "not at all concerned with that" but only with "this revelation of a need for a spiritual life, an interior life, including some kind of mortification" (*SSM*, 187). So Merton began "ransacking the university library for books on oriental mysticism" that fostered in him an image of God as "an infinite, timeless, peaceful, impersonal Nothing" (*SSM*, 187). Though he confesses that he hardly understood what he was reading, the practical benefits of his exploration began bearing fruits in further more deliberate searching.

At this same time Merton's friendship with the Hindu monk and scholar Dr. Bramachari⁸ began as a kind of student/mentor relationship. But Bramachari expressed to Merton that the only genuine prayer that he had noticed in America took place in Catholic churches and he encouraged Merton to seek his own roots by advising him to read St. Augustine's *Confessions* and *The Imitation of Christ* (*SSM*, 198).

Following Bramachari's advice, Merton read much more than these and "ended up being turned on like a pinball machine by ... Thomas Aquinas, Augustine, Eckhart, Traherne, Hopkins, Maritain, and the sacraments of the Catholic Church" (*LL*, 11-12). While Merton was reading about Gerard Manley Hopkins' conversion to Catholicism, and his correspondence with John Henry Newman, Merton suddenly felt as if he

⁸Bramachari was sent by his abbot in India to the United States in 1932 to attend the World Congress of Religions.

were Hopkins and heard a voice saying to him: "What are you waiting for? Do what needs to be done!" After a short time of deliberation and denial, everything inside him "began to sing with peace, to sing with strength and to sing with conviction" (*SSM*, 216). Merton entered the Catholic Church in November of 1938.

Merton's account of his initial conversion as a response to a call to "do what needs to be done" clearly attests to his conversion as an existential commitment, a response to his discernment of value. By his commitment he is now taking responsibility for the kind of person he wants to become. We will see later that this initial step is only the beginning of his self-constitution within a tradition that will eventually enable him to give himself away completely in love.

Not long after Merton had become a Catholic he made a kind of pilgrimage to Cuba to discover Our Lady of Cobre. In *The Seven Storey Mountain* he claims his trip "was nine tenths vacation and one tenth pilgrimage" (*SSM*, 279). But his journal entries from that time would suggest to anyone less pious that the reverse is more accurate (*RM*, 170-219), or that for the young convert there was no difference between vacation and pilgrimage on that journey. On April 29, 1940 Merton records an experience of profound consolation that he had while attending Mass at the Church of San Francisco in Camaguey, Cuba. He wrote:

Before any head was raised again the clear cry of the brother in the brown robe cut through the silence with the word "*Yo Creo. . . .*" "I believe" which immediately all the children took up after him with such loud and strong and clear voices, and such unanimity and such meaning and such fervor that something went off inside me like a thunderclap and without seeing anything or apprehending anything extraordinary through any of my senses (my eyes were open on

only precisely what was there, the church), I knew with the most absolute and unquestionable certainty that before me, between me and the altar, somewhere in the center of the church, up in the air (or any place because in no place), but directly before my eyes, or directly present to some apprehension or other of mine which was above the senses, was at the same time God in all His essence, all His power . . . And so the unshakable certainty, the clear and immediate knowledge⁹ that heaven was right in front of me, struck me like a thunderbolt.

To say that this was an experience of some kind of certainty is to place it as it were in the order of knowledge, but it was not just the apprehension of a reality, of a truth, but at the same time and equally a strong movement of delight, great delight, like a great shout of joy and in other words it was as much an experience of loving as of knowing something, and in it love and knowledge were completely inseparable (*RM*, 217-218).

This stands out among the most poignant of Merton's transformative experiences, and his account lends itself very well to an interpretation from the standpoint of intentionality analysis. The focus of the account is the thunderbolt of his own certainty, the radical affirmation of his heart responding to the "I Believe" of the congregation. Not only is this an affirmation of the meaning of the creed, a judgment of its validity, but also an affirmation that goes beyond the facts of the matter in a response to the apprehension of its beauty and value, "an experience of loving as much as one of knowing something." But what ushered in the thunderclap was the unanimity, the meaning, and the fervor of the creed as confessed and proclaimed. What Merton experienced with this "thunderclap" was his own radical affirmation of the meaning and value of his tradition, of the Christian kerygma. Making this explicit clarifies the uniquely Christian

⁹I would suggest, from the standpoint of cognitional theory, that what Merton is expressing by the qualifier "immediate" would be more accurately expressed as "concrete." All "knowledge" is mediated by the conscious operations of insight and judgment. Only experience is immediate and experience is distinct from knowledge.

character of his conversion at this point in his life, and makes it distinguishable from profound religious experiences he will have later, especially when he is in Asia. Let us now return to examining the role of dialogue in Merton's early conversion.

It is in Part Two of the *Seven Storey Mountain*, in the chapters entitled "With a Great Price" and "The Waters of Contradiction," that Merton recalls the fundamental role that others played in his spiritual journey leading up to and just beyond his baptism. He recalls the community of seekers who, in his days at Columbia, challenged him intellectually, morally, and spiritually.

Daniel Walsh was the first to introduce Merton to Thomist philosophy, to recognize Merton's vocation to the priesthood, and to intrigue him with stories of "Trappist monks." Mark Van Doren impressed Merton with his dignity and moral integrity, his wisdom and pedagogical power. To the young Merton he was a true mentor, and to the older Merton a devoted friend. Edward Rice was a central member of the Columbia friends, he was Merton's baptismal sponsor and later wrote an acclaimed "entertainment" about Merton's life that captured Merton's pioneering spirit.¹⁰ Merton came to affirm that through his friendships 'the Holy Spirit was showing me the light' (*SSM*, 177). Speaking of the Columbia days, Merton wrote:

So now is the time to tell a thing I could not realize then, but which has become very clear to me: That God brought me and a half dozen others together at Columbia, and made us friends, in such a way that our friendship would work powerfully to rescue us from the confusion and the misery in which we had

¹⁰*The Man in the Sycamore Tree: The Good Times and Hard Life of Thomas Merton* (New York: Doubleday, Image Books, 1972).

come to find ourselves (SSM, 178).

In this circle of friends, Robert Lax became Merton's closest life long friend.¹¹ Merton's recollections of meeting Lax and his descriptions of him disclose his attraction to this "natural mystic."

. . . Bob Lax meditated on some incomprehensible woe . . . he was a kind of combination of Hamlet and Elias. A potential prophet, but without rage. A king, but a Jew too. A mind full of tremendous and subtle intuitions, and every day he found less and less to say about them, and resigned himself to being inarticulate . . .

And the secret of his constant solidity I think has always been a kind of natural, instinctive spirituality, a kind of inborn direction to the living God (SSM, 179-181).

Merton's profound sense of sin and of the need for grace marked his early spirituality and gave him a different perspective on the divine/human relationship than his Jewish friend had. For the young Merton living authentically was very difficult, a constant battle against distorted desires. Robert Lax, who affirmed no doctrine of Original sin, thought "nothing should be hard" and gave witness to living more comfortably within his own skin.

Lax amazed Merton with his natural simplicity and integrity. It was no small challenge to Merton that his Jewish friend could be wiser than he, with a clearer vision of things, and "correspond much more truly to the

¹¹Merton scholars are waiting for Arthur W. Biddle's study of the Lax-Merton correspondence, one that promises to be definitive. Biddle has collected over 350 letters that span 30 years, 1938-1968. For now the public has access through *A Catch of Anti-letters* and the five volumes of Merton's collected letters, to many of them but having all the letters together in one volume will be of tremendous value for investigating the personal growth each of the correspondents exhibit and the ways in which each inspire, support and challenge the other on the human journey.

grace of God than (himself)" (*SSM*, 237). But Merton's recognition of Lax's integrity made Merton receptive to the latter's challenges. In fact, Lax may have understood Merton's vocation to be a saint and a writer long before Merton did.

Merton tells us that in his days on Perry Street he became consumed with the desire to publish and establish a name for himself in the intellectual world:

My chief concern was now to see myself in print. It was as if I could not be quite satisfied that I was real until I could feed my ambition with these trivial glories, and my ancient selfishness was now matured and concentrated in this desire to see myself externalized in a public and printed and official self which I could admire at my ease" (*SSM*, 236).

Lax, however, had rebuked Merton for the trivial nature of his motivations. Lax yearned for a voice in print that could speak to the deepest needs of people, "somebody who is capable of telling them of the love of God in language that will no longer sound hackneyed or crazy, but with authority and conviction: the conviction born of sanctity" (*SSM*, 237). In the now famous exchange that followed, Lax raised Merton's consciousness with a question: "What do you want to be, anyway?"

The question immediately made Merton uncomfortable, he began searching for an adequate response, one that transcended the obvious superficiality of his literary motives, so he replied "I guess what I want to be is a good Catholic." But Lax thought this response unworthy. Merton recalls:

"What you should say"--he told me--"what you should say is that you want to be a saint."
A saint! the thought struck me as a little weird. I said:
"How do you expect me to become a saint?"

"By wanting to," said Lax, simply.

With this exchange Lax had quite possibly articulated for Merton a question that generated for him "an almost single-minded effort to reach a decision—a decision constitutive of his very life, of the kind of person he would be."¹² This decision propelled him beyond merely joining the Church, which he had already done in 1938, into a religious life of monastic prayer and penance by becoming a Trappist in 1941. Between these two significant commitments (baptism in 1938 and religious life in 1941) both Merton and Lax were volunteering at Catherine de Hueck's Friendship House in Harlem, and Merton gave serious consideration to dedicating his life to this kind of ministry before he reached the decision to become a monk.

The overwhelming prominence of moral concern in Merton's early writing, which expresses his pre-occupation with his own sinfulness, his need for moral transformation, and commitment to mortification, penance and self-sacrifice, informs and supports Conn's interpretation of Merton's 1938-1941 Christian conversion as primarily, though not exclusively, a moral one.

Furthermore, since Merton's early conversion was largely an acceptance of the meanings and values offered by a pre-conciliar Church, with a magisterial authority established beyond the vicissitudes of secular culture, Conn interprets this as "an uncritical conversion to the given, unquestioned values and beliefs "of Catholicism."¹³ Insofar as this is true,

¹²Walter E. Conn, *The Desiring Self*, p. 118.

¹³Walter E. Conn, *The Desiring Self*, p. 120.

we can understand Merton's early conversion as exemplary of what James Fowler calls "synthetic-conventional" faith.

William Shannon characterizes the Catholic Church at the time of Merton's entering when he writes:

Merton was received into the Catholic Church at a time when the Church was in the grips of an almost universal theological rigidity...a church of imposition that showed little inclination to accommodate itself to the questions and needs of the times. . . . The only thinking allowed in the Roman Catholic Church of the first half of the twentieth century was 'thinking with the Church' . . . and that meant accepting what Rome taught. 'Faith' was a blank check that believers signed leaving Rome - or rather, Roman theologians, to fill in the correct sum.¹⁴

Fowler characterizes stage three, or the synthetic-conventional stage, as determined by a "location of authority external to the self," or a willful submission to the 'tyranny of the they'.¹⁵ Now this complicates the analysis of Merton's journey insofar as his conversion can be viewed, as indeed it was by him, as counter-conventional, and genuinely progressive. However, it can also be seen as a rejection of one external and temporal authority, i.e. the prevailing modern American culture, and the acceptance of another authority, namely the Roman Catholic Church. In other words, a lateral move in terms of Fowler's faith development.¹⁶

¹⁴William Shannon, *Silent Lamp*, p. 161.

¹⁵Fowler employs Sharon Parks' phrase "the tyranny of the they." see note 19 for page 154 in *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1981).

¹⁶Fowler understands "conversion" as something different than, but not unrelated to development. Conversion is a radical transformation of centers of value and power, meaning, and symbol systems and it is a very significant event in terms of possible development. But as it is a reconfiguring, and transposition, it is not necessarily forward, developmental, or progressive. See Fowler on "conversion" in *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1981), pp. 264-5, and 285-291.

However, from the standpoint of transcendental method, Merton's conversion can be seen not only as a reconfiguring of centers of "value and power," but as a genuine mark of self-transcendence. Merton's dedication to a new way of living marked the transcendence of his habitual seeking of self-satisfaction, which had only left him 'empty, robbed and gutted.' This transcendence became manifest in his own developed conscience and left him "reaching out to the universe of value."¹⁷

Merton's affirmation of life's meaning and value as he understood it as proclaimed by the Catholic Church was preceded by and came with an experience of salvation,¹⁸ a feeling and conviction that he had been saved from the absurdity and meaninglessness of life without God. His desire to live in accord with this "salvation" led him to and was the result of his moral conversion. But, as Conn suggests, "moral conversion to value calls us to move beyond the self; it is more a challenge than an achievement; it discloses the gap between the self we are and self we should be. The challenge to close that gap...is the challenge to make our

¹⁷Walter E. Conn, *The Desiring Self*, p. 120.

¹⁸George Kilcourse interprets Merton's 1938-1941 conversion as a response to the experience of salvation. See *Ace of Freedoms*, pp. 13-40. Kilcourse also emphasizes the "affective" dimension of Merton's early conversion, which is an element that Conn emphasizes as particularly evident in Merton in the later nineteen fifties. While Kilcourse, following Conn, uses the term "affective conversion" in accord with Lonergan's usage, he uses "religious conversion" and "intellectual conversion" in more general ways. For Kilcourse, Merton's "religious conversion" is the contextualizing of his life within a transcendent horizon of meaning and value, of being "grasped by ultimate concern" and this is a real form of the question of God but this lacks Lonergan's emphasis on the "experience of being in love without limits" which is central to a fully born "religious conversion." Furthermore, Kilcourse understands Merton's initial conversion to Catholicism as an "intellectual" one (p.15). For Kilcourse, then, "intellectual conversion" is used more broadly to discuss Merton's affirming the truth, meaning and value of Catholicism as he encountered it through Traherne, Augustine, Hopkins, Gilson, etc..., and not in Lonergan's technical sense of affirming that knowing is a composite of experiencing, understanding, and judging.

action consistent with our judgment of what we should do and should be."¹⁹ In the next section of this chapter we get a glimpse of Merton's striving to close that gap and of the advances he makes toward that goal.

2. Monastic Formation: Learning Love and Responsibility

One's true self is the person we are meant to be, the (one) who is free and upright, in the image and likeness of God. The work of recovery of this lost likeness is effected by stripping away all that is alien and foreign to our true selves—shedding the "double garment" of hypocrisy and illusion by which we try to conceal the truth of our misery from ourselves, our brethren and from God (*SL*, pp. 21-23).

Three years after Merton's conversion to Catholicism he entered into monastic life at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. There he began an intensive study of his newly embraced spiritual heritage. Through the Gospels and the writings of Bernard of Clairvaux, Gregory of Nyssa, John of the Cross, and many others he began to realize that his quest for God and true identity could be a long and largely hidden process. These mentors gave Merton a language which named for him much of what he now began to increasingly experience for himself. The journey was difficult and did not end with a flight into cloistered space. He deeply wanted to live the 'freedom of the sons of God' and to love God totally and love others as himself. But realizing this freedom was exceedingly difficult for the young monk.

Partly due to the "theological rigidity" of the Church at the time of Merton's entering the monastery, and partly due to the effects of the

¹⁹Walter E. Conn, *The Desiring Self*, p. 120.

powerful experience of his moral conversion, Merton as a young monk was preoccupied with the distinction between nature and grace, and this preoccupation largely determined his early monastic understanding of himself and the world, himself as a monk over and against himself as a pleasure seeker.

In *The Seven Storey Mountain* Merton wrote "never since I have entered religion have I ever had the slightest desire to go back to the world" (p. 383). Merton's early years in the monastery were marked by his sense of personal salvation, which in his mind was very much a redemption from the world. His writing from that time reflects a *contemptus mundi* theme which had been integral to Christian spirituality since the rise of the *Devotio Moderna* and Thomas `a Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*. His early understanding of this theme was voiced in his insistence that the City of God was "irrevocably opposed to the city of this world because it belongs to an entirely different order of being" (AT, 63). Almost until the end of the nineteen forties Merton frequently emphasized the "infinite distance" between nature and grace and humanity and God, and understood his earlier life as a wondering bohemian as restricted to the former and his life as a monk in light of the latter. This initial conception of his monastic vocation as "other worldly" reflected a *contemptus mundi* that set him apart from the dangers associated with the world and the purely "natural."

But his literary vocation linked his previous life as an aimless wanderer steeped in sin with his life as a monk. The writer remained throughout. However, at this stage of development he lacked an authentic integration that encompassed both the monk and the writer, the

monastery and the world, even though his continual transcendence was leading him to such an integration.

Entering the confines of Gethsemani had not freed Merton from false identity and it only intensified his desire to “escape” it. The young monk was plagued with a spiritual restlessness that stemmed from his intense desire to die to himself and to live in the fullness of Christ. He was also troubled by his own expectations about what that should mean or how it should be manifest in his own life. He did not know which “Merton” was to die. Was Thomas Merton the compulsive writer self-absorbed? Or was the Fr. Louis Merton (his religious name) who asked that question an illusion, an incarnation of spiritual hubris? Initially Fr. Louis wanted to escape the writer, that shadow self that had “followed” him into Gethsemani (*SSM*, 410). The fact that he had been born a writer seemed to him to be a curse and his impediment to the solitary life of prayer. He did not initially like the fact that for a silent monk he was vociferous and noisy, churning out page after page and making a name for himself in the world.

Merton, however, saw no clear answer to this dilemma because on one level he knew that his writing was a way of working toward his own authenticity, a way of closing the gap between who he was and who he wanted to be, but on another he felt that his writing tethered him to the individual he was trying to leave behind. It took some time before he could come to terms with being both a silent contemplative and an insatiable autobiographer. Compounding his own anguish he concluded, in this early period, that good “discernment” meant choosing to be one and not the other. In retrospect it is both humorous and sad that an

earlier Merton believed that “the ruthless and complete sacrifice of his art” was the safest way to true contemplation.²⁰

It is Merton's transcendence of his limited conception of his monastic identity as “apart from the world” that concerns us here. My interpretation of this transcendence is informed by Conn's suggestion that from the late nineteen forties to the late nineteen fifties Merton's moral conversion becomes critically grounded in an appropriation of his autonomy as a moral agent and his self-transcendence is continually advanced by an affective conversion, a growing in love, that enables him to reach out in love to the world beyond the cloister. My interpretation is also informed by William Shannon's affirmation that during this period, Merton underwent a methodological shift in his writing, a shift that gives concrete evidence to support Conn's interpretation.²¹

Where an earlier Merton could say “never since I have entered religion have I ever had the slightest desire to go back to the world” (*SSM*, 276), and call that world “a picture of hell,” a more mature contemplative would write, “we are in the same world as everybody else” and “(i)t is a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race”(CGB, 156-57). Where earlier Merton spoke of the City of God as “irrevocably opposed” to the “city of this world” he later argued that “a *compassion* for the transient

²⁰These are Merton's words regarding the poet who aspires to be a contemplative. In the July 4, 1947, issue of *Commonweal* Merton wrote on “Poetry and the Contemplative Life.” In this article he said much he would later regret and contradict. Bound by the traditional distinctions between active and infused contemplation, and nature and supernature, Merton had not yet achieved a ‘both/and’ perspective of a unified reality and was confined to an ‘either/or’ ultimatum which would “only appall someone who does not understand the infinite distance between the gifts of nature and those of grace, between the natural and supernatural order, time and eternity, man and God” and called for the sacrifice of the former in every instance (p. 285).

²¹Kilcourse discusses this shift as a “turn to the autobiographical voice” in *Ace of Freedoms*, pp. 27-40.

world and a humility which refuses arrogantly to set up the Church as an 'eternal' institution in the world...(is the only way) to avoid disaster and absurdity" (CGB, 42).

These contrasting sentiments jump out at one who reads his opera omnia. His earlier *contemptus mundi* is later seen as "a dream of separateness" and his more mature vision is sweepingly inclusive and compassionate. The question arises: "what brought Merton to this new perspective concerning himself and the world, the Church and the world?"

Merton moved from an 'other worldly' conception of his vocation to one which rooted itself in the realization of his inescapability from the world and its inherent goodness. This reconceptualizing of his monastic vocation was preceded by a methodological turn to the subject with regard to his theological reflections. From the late-nineteen forties to the early nineteen fifties, Merton made an intentional methodological move with regard to his theology. William Shannon sights *Seeds of Contemplation* (1949), *The Sign of Jonas* (1953), and *No Man is an Island* (1955), as indicative of a new perspective in Merton resulting from a turn from employing dogmatic pronouncements as the starting point of his reflections to the locus of his own spiritual experience as the new starting point.²²

Shannon suggests that Merton's early understanding of Catholicism was colored by his theological formation within a distorted form of scholasticism, represented by the manuals that deduced truth from a set of

²²Shannon, *The Silent Lamp*, pp. 167-168, 178.

unquestioned theses.²³ When Merton wrote his own theology of the spiritual journey, *The Ascent to Truth*, he relied heavily on scholastic theology, but found his voice in that work to be artificial and inauthentic. Encumbered by the "technical language" of dogmatic theology, he felt he could not convey what was "most personal and most vital in religious experience" (*SJ*, 9). Merton's discomfort with this kind of approach to religious reflection prompted him to employ a new method. This method begins with experience in all its ambiguity and uncertainty and rediscovers the importance of the question. In this sense it is a kind of recovery of a more authentic scholasticism.²⁴

The author of *The Seven Storey Mountain* and of *The Ascent to Truth* seemed to have many ready answers about truth, life and faith, but representative of this transition Merton writes:

. . . I am not sure of myself and do not claim to have all the answers . . . In fact, I often wonder about these 'answers,' and about the habit of always having them ready. The best I can do is look for some of the questions (*CGB*, 49).

And elsewhere:

. . . the deep, inexpressible certitude of the contemplative experience awakens a tragic anguish and opens many questions in the depths

²³Shannon describes this kind of theology, which became prominent in the late seventeenth century, saying: "the thesis itself is accepted as true and not open to questioning. The task of the theologian is simply to defend the thesis with proofs from Scripture, the fathers of the church, and reason..." (p. 163). He calls this an aberration of true scholasticism which begins with the *questio* and not the thesis. He sites the "theological manuals (Tanqueray, Sabetti-Barrett, and the rest)" as representative of this skewed methodology (p.162).

²⁴Shannon reminds his readers that the "golden age" of scholasticism employed a methodology of the question. He writes: "Aquinas begins his reflections on God, not with the thesis 'God exists,' but with the question 'Does God exist?'" (p.167).

of the heart like wounds that cannot stop bleeding (*NSC*, 12).

Although *The Seven Storey Mountain* does not strictly follow the theology of the manuals, such theology is implicit in that work. Shannon comments that *The Seven Storey Mountain* communicates “the narrowness of Merton’s early Catholicism” and the thesis mentality shows itself in the “sharp cleavage between the supernatural and the natural” that Merton draws therein.²⁵ In this context it is easy to read a statement from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* as an autobiographical indictment. Merton speaks of his earlier limited point of view when he says:

We have got ourselves into a position where, because of our misunderstanding of theoretical distinctions between the ‘natural and the supernatural,’ we tend to think that nothing in man’s ordinary life is supernatural (*CGB*, 81).

Merton’s emerging voice is one that will continually challenge that “misunderstanding.” It is not easy to identify a particular moment in Merton’s life when he realizes the inadequacy and limitations of his former method and approach, but Shannon cites Merton’s claim in *Seeds of Contemplation* that he is “talking about spiritual things from the point of view of experience” as signaling the “hesitant crossing of the theological Rubicon.”²⁶

This methodological shift is correlative to a movement from the location of authority in an external source (Fowler’s stage three) to an authority grounded in individual experience (Fowler’s stage four, or

²⁵ William Shannon, *Silent Lamp*, p. 163.

²⁶ William Shannon, *Silent Lamp*, p. 165.

"individuating-reflective faith"). But this shift is also correlative to what Conn calls the movement from Merton's uncritical acceptance of the meanings and values of Catholicism to the "critical" grounding of Merton's moral conversion. This "critical" advancement of his moral conversion is made manifest in his appropriation of himself as a moral knower, whereby his criteria for his judgments are no longer simply "out there" or dictated by another authority, rather he becomes the generative locus of valuable judgments, an "originating value."²⁷

This turn to the subject brought with it further questions about personal responsibility to the larger world. These questions manifested themselves in an urgent concern for the world which was later voiced in such works as *Raids on the Unspeakable* (1960), *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966), and many essays on nuclear war, peace, and social responsibility.²⁸ Indeed during this same period Merton was writing his most poignant essays on the ills of American culture, speaking out against racism, the Vietnam war and the arms race.²⁹ "Accepting his own society"

²⁷Walter E. Conn, *The Desiring Self*, p. 123

²⁸See such collections of Merton's reflections and letters as *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) and *Thomas Merton on Peace* (New York: McCall Publishing Co., 1971).

²⁹As a result of his prolific outcry against the war and the arms race Merton was silenced by his superiors. In a letter from April 29, 1962 Merton writes about the event: "(t)he reason given is that this is not the right kind of work for a monk, and that 'it falsifies the monastic message.' Imagine that: the thought that a monk might be deeply enough concerned with the issue of nuclear war to voice a protest against the arms race, [this] is supposed to bring the monastic life into disrepute. Man, I would think that it might just salvage a last shred of repute for an institution that many consider to be dead on its feet. Taken from James Forest's article "Thomas Merton's Struggle With Peacemaking," in *Thomas Merton: Prophet in the Belly of a Paradox*, p. 27.

meant also accepting responsibility for it, for its health and development, or its pathological decline.³⁰

In addition to the methodological turn to the subject, a particular experience is equally important in the advancement of Merton's understanding of himself in the world. This experience did not come in the choir, or in private prayer, or even in the monastery but "in the center of the shopping district" of Louisville, Ky.³¹

There can be no doubt that Merton's experience on the corner of Walnut and Fourth street on March 18, 1958 was instrumental in forming his more integrated view of himself and the world. Merton's interpreters have made much of this particular event but that merely bespeaks its importance. Indeed M. Basil Pennington suggests that "it is necessary to see all that Thomas Merton wrote before and after this experience in light of the absence or presence of it."³²

In order to get a clear sense of what this experience meant to Merton let us read his own words:

I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs . . . It was like waking from a dream of total separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness . . . (T)he conception of 'separation from the world' . . . too easily presents itself as a complete illusion . . . This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I

³⁰In *Raids on the Unspeakable* Merton likened the role of a monk to the role of the child in the story *The Emperor's New Clothes* who alone was able to perceive the deception of the tailors and the absurdity of the situation. It is the child who says "but the Emperor is naked!" (p.62).

³¹Merton says he "had to go into Louisville to see about printing the new postulants' guide" (CGB, 155).

³²Basil Pennington, *Thomas Merton : Brother Monk* (New York: New City Press, 1987), p. 13.

almost laughed out loud. And I suppose my happiness could have taken form in the words: "Thank God, thank God that I *am* like other men [sic], that I am only a man among others." God Himself glorified in becoming a member of the human race. A member of the human race! To think that such a commonplace realization should suddenly seem like news that one holds the winning ticket in a cosmic sweepstakes . . . As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun (CGB, 156-7).

This account generates much reflection. In this there is another breaking through the shell of his false identity and an insight into his true identity and communion. Where the young boy had felt his "isolation crowding in" on him from all sides when he was "living in death," the monk now recognizes another kind of isolation in a fantasy world of "supposed holiness." This recognition represents a clear realization of Merton's persistent belief that "the discovery of ourselves is always a losing of ourselves, a death and a resurrection" (NMI, xv); and that "we must forget ourselves in order to be truly conscious of who we are" (NMI, xvi-xvii).

It comes as a great relief to Merton that his separation from the world is illusory. In amazement at his own stupidity and spiritual hubris he bemusedly observes: "(t)o think that for sixteen or seventeen years I have been taking seriously this pure illusion" (CGB, 157). His gratitude for being human among and like others stands in contrast to the Pharisee who prayed in gratitude that he was not like the publican (Luke 18, 11-12), and in contrast to his earlier conception of his monastic vocation.

Elena Malits notes that “for Merton, as for Augustine, the self as image of God participates in the ineffable mystery of the divine.”³³ That is to say every *person* participates in the divine. Merton affirmed this notion in every period of his development. But affirming concepts often precedes profound experience and deeper insight. It seems that only now has he attained to a profound understanding of the “image of God” that all people retain, and that through the eyes of faith he sees “shining like the sun.” This is not to say that prior to this experience Merton did not appreciate this. On the contrary much of his earlier writing, but especially *No man is an Island*, is an anticipatory plea for a deeper discovery of the *imago dei*, and experiencing union in the mystical body of Christ through the genuine love of others; “seeking and finding truth in the lives of those around us.” He sums up the major theme of reflection in that book by citing two lines of the Gospel:

“If any one should save his life, he must lose it,” and, “Love one another as I have loved you.” It is also contained in another saying from St. Paul: “We are all members one of another” (*NMI*, xv).

It is interesting that these very ideas reemerge in his account of his experience in Louisville; losing the illusion of his self-isolation, discovering his true humanity, loving “those people” and realizing that “I am theirs and they are mine.” Another statement in *No Man is an Island* aptly anticipates his Louisville experience:

If we live for others, we will gradually discover that no one expects

³³From Elena Malits, “‘To Be What I am’: Thomas Merton as a Spiritual Writer,” in *Thomas Merton: Prophet in the Belly of a Paradox* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), edited by Gerald Twomey, p. 205.

us to be "as gods." We will see that we are human, like everyone else, that we all have weaknesses and deficiencies (*NMI*, xxi).

On the corner of Fourth and Walnut Merton did discover that he was human, like everyone else, and that that was a tremendous blessing. His appreciation of inter-communion and love of neighbor has moved from an anticipatory yearning for that authentic realization to an affirmation of it that is rooted in profound experience.

Conn argues that Merton's progressively confident and convincing moral authority during this period on issues about which the Church at the time was mostly silent, indicates the critical grounding of his moral agency. The move to a "post-conventional" morality depends upon "restructuring one's horizon in terms of value, and then grounding that horizon in the reality of oneself as a critical, originating value." Insofar as Merton appropriated himself in such a way he was able to challenge not only the larger society on issues of war and peace, justice and oppression, but also the Church itself.

Furthermore, Conn argues that Merton's account of his experience on the corner of Fourth and Walnut may best represent "affective conversion." I did not discuss affective conversion in the first chapter, mostly because it is very difficult to distinguish from moral and religious conversion. However, Conn suggests that it is distinguished from and related to moral conversion as "it is the concrete possibility of overcoming moral impotence" because a powerful love of others enables us to execute the moral judgments we make without self-concern. In other words it enables us to close the gap that opens up like a chasm in the face of moral conversion between who we are and who we should be by engendering the courage necessary to live in accord with our convictions.

Affective conversion is distinguished from and related to "religious conversion" insofar as the former is a falling in love with others that reorients one toward self-giving, while the latter is "other-worldly" falling in love, not in contrast to "worldly love" as Merton might have once understood it, but in the sense that this love is unrestricted, as experienced it is without a known object, and is the ultimate fulfillment of consciousness. Conn discusses Merton's spiritual transformation, or "religious conversion" as it is expressed in Merton's recounting of his experience in Ceylon. I will follow Conn's lead in this, especially since spiritual transformation provides the very context in which I want to discuss Merton's appropriation of Zen.

In light of Merton's increasing awareness and acceptance of his own humanity his writings from this period speak more convincingly than his earlier works about the intimate love that sustains and animates all people in a fundamental union of persons. In these later writings, even though many of them are still aggressive condemnations of racism, war, and consumeristic culture, his own humility is more apparent and there emerges a noticeable desire to dialogue with other human sciences and religions about the human quest for authenticity and self-transcendence. Indeed he suggests to his fellow monks that "it may be very useful for us to discover new and unfamiliar ways in which the human task of maturation and self discovery is defined" (CWA, 208). His own quest for this discovery has led him to the affirmation that "God speaks, and God is to be heard, not only on Sinai, not only in my own heart, but in the voice of the stranger" (CP, 384).

While Merton's moral conversion left him painfully aware of the gap that persisted between who he thought he was and who he wanted to be,

and while his affective conversion was helping him more and more to become that person he wanted to be, a deeper desire to be "no-one", to be "nobody", to lose himself fully in the love of God continually persisted. This deeper desire compelled Merton to "follow Christ in his kenosis" and become totally empty of himself so as to live fully in and from God. But in order for this deepest desire to be fulfilled Merton had to continue his self-transcending journey.

3. Emptiness and Compassion

In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* Merton wrote:

The more I am able to affirm others, to say 'yes' to them in myself, by discovering them in myself and myself in them, the more real I am. I am fully real if my own heart says yes to everyone.

I will be a better Catholic, not if I can *refute* every shade of Protestantism, but if I can affirm the truth in it and still go further. So, too, with the Muslims, the Hindus, the Buddhists, etc. This does not mean . . . the vapid careless friendliness that accepts everything by thinking of nothing. There is much that one cannot "affirm" and "accept," but first one must say 'yes' where one really can (144).

Merton's desire to discover the other in himself and himself in the other intensified during the last decade of his life. Although he had always had varying degrees of interest in non-Christian religions, dating back to his friendship with Bramachari and his readings of Gandhi and Coomaraswamy, it was not until many years later that he was able to accept that his own faith and spirituality, indeed his own tradition, might be challenged and augmented by the wisdom of other traditions.

Beginning in 1959 with his dialogue with Suzuki, Merton's desire to reach out to others of many different faiths began to emerge as a central concern. The Suzuki dialogue provides material that helps to answer specific questions regarding what Merton learned from Zen and the subsequent chapters deal with such questions. But the dialogue with Suzuki is only one among many with Buddhists. Through Merton's dialogues with the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh he also began to discover a 'new solidarity' among contemplatives of various religious traditions. This solidarity was rooted in religious experience and in the horizons of meaning and value constituted by the acceptance and affirmation of such experience as profoundly transformative. The transvaluation of values inspired by the acceptance of such experience, brought about a radical commitment to peace and justice, issues which would emerge as common concerns among Merton, The Dalai Lama, and Thich Nhat Hanh.

Furthermore, in a real sense, Thomas Merton had been a man of "religious experience" even before he had entered Gethsemani, and the affirmations and commitments that he had made in light of his experiences put him in a position to communicate with other like minded men and women of religious traditions vastly different from his own. But in this section of the chapter I want to focus on Merton's journey to Asia and on a particular experience he had there, one that seemingly surpasses others with respect to its intensity, simplicity, and clarity. I will discuss his account of the experience in terms of "spiritual transformation" or "religious transformation" only to distinguish it from the other transformative occurrences I have discussed thus far, but not to suggest that what we have discussed as his moral and affective

transformations were not also in some sense generated by his "religious experience."³⁴

On October 15, 1968 Merton embarked on an Asian pilgrimage. The official reason for the trip was his participation at a conference on monastic renewal to be held in Bangkok in December of that same year. But before making his way to Thailand he would tour parts of India, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), and the Himalayas and would meet the Dalai Lama, and lesser known Rinpoches of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Meeting these people and engaging them in dialogue was to Merton a more attractive dimension of his journey than giving talks on the monastic life.

The Asian Journal which recounts this pilgrimage is, as William Shannon claims, "impossible to summarize"³⁵ because it is largely a collection of random jottings of thoughts from a mind firing with excitement and enthusiasm, a mind leaping from one topic to the next, one interest to the next, from present observations about the weather, birds in bushes, the sun on the mountains, to reflections on Buddhist doctrines and Christian feast days. But an insight can be had into a basic underlying theme of the journal, and that is grounded in Merton's basic anticipation that he is to discover something in Asia. It is this anticipation

³⁴Here the distinction between "religious experience" and "religious conversion" becomes very important. Merton may have had many experiences of the love of God, "of Mercy within mercy within mercy" (*SJ*, 362), but beyond experience there is understanding, and Judgment, and decision. What does a person make of his or her own experience? How is it integrated into his or her conscious life? It may be said that if Merton's transformative experiences from 1938-1941 were at some level "religious" they facilitated a conversion that was primarily moral. Likewise, if his experience in Louisville was "religious" its expression and fruits were noticeably "affective." The experience that concerns us here is largely expressed in apophatic language that is largely independent of the particularities of a single, or "official" suprastructure. However, since Merton died shortly thereafter, one can not really say how this experience, as profound as it was for him, would have been integrated into his conscious life.

³⁵William Shannon, *Silent Lamp*, p. 274.

that accounts for all of his excitement and he articulates this in a talk he gave in October at the Temple of Understanding Conference in Calcutta.

I have left my monastery to come here not just as a research scholar or even as an author. I come as a pilgrim who is anxious to obtain not just information, not just "facts" about other monastic traditions, but 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 (*AJ*, 313).

One of the highlights of Merton's pilgrimage was meeting the Dalai Lama. They met only three times and with the employment of a translator they discussed serious issues in metaphysics, epistemology, and the practical details of monastic vows, meditation, and the attainment of "illumination" or a "transformation of consciousness."

Merton recalled the Dalai Lama's emphasis on appropriating one's conscious life of the mind. His Holiness spoke of observing the mind as an object of concentration, while being mindful that (1) the "I who concentrates" (2) the "observing of the concentration," and (3) "the mind as object of concentration" are "all three one mind" (*AJ*, 113). Merton found the Dalai Lama's ideas concerning illumination very helpful and "built on a very solid foundation." Merton concluded that the Dalai Lama's basic message was one of "detachment," an insistence "on an 'unworldly life,' yet [he] sees it as a way to complete understanding of, and participation in, the problems of life and the world" (*AJ*, 113). Although the subjects of their discourses were "very

serious," The Dalai Lama recalls that "our nature, laughing, joking, teasing quickly came through."³⁶

In just three meetings with one another the two men established a genuinely profound friendship. Through their discussions Merton found that there was "a deep spiritual bond" between them and that they had become "very good friends and were somehow quite close to one another" (*AJ*, 125). And the Dalai Lama was equally impressed by "the inner life that [Merton] manifested." He recalled in his autobiography, *Freedom in Exile*, that his meeting with Merton was one of his "happiest memories." Meeting Merton and discovering "a deeply spiritual man," was "the first time I had been struck by a feeling of spirituality in anyone who professed Christianity."³⁷ Indeed, he thought Merton not only to be a Catholic *Geshe*, or "learned" man, but also a "holy man," who inspired him to learn from the Christian tradition's commitment to "social work, social affairs, the education field."³⁸

As excited as Thomas Merton was to meet the Dalai Lama and engage him in conversation he was also looking forward to meeting still others from whom he could learn. As the Himalayan portion of his pilgrimage continued around the area of Darjeeling, India he met

³⁶See *Merton: By Those Who Knew Him Best*, edited by Paul Wilkes (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), p. 147.

³⁷The Dalai Lama, *Freedom in Exile* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1991, reprint edition), p. 189.

³⁸Paul Wilkes., ed. *Merton: By Those Who Knew Him Best*, p. 147.

Brother Patrick Hart, OCSO told me that the Dalai Lama has planted a tree on the grounds of Gethsemani to honor his friend Thomas Merton. I interviewed Patrick Hart on July 12, 1998 at Gethsemani Monastery in Kentucky.

one contemplative who greatly impressed him. Merton recalled meeting Chatral Rimpoche:

Chatral looked like a vigorous old peasant in a Bhutanese jacket tied at the neck with thongs and a red woolen cap on his head. He had a week's growth of beard, bright eyes, a strong voice, and was very articulate, much more communicative than I expected . . . we started talking about dzogchen and Nyingmapa meditation and "direct realization" and soon saw that we agreed very well . . . but also talking in some points of Christian doctrine compared with Buddhist: dharmakaya . . . the Risen Christ, suffering, compassion for all creatures, motives for helping others, but all leading back to dzogchen . . . "beyond the dharmakaya" and "beyond God" to the ultimate perfect emptiness. He said he had meditated in solitude for thirty years or more and had not attained to perfect emptiness and I said I hadn't either (AJ, 143).

The "ultimate perfect emptiness" that Merton was hoping to experience had been the subject of his dialogue with Suzuki, of his interest in Hui Neng, and ultimately of his interest in Zen, and all of this will be considered in the following chapters. But at this point, Merton suspects that he is very close to experiencing this perfect emptiness, and perhaps this is the discovery that he had hoped for in Asia, in his desire to become a "more enlightened monk."

Although Chatral was at first surprised to find himself getting along so well with a Christian (AJ p.144), Merton remarked that:

the unspoken or half-spoken message of our talk was our complete understanding of each other as people who were somehow *on the edge* of great realization and knew it and were trying, somehow or other, to go out and get lost in it-and that it was a grace for us to meet one another...If I were going to settle down with a Tibetan guru, I think Chatral would be the one I'd choose. But I don't know yet if that is possible, or whether I need to" (AJ p.144).

Certainly Merton's spiritual journey from atheism to Catholicism, from Catholicism to Gethsemani and from there exploring the spiritual traditions of the world, had been marked by many moments of profound experience and realization. However, in Asia, Merton was expecting and seeking yet another such moment. The moment arrived in Ceylon. Whether this was the great realization of dzogchen, to be interpreted as the pinnacle of his religious experience, or as "just another" of the many powerful experiences he had is quite debatable. Merton's own words though are clear, "I have now seen and have pierced through the surface and have got through the disguise (*AJ*, 235-236).

Thomas Merton was in Ceylon in December just before his conference in Bangkok. While he was there he visited the sculptures of the Buddha in Polonnaruwa. Affirming the difficulty of expressing religious experiences sufficiently, Merton wrote; "Polonnaruwa was such an experience that I could not write hastily of it and cannot write now, or not at all adequately" (*AJ*, 230). Fortunately, however, Merton did record this experience in his journal on December 4, three days after it had occurred. Here is a good portion of what he wrote:

I am able to approach the Buddhas barefoot and undisturbed, my feet in wet grass, wet sand. Then the silence of the extraordinary faces. The great smiles. Huge and yet subtle. Filled with . . . the peace not of emotional resignation but of Madhyamika, of sunyata . . . I was knocked over with a rush of relief and thankfulness at the obvious clarity of the figures, the clarity and fluidity of shape and line, the design of the monumental bodies composed into the landscape, figure, rock and tree . . . 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 . . . The thing about all

this is that there is no puzzle, no problem, and really no "mystery." All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear. The rock, all matter, all life, is charged with dharmakaya . . . everything is emptiness, 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 I have seen what I was obscurely looking for. I don't know what else remains but I have now seen and have pierced through the surface and have got through the disguise (*AJ*, 235-36).

Merton's expression that everything is emptiness, everything is compassion resonates with the classic accounts of religious experience as an experience of "all and nothing, todo y nada, void and infinity" (*MZM*, 212), and with Suzuki's equation, "zero = infinity, infinity = zero" (*ZBA*, 107). But the fullness of Merton's experience is expressed as love, as "compassion." Conn suggests that with this experience Merton has finally actualized the radical self-emptying that affords the fullness of the "transcendent experience" about which he had written so much out of his own prior experience but also in anticipation of going further.³⁹

One must be careful, however, talking about Merton's Polonnaruwa experience in such terms as if to suggest Merton had never before had a "religious experience." The important thing to remember is the technical use of the term as employed here. We are talking now about what Lonergan calls "the mediated return to immediacy...in the prayerful mystics cloud of unknowing." In this "return" one withdraws from the world as mediated by acts of meaning

³⁹Walter Conn, *The Desiring Self*, pp. 128-130.

and as Merton says, enters a consciousness "immediately present to itself and not mediated by either conceptual or reflexive or imaginative knowledge" (ZBA, 49). Rather it may just be the experience of the dynamic state of being in love without limits or conditions or qualifications, which in its radical fullness, for Merton, transcends and comes before the I-Thou differentiation in an apparent identity of love and freedom .⁴⁰

Merton's emphasis on the non-mystery of his realization, and no reference whatever to the term "God" can variously be interpreted. I would suggest that Merton's affirmation that "everything is emptiness, everything is compassion" expresses a meaning of "God" correlative with consciousness at the level of religious experience.⁴¹ Religious experience is facilitated by "the mediated return to immediacy" which, in the terms of consciousness, is analogous to the transcendence of self through self-emptying. When a person withdraws from objectification by mediating a return to immediacy attentiveness to one's consciousness intensifies. Through increasing attentiveness one discovers in and through the emptiness "that Love which is the ground of all being" (*Encounter*, 70). But Merton says, accounting his

⁴⁰Merton continues to affirm that the metaphysical distinction between the self as created and God as Creator is accurate, but he affirms that that distinction emerges posterior to experience of union (ZBA, 71). When Merton talks about the "communion that precedes and transcends communication" we can understand this from the standpoint of intentionality analysis as affirming that on the level of experience there is an immediate union of self and God that precedes conceptualization and communication, then there is a union of self and God explicit and concrete when a subject integrates that experience into conscious living by acting out of and in accord with that love. This "act" is a postverbal union that follows upon affirmation and surrender.

⁴¹This idea will be thoroughly clarified in Chapter Four in the section on "Meanings of God and Human Consciousness"

experience that "there is no puzzle, no problem, no 'mystery,' everything is clear."

Lonergan offers some helpful comments that clarify what might have happened to Merton in Polonnaruwa, and in some way serve to summarize Merton's entire self-transcending journey. Lonergan writes:

Ordinarily, the experience of the mystery of love and awe is not objectified. It remains within subjectivity as a vector, an undertow, a fateful call to a dreaded holiness. Perhaps, after years of sustained prayerfulness and self-denial, immersion in the world mediated by meaning will become less total and experience of the mystery become clear and distinct.⁴²

It was as a "fateful call to a dreaded holiness" that Merton first began to respond to this undertow of love and awe. It was this call that "pierced him like a light" and left him in horror at what he saw, and facilitated his Christian moral conversion. Robert Lax helped Merton to objectify just what this call was about when he told Merton "what you ought to say is that you want to be a saint." It was through self-denial and prayerfulness that Merton's experience of love and awe began to intensify. But it was also through his generative relationship as "novice master" to his pupils, and his experience of "loving all those people" in Louisville that helped him to grow in responsiveness to that love and awe. Through the contemplative mystical tradition, and through his appropriation of Buddhist methods of "self-emptying" Merton's immersion in the world mediated by meaning became "less total." But in conversation with Chatral Rimpoche Merton admitted

⁴²Bernard Lonergan, *Method*, p.113.

that he had still not attained to that radical emptiness of total freedom. It may appear as though at Polonnaruwa Merton had reached the pinnacle of self-emptying in "dzogchen," that he had finally gotten lost in that "great realization" where the totality of the experience of love, freedom and awe became perfectly clear and distinct.

Now this interpretation raises further questions. The fact that Merton's expression of this experience draws more on Buddhist terminology than on familiar Christian language is not simply coincident with the experience having occurred at Polonnaruwa and raises the question of the role that his intensive study of eastern contemplative traditions played in facilitating this experience. Furthermore, when Walter Conn suggests that Merton's experience at Polonnaruwa stands as an "experience of the fulfillment of self-transcendence," is he suggesting that this experience, as Merton understood and appropriated it, supersedes and replaces Merton's affirmation and commitment to Christian revelation?

The answer to the first question presumes Merton's engagement with eastern traditions, especially Zen Buddhism, and the next two chapters present a significant portion of that engagement and attempt to answer that question. Regarding the second question, Merton gives no evidence to support what this question implies, and gives plenty of evidence to suggest that this experience is filled out and validated in light of Christian Kerygma. Indeed it was a week after this experience at Polonnaruwa that Merton proclaimed "Christianity and Zen are the future;"⁴³ a proclamation that clearly affirms the complementarity of

⁴³The night before his fatal accident Merton said this to John Moffit. See John Moffit, *Journey to Gorakhpur* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), p. 275.

his Zen-like enlightenment⁴⁴ with his own affirmations of the meaning and value of the Christian tradition.

⁴⁴Conn emphasizes the similarities between Merton's account of his experience at Polonnaruwa and Zen descriptions of satori and kensho. *The Desiring Self*, p. 129

Chapter Three

In Dialogue with Suzuki: The Specific Context

Life is made of encounters. A true encounter stimulates questions and answers. When you meet an interesting stranger you find yourself alert and curious. Who is this person? You seek to discover something of the mystery of his identity and of his history. At the same time if he inspires confidence, if he seems to be a person of unusual depth and experience, you begin to open up to him and to share with him the secret of your own life. In this way, a true personal encounter brings not only knowledge of another, fellowship with another, but also a deeper comprehension of our own inner self (*MJ*, 3).

The authentic person is not born in stoic isolation but in the openness and dialogue of love (*MZM*, 267).

I have chosen to focus on Thomas Merton's dialogue with the Zen scholar Diasetz T. Suzuki because it affords a manageable amount of material that raises the precise questions that I have stated from the outset and is fecund with the data that can lead us to the anticipated insights that may offer accurate answers to those questions. But the task of this chapter is simply to lay out the data, and our questions and answers will be put on hold until an interpretation can be offered in the following chapter, entitled "Dialogue, Consciousness and Common Horizons."

1. D. T. Suzuki

On August 11, 1938 Merton communicated in a letter to Robert Lax some of his intellectual/spiritual interest prior to his baptism. He wrote, "I think to go and read pieces of Aquinas, and I think to read about Zen

Buddhism" (*RJ*, 144). The second aspect of this combined interest initially fell into the margins when Merton became a Catholic monk only to return with greater force and depth as he matured in his vocation. At the time of his early death he was among the American pioneers in the Christian-Buddhist dialogue.¹ Just before his death, thirty years after this letter to Lax, Merton commented that "Christianity and Zen are the future." Nearly another three decades passed before the Gethsemani Encounter (a dialogue between Buddhists and Christians) was held in 1996 on the grounds of Merton's Kentucky home.²

Lawrence Cunningham suggests that Merton was interested in Zen primarily for two reasons: first because Merton thought Zen could offer Christian contemplatives something from the standpoint of technique and secondly that "the Zen desire for self-emptying might aid the Christian in understanding that self-emptying which is incumbent on every believer who wishes to follow 'Christ in his kenosis.'"³ Part of the answer to the question of what Merton learned from Zen is given here in Cunningham's clue. We might suggest, however, that it is not just the Zen "desire" for self-emptying that aids the Christian as much as it is the Zen "understanding" and the Zen techniques that facilitate the process of self-emptying that aids the Christian, at least these are what aided Merton. But Merton's knowledge of Zen (and Zen Buddhism) can not be

¹ Merton was significantly inspired in the dialogue by Dom Aelred Graham, William Johnston, Heinrich Dumulin, and Enomiya LaSalle.

² See *The Gethsemani Encounter: A Dialogue on the Spiritual Life by Buddhist and Christian Monastics*, edited by Donald W. Mitchell & James Wiseman, O. S. B. (New York: Continuum, 1997). This is a collection of the papers delivered at the conference held at Gethsemani in the Summer of 1996.

³ *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master*, edited with an Introduction by Lawrence Cunningham (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1992), pp. 45-46.

considered apart from his relationship to Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, the renown expositor of Zen Buddhism to the west.⁴

Masao Abe remarks that D. T. Suzuki's name is nearly synonymous with Zen in Western popular culture. Suzuki is often credited not only with introducing Zen to the West, but with effecting Western culture by "sparking a radical change in Western ways of thinking."⁵ Although "no Western or Japanese scholar has attempted to make a comprehensive and integrated study of the whole body of Suzuki's writings" the fundamental message of his work is to return "to the basic experience prior to the dichotomy between subject and object, being and non-being, life and death, good and evil--in order to awaken to the most concrete basis for life and the world."⁶ But Abe clarifies that Suzuki's emphasis on this pure experience prior to the "separation between self and other, subject and object, man and God", does not exclude the operations of consciousness that think, analyze and discriminate, "but gives the proper foundation to them and makes them alive and energetic."⁷

During his long life (1870-1966), Suzuki never tired of communicating this simple message of non-duality in "nearly ninety titles in Japanese and over thirty volumes in English" which he published during his lifetime.⁸

⁴Alexander Lipski makes an important point that Merton's knowledge of Zen Buddhism, because of his reliance on Suzuki, is primarily of the Rinzai school and "almost totally ignores Zen in its Soto form." "The Rinzai sect emphasizes koans while the Soto school emphasizes zazen (or sitting meditation)." See Lipski's *Thomas Merton and Asia* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1983), p. 23.

⁵From Masao Abe's "Editor's Introduction" to *A Zen Life: D. T. Suzuki Remembered* (New York: Weatherhill, 1986) p. xv. Hereafter cited as *A Zen Life*.

⁶From Masao Abe's "Editor's Introduction" to *A Zen Life*, p. xv.

⁷From Masao Abe's "Editor's Introduction" to *A Zen Life*, p. xvi

⁸From Masao Abe's "Editor's Introduction" to *A Zen Life*, p. xv

Of these thirty volumes in English, eleven titles appear in what is known at the Thomas Merton Studies Center at Bellarmine College as "Merton's library at the hermitage at the time of his death."⁹ Merton's introduction to Zen, and his growing understanding of that tradition, can almost be exclusively attributed to the tutelage of D. T. Suzuki. But Merton's relationship with the Zen master went well beyond his reading of Suzuki's published literature and expanded into a creative and generative dialogue.

Robert E. Daggy has suggested that "the fullest possible picture of the encounter between Merton and Suzuki" can be gleaned from three sources: Daggy's collection of the Merton/Suzuki letters,¹⁰ Merton's essay "D. T. Suzuki: The Man and His Work" and "Wisdom in Emptiness: A Dialogue by Daisetz T. Suzuki and Thomas Merton"(Encounter, xviii-xix).¹¹ I rely on these sources to present a picture of that encounter.

⁹Jonathan Montaldo, the current director of the Thomas Merton Studies Center at Bellarmine College, has informed me that some of these eleven books were found by monks of Gethsemani in their common library with Merton's marginalia, and he also suggests that Merton could well have read more of Suzuki's work than these eleven books because Merton often used inter-library loan.

The eleven books by D. T. Suzuki in "Merton's library" are: *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove Press, 1964); *Essays in Zen Buddhism, First Series* (London: Rider & Co., 1949); *Essays in Zen Buddhism, Second Series* (London: Rider & Co., 1950); *Essays in Zen Buddhism, Third Series* (London: Rider & Co., 1953); *Manual of Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove Press, 1960); *Studies in Zen* (London: Rider & Co., 1955); *The Training of the Zen Buddhist Monk* (New York: University Books, 1959); *The Zen Doctrine of No-Mind* (London: Rider & Co., 1949); *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D. T. Suzuki*, edited by William Barrett (Garden City: Doubleday, 1956); *Zen and Japanese Buddhism* (Tokyo: Japan Travel Bureau; Tokyo and Rutland, VT., 1958); and *Zen and Japanese Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1959).

¹⁰Robert E. Daggy compiled a collection of extent letters between Merton and Suzuki, as well as Merton's journal entries relating to the Merton and Suzuki meeting in New York in 1964, as *Encounter: Thomas Merton and D. T. Suzuki* (Monterey: Larkspur Press, 1988) hereafter *Encounter*. As *Encounter* is composed of primary material I will cite it hereafter with text notes.

¹¹"D. T Suzuki: The Man and His Work" first appeared in Japan in *Eastern Buddhist* . 11. (1967) and "Wisdom in Emptiness"(which is comprised of a "Prefatory Note" by Merton;

The friendship between Merton and Suzuki was initiated by a letter to the Zen Buddhist from the Trappist. While working on a compilation of sayings of the Egyptian desert monks of the fourth century Merton was struck by their similarities to the sayings of many Zen Masters. At this point Merton had again been reading Zen literature with a sincere interest for about a decade. Merton decided to write Suzuki and ask him to write an introduction to what would later be published as *The Wisdom of the Desert*, discussing the apparent similarities between the sayings of Zen masters and Desert Fathers. This inquiry launched a correspondence that generated serious dialogue on points concerning experience and interpretation regarding Christian mysticism and Zen Buddhism.

2. Merton Makes Contact:

On March 12, 1959 Merton begins his letter to Suzuki confessing his ignorance of Zen and claiming very little knowledge of Christianity. He then writes:

All I know is that when I read your books--and I have read many of them--and above all when I read English versions of the little verses in which the Zen Masters point their finger to something which flashed out at the time, I feel a profound and intimate agreement. Time after time, as I read your pages, something in me says 'That's it!' Don't ask me what. I have no desire to explain it . . . I have my own way to walk and for some reason or other Zen is right in the middle of it wherever I go. So there it is, with all its beautiful purposelessness, and it has become very familiar to me though I do not know 'what it is'. Or even if it is an 'it'. . . . I'll simply say that it

"Knowledge and Innocence" by Suzuki, "The Recovery of Paradise" by Merton, and "Final Remarks" by both Suzuki and Merton) first appeared in *New Directions* 17 (1961), but both were later included in part two of *ZBA*.

seems to me that Zen is the very atmosphere of the Gospels, and the Gospels are bursting with it. It is the proper climate for any monk, no matter what kind of monk he may be. if I could not breathe Zen I would probably die of spiritual asphyxiation. But I still don't know what it is. No matter. I don't know what the air is either (*Encounter*, 5-6).

3. Suzuki Replies:

Dr. Suzuki responded enthusiastically to Merton's inquiry, on March 31, 1959 by inviting Merton to send his manuscript on the sayings of the Desert Fathers. Suzuki acknowledged that the temperament, insight, and detachment expressed in some of the writings of the Desert Fathers reminded him too of "stories told in the annals of Zen" (*Encounter*, 11). However, Suzuki also warned that:

Zen is misunderstood by American and European writers in various ways. To grasp Zen thoroughly a certain course of discipline is needed along with the reading knowledge of Japanese and Chinese literature on the subject. While Zen abhors bookishness, the masters have not neglected writing book after book and talking one thing after another (*Encounter*, 12).

Suzuki ended his letter to Merton by sharing some of his own judgments concerning Christianity that he listed as follows:

We have never been driven out of Eden;
 We still retain our innocence;
 We are innocent just because of our sinfulness;
 Paradise and original sin are not contradictory;
 God wanted to know himself, hence the creation;
 When we know ourselves we know God;
 etc. etc.

4. Merton to Suzuki

The apparent paradoxes concluding Suzuki's letter especially excited Merton and the letter in general inspired Merton's desire to discover to what degree he and Suzuki understood one another, though he supposed that they understood each other quite well. Merton's reply of April 11, 1959 is long (eight pages in *Encounter* and four pages in *HGL*). Merton writes:

We in the west are always ready to talk about things like Zen and about a-hundred-and-one other things besides, but we are not so eager to do the things that Zen implies: and that is what really counts . . . At the moment, I occasionally meet my own kind of Zen master, in passing, and for a brief moment. For example, the other day a bluebird sitting on a fence post suddenly took off after a wasp, dived for it, missed, and instantly returned to the same position on the fence post as if nothing had ever happened. A brief, split second lesson in Zen. . . . (T)he birds never stop to say 'i missed' because, in fact, whether they catch the wasp or not they never miss, and neither does Zen (*Encounter*, 18).

After thanking Suzuki for his "deeply moving and profoundly true intuitions on Christianity" and referring Suzuki to his own and others' works that deal specifically with some of the ideas Suzuki expressed in his letter, Merton shares his own insights and convictions about the new creation in Christ that further affirm Suzuki's paradoxical assertions.

Merton writes:

In Christ the world and the whole cosmos has been created anew . . . The whole world has risen in Christ, say the Fathers. If God is 'all in all' then everything is, in fact, paradise because it is filled with the glory and presence of God, and nothing is anymore separated from God. Then comes the question whether or not the resurrection of Christ shows that we had never really been separated from Him in the first place. Was it only that we *thought* we were separated from Him? But that thought was a conviction so great and so strong that it amounted to separation. It was a thought that each

one of us had to be god in his own right . . . Each one slaved in the service of his own idol—his consciously fabricated social self. Each one then pushed all the others away from himself, and down, beneath himself: or tried to. This is original sin. In this sense, original sin and paradise are directly opposed. In this sense there is exclusion from Paradise. But yet we are in paradise, and once we break free from the false image, we find ourselves what we are: and we are 'in Christ' . . . But Christ Himself is in us as unknown and unseen. We follow Him, we find Him (it is like the cow-catching pictures)¹² and then He must vanish and we must go along without Him at our side, why? Because He is even closer than that. He is ourself. O my dear Dr. Suzuki I know you will understand this so well, and so many people do not, even though they are 'doctors in Israel' (*Encounter*, 20-21).

Merton goes on then to warn Suzuki that if he wants to write about Christianity he should beware of the "theological watchdogs" who will hound him if he tries to speak in any sense definitively about Christian doctrine.

Merton then acknowledges that his own understanding of Zen is enriched by the Christian doctrine of grace. He sees relations between the qualities of Zen koans as they are generative of insight and Christian sacraments as they are efficacious for salvation, between the breakthrough of Zen awakening and the gift of divine life that erupts in freedom and indeterminacy as the offer of salvation (*Encounter*, 22-23).

Merton ends his letter in a search for reconciliation. Lamenting the tragedies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Merton apologizes on behalf of the Christian tradition for a history of mission work and theory riddled with bias and oversight from which no part of Asia had been spared:

If I wept until the end of the world I could not signify enough what

¹²Merton is referring here to "The Ten Stages of Spiritual Cow-herding" that Suzuki interprets in his *Essays in Zen Buddhism, First Series* (London: Rider & Company, 1949), pp. 371ff. Suzuki's comments are followed by pictures of painted plates depicting each of the stages.

this tragedy is. If only we had thought of coming to you to *learn* something . . . If only we had thought of coming to you and loving you for what you are in yourselves, instead of trying to make you over into our own image and likeness. For, to me it is clearly evident that you and I have in common and share more intimately precisely that which, in the eyes of conventional westerners, would seem to separate us. The fact that you are a Zen Buddhist and I am a Christian monk far from separating us makes us most like one another (*Encounter*, 24).

During the summer of 1959 Suzuki had been attending the Third Conference of East-West Philosophers in Honolulu, Hawaii. Partly due to this, and perhaps to his advanced age (Suzuki was eighty-nine years old at this point), five months passed before he responded to Merton's letter. On September 25, 1959 Suzuki replied briefly, keeping to the business of questions concerning the preface to Merton's book that he was writing. Two more letters to Merton follow that remain on the level of practical considerations concerning the length of the preface, and the date by which it ought to be submitted.

The conference in Hawaii had made Dr. Suzuki more aware of western misunderstandings of Zen, especially regarding questions of morality. Suzuki became concerned with clarifying that Zen was not about condoning moral relativism under the guise of spiritual freedom from conventional norms, and he was disturbed that so many westerners, whether they were attracted to Zen or repulsed by it, were understanding it thus. The preface to Merton's book became an avenue to address this issue for a western audience, and so the manuscript he sent Merton dealt largely with the Zen Buddhist take on the dynamic of freedom and responsibility. Yet Suzuki's presentation is novel and he uses the Genesis narrative of the Fall of Adam and Eve to elucidate points concerning a Zen morality.

5. Suzuki's Preface

Near the beginning of "Knowledge and Innocence"¹³ Suzuki shares with his readers a question posed to him at the conference in Hawaii. In the paper Suzuki presented at the conference he stated: "All the moral values and social practice come out of this life of Suchness which is Emptiness.." (ZBA, 104). One of the participants at the conference asked: "If this is so, then 'good' and 'evil' are secondary differentiations. What differentiates them and how do I know what is 'good' other than 'evil'? In other words, can I--and if so, how can I--derive an ethics from the ontology of Zen Buddhism?" (ZBA, 104). Suzuki takes up this question in part one of his essay as a point of departure for elucidating a Zen-Buddhist "ethics" and for demonstrating the relation of Zen "ethics" to the Christian understanding of the innocence of Adam before the fall, and the pursuit of the Desert Fathers' recovery of Paradise.

Suzuki explains that although the practitioner of Zen must be concerned with social and ethical values, his/her primary concern is with the recovery of "innocence"¹⁴ through the interior life.

[The Zen person] wants to have the heart thoroughly cleansed of

¹³Suzuki's preface was never published in Merton's book *Wisdom of the Desert* since Dom Gabriel Sortais, the Abbot General of the Cistercian Order at the time, would not grant the "Imprimi Potest" unless the Suzuki essay were left out, on the grounds that it might mislead and confuse Roman Catholics (*Encounter*, xvii). However, what would have been the preface to *Wisdom of the Desert* appeared later as "Knowledge and Innocence" in ZBA, pp. 103-116.

¹⁴Throughout this essay Suzuki identifies the Christian ideas of "Knowledge" and "Innocence" with the Buddhist ideas of "Ignorance" and "Emptiness." For Suzuki, Christian "Knowledge" and Buddhist "Ignorance" both refer to a "fallen state" in which Christian "Innocence" and Buddhist "Emptiness" or "the original light of suchness" is obscured. But in the end, Innocence is not separate from Knowledge, nor Ignorance separate from Emptiness (ZBA, 105).

all impurities issuing from "Knowledge" which we acquired by eating the fruit of the forbidden tree. When we return to the state of "innocence" anything we do is good. St. Augustine says, "Love God and do as you will." The Buddhist idea of *Anabhoga Caryā* corresponds to Innocence. When Knowledge is awakened in the Garden of Eden where Innocence prevails, the differentiation of good and evil takes place. In the same way, out of the Emptiness of the Mind a thought mysteriously rises and we have the world of multiplicities.

The Judeo-Christian idea of Innocence is the moral interpretation of the Buddhist doctrine of Emptiness (ZBA, 104).

Suzuki contrasts Innocence with Knowledge only to establish them in proper relation to one another. From one point of view Knowledge and Innocence appear contradictory, but Suzuki suggests that their opposition is actually complementary. So our task is to "have a thoroughly penetrating insight into the relationship between the two (ZBA, 105)."

Suzuki explains:

The so-called opposition between Innocence and knowledge . . . is not the kind of opposition we see between black and white, good and evil, right and wrong. . . . The opposition is, as it were, between container and the contained, between the background and the stage, between the field and the players moving on it . . . It is like the rain that falls on the just and the unjust. It is like the sun rising on the good and on the evil, on your foes and on your friends (ZBA, 106).

Zen practice aims at recovering the "inner goodness" of Innocence out of which we can operate authentically in the world of Knowledge. For Suzuki it is a matter of becoming free from "self" "for all evils and defilements start from our attachment to it" (ZBA, 109). It is through liberation from the "self" that one begins to act out of "suchness" or "emptiness" un-selfconsciously. *Anabhoga Caryā*, which Suzuki translates as "effortless action" or "no striving" act, names the realization

of authenticity.¹⁵ Suzuki then uses examples from the stories of the Desert Fathers and quotations from Meister Eckhart to further illustrate and support his basic insights.

Using the proper relation between Knowledge and Innocence as a hermeneutical tool Suzuki makes ethical evaluations. If one sets Innocence and Knowledge up in contradictory opposition, one ends up with the legalistic enslavement to an ungrounded “knowledge” on the one hand, or the misguided license of a false “innocence” on the other. Knowledge without Innocence is the fallen state of alienation from the ground of one’s being. Innocence without knowledge is illusory, it is the quietism of empty-headedness. The proper relation of the two leads to mindfulness and wisdom, or *Prajna*. But even in the recognition of their complementarity, the responsibility of realizing the balance between the two falls on the acting subject. Suzuki sees the story of the “great hermit” as an example of a failure to maintain the balance.¹⁶

The “great hermit” is guilty of not realizing Emptiness, that is, Innocence, and Abbot Poemen commits an error in applying Innocence minus knowledge to the affairs of the world. The robbers are to be consigned to prison, for the community will suffer; as long as they are outlaws they must be deprived of their liberty (ZBA, 107-108).

¹⁵Suzuki refers readers to his *Lankavatara Sutra* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957), pp. 32, 43, 89, etc... .

¹⁶The “great hermit” was attacked by robbers and when other hermits heard his cries they rescued him and marched the robbers off to jail. “But then the brothers were very ashamed.” They went to Abbot Poeman for counsel and he said: “Remember who carried out the first betrayal, and you will learn the reason for the second. Unless you had been betrayed by your own inward thoughts you would never have ended by turning those men over to the judge.” The hermit who had been attacked, “touched by these words, got up at once and went into the city and broke open the jail, letting out the robbers and freeing them from torture” (See *WD*, XXXVII).

Whereas in part one of his essay Suzuki focused on the relation of Buddhist Emptiness to Christian Innocence, in part two he discusses it in relation to poverty. He begins, "The metaphysical concept of Emptiness is convertible in economic terms into poverty, being poor, having nothing: 'Blessed are those who are poor in spirit'" (ZBA, 108-109). Suzuki spends the remainder of part two attempting to convey the utterly radical nature of the kind of poverty he is talking about. It is a poverty so great that there remains no-self to be poor, or to be proud of one's spiritual emptiness. In order to communicate this idea he draws on the sayings of some Zen masters, but he ends the second part with a quote from Eckhart:

If it is the case that a man is emptied of things, creatures, himself, and God, and if God could find a place in him to act, then we say: as long as that (place) exists, this man is not poor with the most intimate poverty (*eigentlichste Armut*). For God does not intend that man shall have a place reserved for him to work in, since the true poverty of spirit requires that man shall be emptied of God and all his works, so that if God wants to act in the soul, he himself must be the place in which he acts—and that he would like to do (ZBA, 110).

Finally, in the third part of his essay, Suzuki discusses the 'virtues' a Buddhist attempts to actualize. "They are: (1) *Dana*, 'giving'; (2) *Sila*, 'observing the precepts'; (3) *Virya*, 'spirit of manhood'; (4) *Ksanti*, 'humility' or 'patience'; (5) *Dhyana*, 'meditation'; and (6) *Prajna*, 'transcendental wisdom'" (ZBA, 111-112). He clarifies that each of these virtues is fundamentally related to the others. Although *Prajna* is most commonly considered the goal of practice, it is also the basis of authentic practice itself. So the "Paramita moves in a circle with no beginning and no ending. The giving is possible only when there is Emptiness and Emptiness is attainable only when the giving is unconditionally carried

out" (ZBA, 112). Suzuki relates *Dana* to *Prajna* citing these words of Eckhart:

St. Peter said, ' We have left all things.' St. James said, 'we have given up all things.' St. John said 'we have nothing left.' Whereupon Brother Eckhart asks, When do we leave all things? When we leave everything conceivable, everything expressible, everything audible, everything visible, then and then only we give up all things. When in this sense we give up all, we grow aflood with light passing bright with God (ZBA, 113).

Suzuki then develops the idea of *Dana* as a kind of total giving unto death, a spiritual death. He cites a seventeenth century poem by the Zenman Bunan Zenji:

While alive, be dead
thoroughly dead--
All is good then,
Whatever you may do (ZBA, 113).

Suzuki, however, is careful to make one final point that he emphasizes as the goal of all Zen training. And that is to get beyond the possibility of "a distorted interpretation of the experience" of enlightenment. In other words, when a person experiences enlightenment in the break-through of satori, "the Zen Master...will tell us to transcend or 'to cast away' the experience itself. ...To be absolutely naked... . Then and only then do we find ourselves to be the ordinary Toms, Dicks, and Harrys we had been all along" (ZBA, 114).

Suzuki concludes "Knowledge and Innocence" with the suggestion that the gravest question that faces modern humans is "how to actualize the transcendental wisdom of *Prajna* in a world where the growth of Knowledge is everywhere encouraged in a thousand and one ways" (ZBA,

115). And he suggests that both Buddhist and Christian monks seek the solution by cultivating the virtues of “poverty, tribulation, discretion, obedience, humility, not-judging others, meditation, silence,” and he suggests that the most fundamental is poverty. “Poverty corresponds ontologically to Emptiness and psychologically to selflessness or Innocence” (*ZBA*, 115).

6. Merton Responds

On October 24, 1959 Merton writes Suzuki after having received the latter’s proposed preface.

Your commentary is excellent, but I am convinced that most readers will have no grasp of its real and intimate relation to the Desert Fathers, and will think it is a rather ‘unrelated’ excursus on Zen . . . Hence, in order that they may grasp the import of your distinction between innocence and knowledge, which is so fundamental for the Desert Fathers and for ancient Christian tradition, I will absolutely have to bring to light some clear Christian texts which show conclusively that what you are saying really belongs to the authentic Christian tradition and is not merely something that you, as a Buddhist, have read into it through Eckhart. Your use of Eckhart, of course, puts the whole study on a much more sophisticated level than the Desert Fathers sayings originally suggest (*Encounter*, 40).

In response to his own concern for Suzuki’s material to be received openly, and understood correctly, Merton writes his “Prefatory Note” and his essay “The Recovery of Paradise” that later become, along with Suzuki’s “Knowledge and Innocence,” parts that make up “Wisdom in Emptiness” in *ZBA*.

However, Merton takes issue with Suzuki’s interpretation of the story of the great hermit.

I particularly value your astute remarks about the necessity of combining spiritual ('recovered') innocence with a kind of practical, matter-of-fact acceptance of our necessity to deal with good and evil . . . and your observations about the failure of some of the Desert Fathers to combine them is very illuminating. I am grateful for this insight . . . However, I do think that you are unjust to the 'great hermit' (*Encounter*, 40-41).

Merton provides his own interpretation of the 'great hermit':

What had happened was that the monks failed to do what your Zen hermit did quite properly when he helped the robber with the ladder. These monks being 'sick' with attachment to self and with fixation on their own proprietorship and security, had seized the robbers with anger and turned them over to the police--and thus put them in danger of torture . . . Now behind the action of the 'great hermit' in liberating the robbers is the deep truth that the violence, attachment, and sickness of the righteous is what causes, to a great extent, the delinquency of the unrighteous . . . This does not mean that laws ought not to be enforced, but it means that the obligations and responsibilities of the ones who make and enforce the laws are beyond all comparison with what is actually thought (*Encounter*, 41-42).¹⁷

However, Merton goes on to say:

"I believe I understand why you insisted on this point--that robbers should go to jail--because America is now full of people who think that Zen is mere yielding to irrational impulses, and who do not know the difference between satori and being dead drunk (*Encounter*, 42).

In *ZBA*, however, Merton suggests that perhaps Suzuki's reading of the 'great hermit' is distorted by a preoccupation with his desire to dispel the misconceptions that Zen advocates a kind of moral chaos. In his

¹⁷This is a more candid and nascent version of his interpretation of the 'great hermit' found in *ZBA*, p. 122.

"Prefatory Note" Merton recognizes that "Zen is at present most fashionable in America among those who are least concerned with moral discipline" (ZBA, 101). Knowing that Suzuki is well aware of this, in "The Recovery of Paradise" Merton writes: "I am tempted to wonder if there is not, in this reaction of his, a touch of what might be called 'overcompensation'" (ZBA, 121).

Merton ends his letter thanking Suzuki for his "admirable study . . . by which I hope to profit spiritually in many ways." Merton tells Suzuki, "I shall send you a copy of whatever I write further on the subject" (*Encounter*, 44).

7. Recovery of Paradise

"The Recovery of Paradise" (ZBA, 116-133)¹⁸ is Merton's response to "Knowledge and Innocence" and a careful attempt to further elucidate, along with Suzuki, the points of convergence and divergence between the spiritual wisdom of the Desert Fathers and Zen Buddhism. But Suzuki's use of Eckhart has moved the discussion well beyond the *Verba Seniorum* into the more fundamental dialogue concerning Buddhist Emptiness and Christian "Paradise" consciousness. So Merton, following Suzuki, reaches into the writings of later Christians to further develop the dialogue.

¹⁸ Although "The Recovery of Paradise" is written in four parts, the organization of the essay is more cyclical than linear. That is, Merton returns to the same ideas again and again from different angles. I have decided, for the purpose of presenting its basic ideas, not to follow his own presentation in its succession, but to give an overview that distorts the organization of the original. So the reader will notice the leaps in my notations.

“We do not understand that life is paradise, for it suffices only to wish to understand it, and at once paradise will appear in front of us in its beauty.” Merton begins by referring to these words of Zosima, a character in Dostoyevski’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, in order to suggest that this is precisely what motivated early Christians to enter deserts. They were inspired “by the hope that by so doing they might return to paradise” (ZBA, 116).

However, Merton first takes care to distinguish paradise from heaven. He writes:

Paradise is not “heaven.” Paradise is a state, or indeed a place, on earth. Paradise belongs more properly to the present than to the future life . . . It is the state in which man was originally created to live on earth. It is also conceived as a kind of antechamber to heaven after death—as for instance at the end of Dante’s *Purgatorio* (ZBA, 116).

In and through the transformative power of Christ humans can recover paradise. Merton writes:

In the beginning Adam was “one man.” The fall had divided him into “a multitude.” Christ had restored man to unity in Himself. Christ was the “New Adam” and in Him all men could return to unity, to innocence, to purity and become “one man.” *Omnes in Christo unum* (ZBA, 117).

But the recovery of this lost unity requires the individual to die with Christ “to his ‘old man,’ his exterior, egotistical self, and [rise] in Christ to the new man” (ZBA, 117).

Where Suzuki had employed the Genesis account of The Fall to demonstrate that “good and evil” are indeed “secondary differentiations,”

Merton communicates the Patristic understanding of "the Fall" as a support to Suzuki's argument. Merton writes:

First of all, the state in which man is created is one of un-self-conscious "reaching out" to what is... higher than himself, but nevertheless intimately present within his own being, so that he himself is hidden in God and united with him . . . The knowledge of good and evil begins with the fruition of sensible and temporal things *for their own sakes*, an act which makes the soul conscious of itself, and centers in on its own pleasure. It becomes aware of what is good and evil "for itself." As soon as this takes place, there is a complete change of perspective, and from unity or wisdom (identified with emptiness and purity) the soul now enters into a state of dualism. It is now aware of both itself and God, as separated beings. It now sees God as an object of desire or of fear, and is no longer lost in Him as in a transcendent subject (ZBA, 126-127. italics added).

Merton suggests that the Augustinian interpretation of St. Paul's dictum, *scientia inflat*, applies to this fallen state. It is in the fallen state that emptiness is lost in an illusory fullness which is only the false self having become full of itself, "puffed up" with a knowledge of its own "fictional substantiality" (ZBA, 128).

Throughout his essay Merton contrasts the fallen state of knowledge to the wisdom born of emptiness, poverty, and purity of heart. Suzuki's radical interpretation of Innocence, supported by Eckhart, seems to amount to a denial of distinctions.¹⁹ By relying on the Christian concept of purity of heart, as it is discussed in the works of John of the Cross and John Cassian, Merton maintains the distinction between God and humanity, and thus he can speak of the false self of knowledge and the

¹⁹ Zen's apparent denial of distinctions was an issue of central concern for Merton, and he struggled to understand what Suzuki and others meant by their apparent denials. Merton later dealt concretely with this problem in his essay *The Zen Revival*, which I will comment on in the following chapter.

true self of wisdom, or *Prajna*. The self, whether illusory or authentic, can be distinguished from its ultimate ground and goal. Merton is, however, aware that the interpretation of innocence, that he advocates, deviates from Suzuki's. Merton communicates his understanding of the problem, and of the value behind both the Christian and Buddhist perspectives on this point.

. . . Buddhism seems to take "emptiness" as a complete negation of all personality, whereas Christianity finds in purity of heart and "unity of spirit," a supreme and transcendent fulfillment of personality (*ZBA*, 117-118).

Merton acknowledges that he is not prepared to discuss this problem in his essay but he does make a couple of observations regarding it:

Very often, on the Christian side, we identify "personality" with the illusory and exterior ego-self, which is certainly not the true Christian "person." On the Buddhist side there seems to be no positive idea of personality at all: it is a value which seems to be completely missing from Buddhist thought. Yet it is certainly not absent from Buddhist practice . . . The Main difference is that the language and practice of Zen are much more radical, austere, and ruthless, and that where the Zen-man says "emptiness" he leaves no room for any image or concept to confuse the real issue. The Christian treatment of the subject makes free use of richly metaphorical expressions and of concrete imagery, but we must take care to penetrate beyond the exterior surface and reach the inner depths. In any case the "death of the old man" is not the destruction of personality but the dissipation of an illusion, and the discovery of the new man is the realization of what was there all along . . . I wonder if what Dr. Suzuki has said about "emptiness" ought not to help us to go deeper than we usually do into this doctrine of our mystical unity and purity in Christ (*ZBA*, 118-119).

Finally, Merton ends his essay by communicating what he believes the real difference between Christianity and Zen to be. Using John Cassian's understanding of the two-fold goal of the monastic life he suggests that

Zen stops at the intermediary end of the recovery of paradise in “emptiness” while the Christian journey anticipates a further ultimate end which is not purity of heart but heaven itself, “which eye hath not seen, ear hath not heard, nor hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive.” The Christian anticipates a fullness in the Holy Spirit, which is realized eschatologically, not in paradise which is the original state of creation, but in heaven. This eschatological fullness does not result from “an object that enters into emptiness to ‘fill’ it. It is nothing else but God’s own suchness” (*ZBA*, 133).

8. Suzuki to Merton:

On November 22, 1959 Suzuki writes Merton after having read “The Recovery of Paradise.” He thanks Merton for his “illuminating letters” and for the manuscript itself. Suzuki writes: “As you say, one’s “intellectual antecedents” are bound to condition everything one desires to elucidate either Christianity or Buddhism . . . The only thing we can do in the circumstances is to be tolerant toward each other” (*Encounter*, 47). Suzuki then informs Merton that he will be sending him some comments that he would like to have follow Merton’s essay. He ends his letter: “I wonder if I shall have a chance to meet you personally” (*Encounter*, 47).

9. Final Remarks: Suzuki

The comments Suzuki sent to Merton appear as “Final Remarks” in *ZBA* (133-134). Suzuki begins by recognizing his lack of knowledge regarding Christian doctrine and tradition, and that what he says regarding

such “may miss the mark entirely” but he nonetheless risks voicing his opinion. He writes:

I would like to say that there are two types of mentality that fundamentally differ one from another: (1) affective, personal, and dualistic, and (2) nonaffective, nonpersonal, and nondualistic. Zen belongs to the latter and Christianity naturally to the former. The fundamental difference may be illustrated by the conception of “emptiness” (*ZBA*, 133).

He then writes that Merton’s use of the term “emptiness” does not go “far and deep enough” because it is still on the level of God as Creator, which Suzuki understands to be dualistic, because of the distinction made between creator and creation, or creature. Zen anticipates an experience of emptiness, or no-mind, before thoughts arise, before thoughts of God and self, good and evil, etc... . Attempting to push the discussion further, using Christian terminology to communicate his idea, Suzuki invokes the distinction between God as Creator, and the Godhead. He equates the Godhead with Zen emptiness.

“Zen emptiness is not the emptiness of nothingness, but the emptiness of fullness in which there is “no gain, no loss, no increase, no decrease,” in which this equation takes place: zero = infinity. The Godhead is no other than this equation. In other words, when God as Creator came out of the Godhead he did not leave the Godhead behind . . . For creation is out of inexhaustible nothingness” (*ZBA*, 134).

Suzuki then continues to say that the eschatological fullness is “something never realizable and yet realized at every moment” (*ZBA*, 134). Recognition of this reality is The Great Mystery, or Divine Wisdom, when questions cease and we simply live.

10. Merton Responds

On November 30, 1959 Merton writes in a letter to Suzuki, "I am so glad that you have added a few comments to your article. They are very wise and I do hope that they can lead to further exchange of views, because really we have only *begun* to get into the subject" (*Encounter*, 51). And further on, "I recognize the validity of your criticism of my treatment of "emptiness"...it must wait for further development." Merton then cautions Suzuki that his use of the distinction between God and Godhead "runs into technical theological difficulties" but he refers Suzuki to John Ruysbroeck²⁰ who he believes develops Suzuki's idea quite well. Merton then informs Suzuki that he too will be appending some notes to Suzuki's final remarks. The latter half of Merton's letter is more personal and considers the value of their discourse.

Once again I thank you warmly for your collaboration in this work. It has been very interesting and challenging and I feel that such contacts are of great importance. Certainly I know that I have profited personally from your remarks. For we have been discussing our common interests on two levels: first as writers, but then as monks or Zen-men or whatever you would like to say. That level is to me much more important, though alas I have been compelled to stay more on the first level in order to get out this book (*Encounter*, 52).

Merton then conveys the difficulties he experiences in trying to experience, understand and communicate that which is at the heart of their dialogue concerning "emptiness." In seriousness and jest, he writes:

²⁰Ruysbroeck was a fourteenth century mystic and spiritual writer whom Merton greatly admired. Merton included a biographical note on Ruysbroeck in *The Ascent to Truth* where he calls him "one of the greatest Christian mystics" who "dominated the golden age of German and Flemish mysticism" (*AT*, 325). Contemporary translations spell the Flemish mystics name "Ruusbroec" rather than "Ruysbroeck." See *The Classics of Western Spirituality's* edition of Ruusbroec's work translated and introduced by James A. Wiseman, O. S. B., (New York: Paulist Press, 1984).

I am glad you are far away or you would settle the question with thirty blows of the *hossu*²¹. But at any rate I thought you would be happy to know that I struggle with the--not problem, but koan. It is not really for me a serious intellectual problem at all, but a problem of 'realization'--something that has to break through. Every once in a while it breaks through a little. One of these days it will burst out. (*Encounter*, 52).

11. Final Remarks: Merton

Merton's final remarks introduce the thought of John Ruysbroeck as a possible tool for establishing a mutually acceptable communication of the experience of "emptiness." Ruysbroeck wrote of an experience of God, or the ground of being, as "emptiness without manner," beyond all manner, beyond all conceiving. Merton quotes Ruysbroeck, though without a reference, as saying:

For God's impenetrable lack of manner is so dark and without manner that in itself it comprehends all the Divine manners . . . and in the abyss of God's namelessness it makes a Divine delectation. In this there is a delectable passing over and a flowing away and sinking down into the essential nakedness, with all the Divine names and all manners and all living reason which has its image in the mirror of divine truth; all these fall away into the simple nakedness wanting manner and without reason (*ZBA*, 135-136).²²

²¹ In *Encounter* Daggy has a footnote here that reads: "The *hossu* was part of the traditional equipment of the Zen Master, a whisk or a stick with hair on it, originally used to brush away flies and mosquitoes. It was also used to whack disciples; Ummon, for example, frequently prescribed thirty blows for a questioning disciple" (*Encounter*, note 26, p. 99).

²²Vivian Ligo has informed me that this quotation comes from Ruysbroeck's *Spiritual Espousals*, which is found on p. 52 of Wiseman's translation in the *Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984).

Merton suggests that this "essential nakedness" corresponds more closely to Zen emptiness than did his earlier concept of purity of heart,²³ and he remarks that if this "essential nakedness" is what Suzuki means by "suchness of the Godhead" then it is "thoroughly acceptable."

Merton continues making some important comments concerning grace that perhaps reach the heart of the difference between him and Suzuki regarding their comments concerning the experience of "emptiness." Merton writes:

If in my own exposition I have not spoken so much of "sinking down into the essential nakedness" of God it is not because I have insisted on man's awareness of God as Creator but rather, at least implicitly, on man's dependence on God as Savior and giver of Grace (ZBA, 136).

Merton contends that the experience of "Divine Mercy" is grace, "not as a reified substance given to us by God from without, but grace precisely as emptiness, as freedom, as liberality, as gift. This giving without reason, without limit, without return, without self-conscious afterthought is, perhaps, the real secret of God who 'is love.'" Merton surmises that everything Suzuki has talked about he would tend to see from the point of view "of freedom and of gift" (ZBA, 136-137).

²³ In his essay, "The Study of Zen" (ZBA, 1-14), written almost a decade after this dialogue, Merton recognizes Cassian's "purity of heart" as an inadequate correlative to Zen emptiness. He writes: "...my choice of Cassian's 'purity of heart' as a Christian expression of Zen-consciousness was an unfortunate example. ...Cassian's idea of 'purity of heart,' with its Platonic implications, while it may or may not be mystical, is not yet Zen because it still maintains that the supreme consciousness resides in a distinct heart which is pure and which is therefore ready and even worthy to receive a vision of God. It is still aware of a 'pure,' distinct and separate self-consciousness" (ZBA, 9). He then goes on to affirm the very same quote from Eckhart that Suzuki had used in their dialogue as a superior expression of Zen emptiness.

Merton concludes by acknowledging that despite the many differences in the doctrines of the two religions he is grateful that he and Suzuki can communicate so easily. He writes:

I feel that in talking to him I am talking to a "fellow citizen," to one who, though his beliefs in many ways differ from mine, shares a common spiritual climate. This unity of outlook and purpose is supremely significant (*ZBA*, 138).

12. The Meeting

Several years after this dialogue, on June 1, 1964 Suzuki's secretary, Mihoko Okamura, wrote to Merton to inform him that Suzuki would be in New York for most of June 1964 and would like, if possible, to meet Thomas Merton in person (*Encounter*, 57). Merton, rather unexpectedly, secured permission from his Abbot to go to New York, "under strict obedience not to see anybody but Suzuki."²⁴ Merton was excited about the prospect of meeting the man he so much admired, whose books he had been reading for almost ten years, but he was ambivalent and reticent about going to New York. On June 12, 1964 he recorded in his journal that he "can think of nowhere (he) would less like to go than New York." Yet he was also pleased by thoughts about going to the Guggenheim Museum, and that he might "slyly get to a concert" (*Encounter*, 77-78). Merton found upon arrival that he loved being in New York, seeing the lively people, noticing what had changed and what had not.

²⁴Merton also writes: "I certainly did not think that Dom James would give this permission, and yet, very hesitantly he did...(*Encounter*, 77).

On June 16 Merton records some sketchy notes regarding his meeting with Suzuki that he returns to and develops in his June 20 entry after their second meeting. In the June 16 entry he notes: "We could not get anywhere definite on the idea of 'person.' We are all different expressions (words) of the same emptiness (cf. Pessoa)."²⁵ And "the thing he insisted on most--in Xtianity and Buddhism--love more than enlightenment" (Encounter, 82-83).

Though Suzuki was 94 years old when he and Thomas Merton met, and deaf to the point of having to use an earhorn in order to hear Merton, the two had some mutually gratifying discussions. In his June 20, 1964 journal entry Merton provides a fuller picture of their meetings. They sat and drank green tea while they talked about their lives and work. Merton seemed surprised to discover that "quite a few Zen people read the *Ascent to Truth*. This is somewhat consoling though it is...in some ways my emptiest book...and in writing it, I was not fully myself. Suzuki was especially pleased with my essay on Zen in *Continuum* (1) and thought it was one of the best things on Zen that has been written in the West (Encounter, 84-85).²⁶

Suzuki expressed his love for Eckhart and told Merton more stories from the annals of Zen lore and Merton translated and read to Suzuki from Octavio Paz's translations of Fernando Pessoa's poetry. "There were a few things (in the poem) he liked immensely (especially 'praise be to God

²⁵Merton's translations of Fernando Pessoa's poems can be found in *CP*, pp. 987-996.

²⁶Merton is referring here to "The Zen Revival," *Continuum* I. (1964), pp. 523-538. I will be examining this important essay in the following chapter.

that I am not good'--'that is so important!' said Suzuki with great feeling.)"²⁷(*Encounter*, 85).

Merton concludes that this meeting was "profoundly important" and he appreciated the opportunity it provided him to affirm, first hand, the "deep understanding" between them. Although he comments that perhaps he had "tried to explain things that did not need explaining," he was nonetheless gratified that this encounter gave him "a renewed sense of being situated in the world." And with Suzuki, and his secretary Mihoko Okamura, Merton felt "for once in a long time" that he "had spent a few moments with (his) own family" (*Encounter*, 85-86).²⁸

Later that summer Merton thought back fondly on his trip to New York. He recalled the meals he ate, the museums he visited, the Van Gogh paintings that impressed him, and although there was too much of everything, it was all very good. He wrote in his journal on July 10, 1964:

The people walking on 5th Ave. were beautiful and there were those familiar towers of hotels above the park . . . New York is feminine. It is she, the city. I am faithful to her. I have not ceased to love her to the last gasp of this ball point pen (*Encounter*, 88-89).

Concluding his recollections he writes:

. . . Literature, contemplative solitude, Latin America, Asia, Zen,

²⁷The whole stanza reads (Praise be to God I am not good and have/ The natural selfishness of flowers/ And rivers, going on their way/ Concerned only, and not knowing it,/ To flower and go./ This is the only mission in the world:/ This--to exist clearly/ And to know how/ Without thinking about it.) (*CP*, 993).

²⁸ Merton and Suzuki continued to correspond after this visit (*Encounter*, 65-74). They sent one another books and other items of interest. Suzuki sent Merton a Japanese calander and a scroll of calligraphy he had written (which Merton hung in his hermitage). Merton's final letter to Suzuki, dated May 3, 1965, ends with these words, "There is only one meeting place for all religions, and it is paradise. How nice to be there and wander about looking at the flowers. Or being the flowers" (*Encounter*, 74).

Islam, etc., all these things come together in my life. It would be madness for me to attempt to create a monastic life for myself by excluding all these. I would be less a monk. Others may have their way of doing it but I have mine (*Encounter*, 89-90).

13. Merton Remembers Suzuki

Three years after their meetings in New York, and one year after Suzuki had passed away at the age of 96, Thomas Merton wrote "D. T. Suzuki: The Man and His Work" (*ZBA*, 59-66).²⁹ In this essay Merton remembered their earlier dialogue and subsequent meetings with the benefit of hindsight. Merton wrote:

There is no question that Dr. Suzuki brought to this age of dialogue a very special gift of his own: a capacity to apprehend and to occupy the precise standpoints where communication could hope to be most effective . . . This of course is an advantage in any dialogue, for when men try to communicate with each other, it is good for them to speak with distinct and personal voices, not to blur their identities by speaking through several official masks at the same time (*ZBA*, 60).

Merton recalled:

I had the great privilege and pleasure of meeting him. One had to meet this man in order to fully appreciate him. He seemed to embody all the indefinable qualities of the "Superior Man" of the ancient Asian, Taoist, Confucian, and Buddhist traditions. Or rather in meeting him one seemed to meet that "True Man of No Title" that Chuang Tsu and the Zen masters speak of. And of course this is the man one really wants to meet. Who else is there? (*ZBA*, 60-61)

And Later on:

²⁹ First published in *The Eastern Buddhist* (New Series), II. (1967).

I did feel that I was speaking to someone who, in a tradition completely different from my own, had matured, had become complete and found his way. One cannot understand Buddhism until one meets it in this existential manner, in a person in whom it is alive . . . I am sure that no alert and intelligent Westerner ever met Dr. Suzuki without something of the same experience (*ZBA*, 62).

Suzuki had shown Merton that at the foundation of all the images, doctrines, rituals, etc... which can be “very confusing to a westerner,” Buddhism was “very simple.” In its simplicity Merton understood it in relation to Christian, Muslim, and Jewish contemplative traditions, as they all contain elements within them that anticipate a recovery of union “with Absolute Being, Absolute Love, Absolute Mercy, or Absolute Void” (*ZBA*, 62), though their methods for attaining this and their interpretations of what is actually going on all differ in some ways. Merton observes, however, that deep similarities continue to exist between the iconoclasm of Zen and the Christian *via negativa* of “knowing in unknowing” as well as regarding the transformation of consciousness and radical self- transcendence they anticipate. But he concludes with a concern for love:

. . . the last words I remember Dr. Suzuki saying (before the usual good-byes) were ‘The most important thing is Love!’ I must say that as a Christian I was profoundly moved. Truly *Prajna* and *Karuna* [compassion] are one (as the Buddhist says), or *Caritas* (love) is indeed the highest knowledge (*ZBA*, 62).

Chapter Four

Dialogue, Consciousness and Common Horizons

In the previous chapter I provided a fairly complete picture of the dialogue between Merton and Suzuki as it transpired over a five year period,¹ In this chapter I focus on the basic terms of that dialogue and using the words of the interlocutors I attempt to highlight (1) Suzuki's understanding of the terms, (2) Merton's understanding of Suzuki's position, (3) Merton's own understanding of the terms, (4) Suzuki's understanding of Merton's position, and (5) developments in Merton's understanding of Suzuki's position as they are evident in their dialogue. I include in my presentation of Merton's development not only the published dialogue with Suzuki but also Merton's later essay "The Zen Revival".² This essay, written five years after their published dialogue, became for them a topic of discussion when they met in June of 1964. Finally, I will offer (6) my own understanding and conclusions concerning the foregoing in light of intentionality analysis.³

¹Following Robert Daggy's suggestion that the fullest possible picture of the Merton/Suzuki dialogue could be gleaned from three sources, I used those three sources to present the dialogue in Chapter Three. However, in this Chapter I have introduced Merton's essay "The Zen Revival" as an integral component of the dialogue insofar as it exemplifies important aspects of the development of Merton's thinking about Zen, and since this essay was so highly praised by Suzuki. My treatment of "The Zen Revival" comprises part Six of this chapter.

²"The Zen Revival" was first published in *Continuum I* (1964). A more extensive version of this essay appears in *MZM* (pp. 3-44) entitled "Mystics and Zen Masters." I, however, will be using the edition of this essay published by the Buddhist Society, London (1971) with a forward by Christmas Humphreys.

³Intentionality analysis is an investigative approach that brings to light transcendental method, or the implicit or explicit stances that subjects actually take as consciously and authentically operating knowers and doers. This approach is available to any interpreter who objectifies the operations of his or her own consciousness and adverts to that dynamic unfolding process in an attempt to understand another. The second section of Chapter One

My ultimate goal in this chapter is to advance an understanding of Merton's openness to and appropriation of Zen, and his simultaneous fidelity to his Catholic heritage that I judge to be consonant with his own understanding of that integration. And finally, I want to suggest further ways that the use of intentionality analysis can help to clarify and resolve some problematic issues in Merton's dialogue with Suzuki that may subsequently have relevance for issues in interreligious dialogue in general.

The dialogue between Thomas Merton and Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki began without a clear focus but with a mutual desire to discover and understand what they suspected to be profound affinities among the sayings of the early Christian desert monks and the Zen masters of Buddhism. Their dialogue advanced with an emerging focus, and soon the focus had crystallized as concerning nothing less than the ultimate, transcendent ground and potential of human existence, or what Karl Rahner has called the "whither and term of human transcendence." More specifically, their dialogue concerned the correlation of (a) the Judeo-Christian term of Wisdom realized in union with God in Christ through the Holy Spirit by faith, and (b) the Zen-Buddhist term of Prajna or "transcendental wisdom" realized in "suchness" or "emptiness" through satori, enlightenment, or what Merton prefers to call in his later writings "Zen insight."⁴ In short, their basic terms were "wisdom" and

of this dissertation provides a brief presentation of Lonergan's cognitional theory that explicates consciousness as intentionally operative in experiencing, understanding, judging, and deciding.

⁴Since their dialogue centered around ultimate concerns both Merton and Suzuki employed several ultimate terms interchangeably. For example, Merton and Suzuki both used "God" and "ground of being" (Merton also used "Love which is the ground of all being") interchangeably. Suzuki used "emptiness," "Prajna" and "Enlightenment" as equivocal terms for God as well. I also will use several ultimate terms, interchangeably at first, but

“emptiness,” and they explored the meanings of these terms from the contemplative Christian and Zen-Buddhist perspectives.

1. Suzuki on Prajna

Suzuki's main concern in the dialogue was to communicate the radical dimension of self-transcendence that is at the heart of Zen 'sayings' and the basis of those 'sayings.' It is important to remember that while Suzuki presents a Zen-Buddhist's perspective on enlightenment, he is purposefully writing to a "non-Zen" audience, so he expresses a special interest in presenting his position in a way that addresses the once "typical" occidental concern that Zen advocates moral relativism and nihilistic world-denial (*ZBA*, 103-104).

After distinguishing Knowledge from Innocence⁵ in his essay "Knowledge and Innocence" Suzuki suggests that only in the "fallen state" (for Christians) or in the ordinary state of Maya or illusion (for Buddhists)

which I will distinguish from one another later regarding how the meanings of these terms relate to one another from the stand point of intentionality analysis.

⁵As a reminder to the reader, Suzuki interprets "Innocence" as the state in which humanity was originally created in God's image and likeness. "Knowledge" designates humanity's lost likeness through sin and alienation. "Innocence" corresponds, for Suzuki, to the Buddhist term "Emptiness", and "Knowledge" corresponds to the Buddhist term "Ignorance." Suzuki suggests that Knowledge and Ignorance are epistemologically linked in a position that holds the subject/object division as primary. However, the recovery of paradise through Emptiness establishes a proper relation between Innocence and Knowledge in which the world of explicit subjects and objects (the world of Knowledge) is understood to be secondarily derivative and springs out of a primary unity that is Emptiness.

In my interpretation of Suzuki (section 10 of this chapter) I interpret the fallen state of Knowledge as correlative with the way an "intellectually" unconverted subject judges the world mediated by meaning, and the recovery of paradise through actualizing emptiness as correlative with the return to immediacy, that can generate the transformative insight that grasps the proper relation between the infrastructure of spiritual experience (Innocence) and the suprastructure of world mediated by meaning (Knowledge).

do we see Knowledge and Innocence as divided, separate states. From within this fallen perspective one must discipline his or her actions, and live under laws, struggle to resist the temptations to do evil. But, according to Suzuki, this highly "moral" perspective is not enough. One must transcend the moral concern by purifying the heart. Suzuki cites verse 183 from the Dhammapada in the attempt to elucidate what he means by actualizing this freedom:

Not to do anything that is evil,
To do all that is good,
To thoroughly purify the heart:
This is the teaching of the Buddhas (*ZBA*, 107).

He interprets this as suggesting that persons alienated from Innocence take the first two lines as moral prescriptions, but from the standpoint of Prajna (suggested by the third line) the first two lines become simply descriptive of how Prajna is manifested (*ZBA*, 106-107). In other words, when the heart is pure, one will do good and avoid evil without undue worry over every choice and action. In this sense, Suzuki compares Prajna to the wisdom expressed by St. Augustine's dictum "love God and do as you will" (*ZBA*, 104).

In Prajna, Innocence and Knowledge are not two separate states.

Suzuki describes:

It is out of this zero [out of Emptiness] that all good is performed and all evil is avoided. The zero I speak of is not a mathematical symbol. It is the infinite—a storehouse or womb (Garbha) of all possible good or values.

zero = infinity, and infinity = zero.

This double equation is to be understood not only statically but dynamically. It takes place between being and becoming. For they are not contradicting ideas. Emptiness is not sheer emptiness

or passivity or Innocence. It is and at the same time it is not. It is Being, it is Becoming. It is Knowledge and Innocence. The Knowledge to do good and not to do evil is not enough; it must come out of Innocence, where Innocence is Knowledge and Knowledge is Innocence (*ZBA*, 107).

Further on, Suzuki suggests that transcendence of self in Prajna "is no more, no less than the seeing into the nonexistence of a thingish ego-substance" (*ZBA*, 109). It is the "self" that must be transcended that endeavors to do good and avoid evil under the demands of law. But Prajna is effortless action that arises from absolute poverty of spirit. He continues,

This is the greatest stumbling block in our spiritual discipline, which, in actuality, consists not in getting rid of the self but in realizing the fact that there is no such existence from the first . . . being poor means to be from the very beginning not in possession of anything . . . to be just so, and yet to be rich in inexhaustible possibilities . . . To be absolutely nothing is to be everything. When one is in possession of something, that something will keep all other somethings from coming in (*ZBA*, 109).

2. Merton's Initial Understanding of Suzuki's Viewpoint

Merton's essay "The Recovery of Paradise" communicates his own understanding of Zen-Buddhist Prajna not as an ultimate realization of the human journey but as an intermediate one. Throughout his essay Merton follows Suzuki's lead and correlates Suzuki's concept of Prajna with his Christian conception of a pre-lapsarian and/or recovered "paradise consciousness." By distinguishing paradise from heaven at the beginning of his essay Merton is able to conclude at its end that Dr. Suzuki's Prajna is correlative with what Christians recognize as an

intermediate end, namely the return to paradise, and not correlative with the ultimate anticipation of human life as recognized by Christians as the eschatological fullness of the Kingdom of Heaven.⁶

Merton writes:

The intermediary end, or scopos, is what we have been discussing as purity of heart, roughly corresponding to Dr. Suzuki's term 'emptiness.' . . . The concept [Cassian's purity of heart] in actual fact, corresponds rather to the Stoic *apatheia* than to Zen suchness. But at any rate there is a close relationship. It is the *quies*, or rest, of contemplation—the state of being free from all images and concepts which disturb and occupy the soul...One thing, and this is most important, remains to be said. Purity of heart is not the ultimate end of the monk's striving in the desert. It is only a step towards it . . . The monk who has realized in himself purity of heart...is ready for a new work 'which eye hath not seen, ear hath not heard, nor hath it entered in to the heart of man to conceive.' . . . This is a dimension which does not enter into the realm of Zen (*ZBA*, 131-132).

For Merton, the eschatological fullness of the Kingdom of God is a "superior and more vigilant innocence... an emptiness that is enkindled by the glory of the Divine Word and enflamed with the presence of the Holy Spirit. That glory and that presence are not objects that 'enter into' emptiness to 'fill' it. They are nothing other than God's own suchness" (*ZBA*, 133).

⁶While it is clear that Merton distinguishes between a recovered "paradise consciousness" and the "eschatological fullness of heaven" in his early dialogue with Suzuki, in later writings he seems to understand "paradise consciousness" fully in terms of the "new creation" in Christ that itself is eschatological, and so the distinction in Merton's own thinking, though never abandoned, is more difficult to discern. See Merton's letter to Rosemary Radford Ruether dated March 9, 1967 where he writes: "I am in the line of the paradise tradition in monastic thought, which is also part and parcel of the desert tradition and is also eschatological, because the monk is supposed to be living the life of the new creation in which the right relation to the rest of God's creatures is fully restored." *At Home in the World* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), pp. 33-38. By this account it could be argued that Merton, in his later writings, advances from a futurist eschatology to a realized eschatology.

3. Merton on Wisdom

Merton's own understanding of Wisdom is heavily influenced by the conceptions of Desert monks and Patristic and medieval mystical literature. As such, "The Recovery of Paradise" relies on the specialized terms of doctrines. For Merton, Wisdom "means unity in Christ, so that each one who is in Christ can say, with Paul: 'it is now not I that live but Christ that lives in me.' It is the same Christ who lives in all. The individual has 'died' in Christ to his 'old man', his exterior, egotistical self, and 'risen' in Christ to the new man, a selfless and divine being, who is the one Christ, the same who is 'all in all'" (ZBA, 117). For Merton the person who has become empty of all things and dead to his or her ego self is "moved in all things by the grace of Christ" as "action out of emptiness, springing from the mystery of the pure freedom which is 'divine love'..." (ZBA, 119). The highest realization of this is a complete emptiness of self "where all is done in us but without us, in nobis et sine nobis. But before we reach that level, we must also learn to work on the other level of 'knowledge' --scientia-- where grace works in us but 'not without us' -- in nobis sed non sine nobis" (ZBA, 121).⁷

⁷Merton seems to be suggesting here that the perfect realization of emptiness is purely "operative grace" which is received without any cooperation on the part of the subject. Merton here may still be using the categories of acquired and infused contemplation, in which case the grace that "works in us but without us" would refer to "infused contemplation." Anne Carr, however, has argued that Merton later dropped the distinction between infused and acquired contemplation, a distinction correlative with the distinction between operative and cooperative grace, and began to conceive mystical prayer more broadly. But I am not prepared to go into this very deeply. For my purposes, and in light of intentionality analysis, I would affirm that as long as grace is operative "in us" it can not be operating entirely "without us." From this view I would understand Merton to mean by "action out of emptiness" that a person has thoroughly converted from cupiditas (a love built upon self-interest) to caritas (a self-transcending love, beyond self-concern and self-interest). In this case the phrase "in us but without us" would mean that we are loving with a pure love, without fear or self-interest. For help on this issue see Anne Carr's *A Search*

In reference to this latter level Merton also talks of the necessity to understand Innocence and Knowledge not as dialectically opposed, but interrelated. The rejecting of Knowledge in favor of Innocence is dangerous. One ends up with “an emptiness that is merely blank and silly: an absence of knowledge without the presence of wisdom (ZBA, 121). The person who is truly empty of all things has no self-concern, is free, and “all he knows is love” (ZBA, 129). The ultimate realization of Wisdom for Merton, is life in Christ through the gift of the Holy Spirit, in “God’s own suchness.”

4. Suzuki’s understanding of Merton’s Viewpoint

In Suzuki’s final remarks he points out that “Father Merton’s emptiness, when he uses the term, does not go far and deep enough, I am afraid... Father Merton’s emptiness is still on the level of God as creator and does not go up to the Godhead. So is John Cassian’s” (ZBA, 133). Suzuki then reiterates his conception of Zen emptiness as a contrast both to the Christian emptiness of Merton and Cassian and to Merton’s misconception of Zen emptiness. For Suzuki it is Zen emptiness that is ultimate:

Zen emptiness is not the emptiness of nothingness, but the emptiness of fullness in which there is “no gain, no loss, no increase, no decrease” . . . Eschatology is something never realizable

for Wisdom and Spirit: Thomas Merton's Theology of the Self (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988) on “contemplation” and Bernard McGinn's *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism, Volume One* (New York: Crossroad, 1995). pp. 277-279. For Lonergan's clarification concerning operative and cooperative grace in *Method*, see pp. 106-108. Lonergan suggests that the dynamic state of being in love without limits or conditions or qualifications “of itself” is operative grace. But the same state as principle of acts of love, etc... is cooperative grace.

and yet realized at every moment of our life. We see it always ahead of us though we are in reality always in it. This is the delusion we are conditioned to have as beings in time or rather as "becomings" in time. This delusion ceases to be one the very moment we experience all this. It is the Great Mystery, intellectually speaking. In Christian terms, it is Divine Wisdom. The strange thing, however, is: when we experience it we cease to ask questions about it, we accept it, we just live it (ZBA, 134).

At this point in the dialogue Suzuki concludes that Zen is non-affective, non-personal and non-dualistic, while Christianity is the opposite in all regards (ZBA, 133). Thus, Suzuki continues to understand Merton as striving for a kind of "subjective" emptiness that enables the pure experience of the "objective" reality which is somehow apart from and over against the emptiness of the subject. This is correlative with what Suzuki would call "mirror-wiping" Zen rather than authentic Zen insight.⁸

5. Merton's Understanding Develops

In late 1959 Merton responded to Suzuki's final remarks (ZBA, 135-138), nearly five years after that he published "The Zen Revival." These writings are integral to the Merton/Suzuki dialogue and examined in that context reveal significant refinements in Merton's own thinking.

Merton begins his "Final Remarks" by confessing that "the strongly personalistic tone of Christian mysticism, even when it is 'apophatic,' generally seems to prohibit a full equation with Zen experience" (ZBA, 135). This is because Zen ultimately professes to be trans-personal, while

⁸I will elucidate the concept of "mirror-wiping" Zen in section 6 of this chapter, in my discussion of Merton's essay "The Zen Revival".

Christianity seeks the fulfillment of the person in the love of God. However, Merton now suggests that if Christian emptiness and Zen emptiness are at all correlative then he and Suzuki need to find new terms to discuss this other than the terms Suzuki proposes.

For Merton, the way to avoid the semblance of dualism in his accounts of emptiness, a dualism that Suzuki links with the personalistic nature of Christianity, is not to invoke the distinction between God and Godhead in reference to levels of "experience" as Suzuki does, which Merton claims is itself a distinction "of a clearly dualistic nature" and "technically condemned by the Church." Rather, Merton prefers to seek new mutually satisfying forms of expression.

The distinction that Suzuki is trying to articulate by the terms God and Godhead "must be treated in other terms." Merton suggests that perhaps Suzuki's distinction is more accurately stated, from a Christian point of view, as a distinction between "divine energies" and "divine substance" or "Trinity of Persons" and the "Unity of Nature." In this regard, Suzuki's concept of experiencing the "Godhead" might correlate with Ruysbroeck's orthodox term of the climax of mysticism as an "emptiness without manner" or knowing God "beyond all conceiving" in God's "transcendent, ineffable reality", a knowledge that transcends knowing God in his works (*ZBA*, 135). From this point of view, Merton announces, Suzuki's distinction is "thoroughly acceptable."

Merton's second point of concern in his final remarks is to affirm Suzuki's understanding of "eschatological fullness" (*ZBA*, 137). This affirmation is significant because it contrasts with his earlier judgment that the Zen concept of emptiness only anticipated an intermediate end, rather than the ultimate, eschatological fullness. Suzuki's comments on

the “already” and “not yet” quality of the eschatological fullness of the Kingdom of God persuaded Merton that Suzuki had a firm grasp of these Christian concepts and related them accurately to his Zen-Buddhist tradition (see *ZBA*, 134).

Finally, Merton articulates his understanding of the difference between Zen and Christianity in new terms. Earlier Merton had suggested that Christian contemplation anticipated a realization superior to that anticipated by Zen. Merton supposed that while Zen anticipated an intermediate “paradise consciousness” the Christian went further anticipating the eschatological fullness of heaven (*ZBA*, 131-132). Now, however, Merton suggests that the difference is not a matter of one anticipating an ultimate experience and the other an intermediate one, rather the difference has to do with how each understands the ultimacy that they both intend (*ZBA*, 136-137). This insight brings Merton to the affirmation that the “emptiness” that both he and Suzuki intend (not as a counterpart to some imagined fullness “standing over against it in metaphysical isolation”) will be affirmed by the Christian as “having the character of a free gift of love.” This affirmation does not erect a new division between giver, gift, and receiver, but stems from the understanding of emptiness as grace, “not as given to us by God from without, but grace precisely as emptiness, as freedom, as liberality, as gift (*ZBA*, 136-137). Merton, however, does not develop this line of thinking, but the shift in his own thinking is important; no longer is he imagining Christianity as superior to Zen in virtue of the former having some experiential state of consciousness “that does not enter into the realm of Zen” (*ZBA*, 136). Rather, Merton is identifying the fundamental difference now as a matter of understanding.

A comment, however, that Merton makes in his final remarks is thoroughly confusing. Merton writes: "For the Buddhist, life is a static ontological fullness. For the Christian it is a dynamic gift, a fullness of love" (ZBA, 138). It is difficult to take this judgment very seriously, let alone to affirm its validity, given Suzuki's comments concerning eschatology and his explicit insistence that Zen emptiness is to be understood "not only statically but dynamically" (ZBA, 107). I simply take note of this in view of demonstrating further development as Merton later overturns this judgment.

6. "The Zen Revival:" New Terms for Affirming Mutual Understanding

The first phase of the Merton/Suzuki dialogue⁹ ended leaving the partners with feelings of mutual respect, gratitude, and with the desire to continue, but a temporary impasse regarding agreement concerning emptiness and wisdom had also become clear. Merton continued to affirm life in Christ as the gift of the Spirit, as the fulfillment of the person, while Suzuki continued to understand this affirmation as exemplary of Merton's insufficient understanding of emptiness and as ultimately divisive and dualistic in light of the Buddhist doctrines of *anicca* (interbeing) and *anatta* (no selves exist). However, a few years after this initial phase had ended Merton wrote an article entitled "The Zen Revival". This article communicated a growing subtlety in Merton's understanding of Zen emptiness.

⁹By "the first phase" I mean the dialogue that led to the publication of "Wisdom in Emptiness" and was completed by November of 1959. The second phase started in June of 1964 immediately prior to their meeting in New York and continued until Suzuki's death in 1966.

Christmas Humphreys noted that through this article, which Suzuki had read without Merton's prompting, "Merton made clear to Dr. Suzuki the depth and quality of his understanding of Zen, not merely as a scholar but in terms of his own enlightenment."¹⁰ Indeed, it was this article that Suzuki praised saying "there is more true understanding of Zen in this article than anything I have ever read by a Western writer."¹¹ As this was Suzuki's judgment, and as "The Zen Revival" became a brief topic of discussion when the two men met in 1964, it is necessary now to include this article in my inquiry into the refinement of Merton's understanding of Zen insight.

Merton's essay "The Zen Revival" is partly a review of Heinrich Dumoulin's *A History of Zen Buddhism*¹² and partly Merton's own contribution to answering the question "what, exactly, is Zen"?(ZR, 4). Though Merton suggests that Dumoulin's book is "probably the best and most comprehensive history of Zen that has appeared in any western language," he takes issue with Dumoulin for his tendency to characterize Zen as a kind of natural mysticism (ZR, 1-2). Merton tries rather to treat the question of Zen in terms other than the familiar western religious categories of natural and supernatural, mystical and non-mystical.

Before hazarding answers to the question "what is Zen?" Merton undermines and subverts inadequate responses by asserting what Zen is

¹⁰From Christmas Humphreys's forward to Thomas Merton's *The Zen Revival* (London: The Buddhist Society, 1971).

¹¹Mr. Lunsford Yandell met with D. T. Suzuki the day after Merton had met with him. Mr. Yandell remembers Suzuki saying these words as he handed him a copy of Merton's article. See Humphreys's forward to *The Zen Revival* (London: The Buddhist Society, 1971).

¹²Heinrich Dumoulin, S. J., *A History of Zen Buddhism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1963, 2nd edition), translated by Paul Peachey.

not. In doing this he not only distinguishes his position from Dumoulin's but also from his own previous judgments regarding Zen.

As soon as Merton poses the question "what, exactly, is Zen?" he asserts that the "Zen tradition absolutely refuses to tolerate any abstract or theoretical answer" to the question (ZR, 4). Merton informs his readers that Zen is "not a religion, not a philosophy, not a system of thought, not a doctrine and not an ascesis" (ZR, 4).¹³ He insists that the insight anticipated by zazen (sitting meditation) cannot be communicated in a doctrinal formula nor fully or precisely described. This is not because Zen is Gnostic or esoteric in doctrine, but because any description or explanation might imply that the Zen insight "is 'an experience' that a 'subject' is capable of 'having'" and such terms "contradict all the implications of Zen" (ZR, 5). So employing any language that may imply a primary division of the world into subjects (who have experiences) and objects (of experience), essences and appearances, matter and spirit, is liable to perpetuate misunderstanding.

¹³Merton explains that the word "Zen" comes from the Chinese *Ch'an* which designates a certain kind of meditation, "and is based on the Sanskrit word *dhyana*" (ZR, 4). But *dhyana* is not meant to be an acquisitive form of meditation that anticipates the practitioner coming into possession of a kind of experience, rather it is meant to bring the extinction of "seeking" when anticipation finds fulfillment. Thus, Zen is not an ascesis. In this regard the word Zen itself becomes synonymous, in a sense, with *Prajna*, *Emptiness*, and the other ultimate terms.

The Chinese Ch'an School was originally introduced into China by Bodhidharma in the early part of the Sixth century. Its distinctive element was the teaching of the four principles: "a special transmission from spirit to spirit, outwith the Scriptures; no dependence as far as words were concerned; to aim directly for the mind; to discover one's true nature in order to reach buddhahood." When the Ch'an tradition of Bodhidharma made its way into Japan in the Eighth and Ninth centuries it became Zen. Zen in Japan flourishes primarily in two forms: the Soto school, founded by Hsing-su (d. 740), and the Rinzai school, attributed mostly to the leadership of Lin-chi (d. 867). See Jacques Brosse's *Religious Leaders* (New York: Chambers, 1991) pp. 34-35, translated from the French *Les maîtres spirituels* (Paris: Bordas, 1988) by Sara Newbery.

After Merton asserts that the "most elementary fact about Zen is its abhorrence of ...dualistic division(s)" he attempts to communicate Zen's fundamental affirmation in positive ways (ZR, 5). Merton elucidates his basic assertion that "Zen is the awareness of pure being beyond subject and object" by sharing his own judgments concerning Zen (ZR, 5). Merton writes:

Zen enlightenment is an insight into pure being in all its actual presence and immediacy. It is a fully alert and superconscious act of being which transcends time and space . . . Zen insight is at once a liberation from the limitations of the individual ego, and a discovery of one's "original nature" and "true face" in "Mind" which is no longer restricted to the empirical self, but is in all and above all. Zen insight is less our awareness than being's awareness of itself. . . . (it) is a recognition that the whole world is aware of itself in me . . . (and) that my identity is to be sought not in separation from all that is, but in oneness with all that is. This identity is not the denial of my own personal reality but its highest affirmation (ZR, 8).

Although Merton employs metaphysical language to elucidate his meaning he also reminds his readers that the language of the Zen masters is ordinarily not explanatory nor theoretical but poetic, descriptive and common sensical (ZR, 10).¹⁴ The intention of Zen is not to explain to others an understanding of enlightenment but to facilitate others having the experience and insight for themselves. Sometimes the master judges that the best way to facilitate this is with the blow of the hossu, or with a koan, or with a disarming, enigmatic response to a disciple's question.

In view of emphasizing Zen's "abhorrence of division" Merton comments on what is known to the "Southern school" of Chinese Zen as

¹⁴Merton actually says that Zen language "is *not metaphysical* but poetic and phenomenological. The Zen insight is a direct grasp of being, not a formulation of the nature of being" (ZR, 10).

“mirror-wiping” (ZR, 8-10).¹⁵ He explains that mirror-wiping Zen is regarded as a kind of heresy by Zen masters of the Southern school. The heresy affirms that ultimate consciousness is realized or attained by one who empties the mind, frees his or her mind of thoughts, and thereby achieves a state of enlightenment. In this view the mind is compared to the mirror, and an individual must continually wipe the mirror, keeping it clean, empty and pure, so that the mind becomes a perfect reflection of ultimate emptiness. But the Zen masters of the Southern school reject such conceptions because (a) the image of a mirror reflecting suggests primordial divisions, and (b) because the abstraction of a self as custodian of the mirror mind is problematic because it erects an illusory self as primary, who is capable of “possessing” a mind, purifying it, attaining enlightenment, etc.... Hui Neng's solution to the problem is radical denial of such distinctions. There is nothing to reflect, no mirror to reflect, no self to wipe the mirror. Thus, Hui Neng exclaims “fundamentally not one thing exists.” Merton, however, quickly cautions that the

western reader...is likely to seize upon the phrase 'not one thing exists' to account for his anxieties: but if he thinks this is a fundamental principle, a declaration of pantheism, he is wrong . . . statements about the “nothingness” of beings and of “oneness” in Buddhism are to be interpreted just like the . . . terms of western mystics describing their experience of God (ZR, 10).

¹⁵Merton explains that the Chinese school of Zen (or Ch'an) split into Northern and Southern schools in the seventh century, over the choosing of the Sixth “Patriarch.” The Sixth Patriarch was to be chosen among the disciples of the Fifth Patriarch, Hung-Jen, on the basis of poems written by them that communicated the highest degree of enlightenment. Shen-hsiu, a senior and most revered monk, composed a poem that likened the mind to “a clear mirror standing”. Hui Neng composed a poem that proclaimed “the clear mirror is nowhere standing/ Fundamentally not one thing exists” and his poem was preferred and Hui Neng was chosen as the Sixth Patriarch. Shen-hsiu, however, was apparently endorsed by enough disciples to constitute a kind of schism in the Chinese Zen school and the Northern school remained faithful to him.

In other words, the language is descriptive and not theoretical. However, Merton acknowledges that the problem of expressing the Zen insight might also be solved not only by emphasizing denial and the withdrawal from objectification, but by taking care to make further distinctions, in this case by distinguishing between the "ego self" and the genuine "person" actualized in self-transcendence through grace (ZR, 8).

Merton attempts to offer an account of the genuine person actualized through self-transcendence from a Zen perspective. He clearly affirms the inadequacy of mirror-wiping Zen and is able to say, now in accord with Hui Neng and Suzuki, that "to speak of the mind as a mirror which is 'owned' by the ego and which must be kept pure by the extinction of all thought" is "sheer nonsense" (ZR, 12-13). Merton writes:

As Bodhidharma said, the "Unconscious" (prajna) is a principle of being and light secretly at work in our conscious mind making it aware of transcendent reality. But this true awareness is not a matter of the empirical ego standing back and "having ideas", "possessing knowledge", or even "attaining to insight" (Satori). Here we are not dealing with a Cartesian awareness of a thinking self but with a vastly different realm of prajna-wisdom. Hence what matters now is for the conscious to realize itself as identified with and illuminated by the Unconscious, in such a way that there is no longer any division or separation between the two. It is not that the empirical mind is "absorbed in" Prajna, but simply that Prajna is, and nothing else has any relevance except as its manifestation.

Indeed it is not the empirical self which "possesses" prajna-wisdom, or owns "an unconscious" as one might have a cellar in one's house. In reality the conscious belongs to the transcendental Unconscious, is possessed by it and carries out its work, or it should do so. Its destiny is to manifest in itself the light of that Being in which it subsists, as a Christian philosopher might say. It becomes one, as we would say, with God's own light, and St. John's expression, the "Light which enlightens every man coming into this world", (John 1:9) seems to correspond fairly closely to the

idea of Prajna and of Hui Neng's "Unconscious" [sic] (ZR, 13).

Here Merton makes room for a positive understanding of the person. His interpretation of Hui Neng's idea of Prajna is correlative with his own conception of authentic personhood as the gift of the Holy Spirit. Here again Merton would advert, as he often does, to the words of St. Paul who professed "I live, no longer I but Christ lives in me." But Merton understands Paul's qualifier "in me" not as an affirmation of a "Paul" who exists apart from the "Christ" who lives in him, but expressive of the necessary distinction between the absolute (the ultimate ground of consciousness and of being, or of Hui Neng's "Unconscious")¹⁶ and the contingent (the self as knower, or intentional human consciousness).

Merton comments further on Zen enlightenment as an affirmation that amounts to self-transcendence:

This state of "enlightenment", then, has nothing to do with the exclusion of external and material reality, and when it denies the existence of the empirical self and of external objects, this denial is not the denial of their reality but of their relevance insofar as they are isolated in their own forms. They have become irrelevant because the subject-object relationship that existed when the empirical self regarded them and cherished its thoughts about them, has now been transcended in the "void". But this void is by no means a mere negation. It would be helpful for western minds to call it a pure affirmation of the fullness of positive being....the Unconscious as manifest and conscious in us (ZR, 15).

Merton dedicates the remaining few pages of "The Zen Revival" to emphasizing the importance of understanding Hui Neng's rejection of

¹⁶In "The Zen Revival" Merton frequently employs Hui Neng's term "Unconscious" as correlative with "Prajna," the "fulness of being" and "Ultimate Mind." Merton himself, however, is careful to point out that Hui Neng's "Unconscious" "is totally different from the unconscious as it is conceived by modern psychoanalysis" (ZR, 13).

mirror-wiping Zen. Merton's own grasp of Hui Neng demonstrates a movement beyond his own prior understanding of Zen enlightenment, which he previously characterized as an intermediate experience and clearly in line with what Suzuki and Hui Neng reject as an emptiness that does not go far and deep enough (namely as a kind of mirror-wiping Zen).

Ironically, in the first phase of the dialogue both Merton and Suzuki were, in a sense, suspicious of the other as advocating a kind of mirror-wiping Zen. That is to say, Merton thought Zen anticipated "the *quies*, or rest, of contemplation—the state of being free from all images and concepts which disturb and occupy the soul"(ZBA, 131), but not the radical self-transcendence actualized by grace and characterized as "an emptiness without manner"... "which eye hath not seen, ear hath not heard, nor hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive" (ZBA, 132). Suzuki, on the other hand, concluded that Christianity, and Merton's conception of emptiness, remained always on a level of division and separation, because of the distinctions made by Merton, which for Suzuki were "divisions," between humans and God, and because distinctions belong to the world of knowledge and are always secondary to experience and inner innocence.

7. Convergence and a Common Language

The portion of the Merton/Suzuki dialogue published in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* as "Wisdom in Emptiness" relies heavily on the terms of Christian doctrine. As an example, when Merton composed his final remarks about the dialogue (ZBA, 135-138) he was still aspiring to translate Suzuki's conception of emptiness and transcendental wisdom using theological distinctions. He attempted to suggest that what Suzuki meant

by the distinction between God and Godhead might have been more accurately communicated by the distinction between the "'divine energies' (through and in which God works outside Himself) and the 'divine substance' which is beyond all knowledge and experience" (ZBA, 135). However, Merton became increasingly dissatisfied with this approach and later felt that his comments may have only complicated the dialogue further.

In the "Postface" to *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* written several years after "Wisdom in Emptiness" Merton commented that he was "tempted to cut out" his "Final Remarks" from their published dialogue. From this later standpoint he saw his remarks mostly "as an example of how *not* to approach Zen" (ZBA, 139). The problem, he said, was not that the theological terms of Christian doctrine were "wrong" or "false" or "erroneous" but that "any attempt to handle Zen in theological language [was] bound to miss the point" (ZBA, 139). Merton's determination to continue his exploration of convergence between Zen and his own Catholic faith in a way that did not "miss the point" lead him to the judgment that he needed first to approach Zen on its own terms and only then could he relate his understanding of Zen to his Christian faith commitments. And this is precisely what he did when he wrote "The Zen Revival."

When Merton wrote "The Zen Revival" he began to approach Zen simply as a man of spiritual experience and as a sympathetic human inquirer. That is to say, when he wrote "The Zen Revival" he was not speaking primarily as a Christian theologian but primarily as a man of the interior life.

By beginning with the question "what is Zen" and not yet asking about Zen's relation to the doctrinal claims of Christianity, Merton was able to distinguish, in his own mind, between what Zen had to say about the transcendental wisdom of Prajna and his own theological understanding of the same. By focusing on the former in "The Zen Revival," Merton was able to correlate Hui Neng's affirmations concerning the relation between consciousness and the transcendental Unconscious, to his own contemplative experience. In so doing Merton grasped the fundamental importance of the distinction between the experience of radical self-transcendence, the experience of the fulfillment of consciousness in the transcendental Unconscious, and the subsequent understandings (interpretations) and affirmations regarding such experience; and this insight opened up new possibilities for him.

The "self-conscious self," as Merton says, is born through a differentiation of consciousness, and is therefore secondary (*MZM*, 22-23). The differentiations of self and others, of mirror and void reflected, of ego as custodian of the "mind", take place posterior to undifferentiated experience. At the level of attentive experiencing, prior to insight and objectification, there is unity. Once the "self-conscious self" emerges and begins to question experience, to "cherish its thoughts about experience," etc.... we have entered into differentiation. As Suzuki says "out of the Emptiness of Mind a thought mysteriously rises and we have the world of multiplicities" (*ZBA*, 105). And it is Masao Abe who says "enlightenment is nothing more than the realization that one's True Mind is the ground both of one's ordinary self and of the world which the ordinary self inhabits." Now the movement to differentiation through the emergence of self-reflexive awareness, from Innocence to Knowledge, is natural and

necessary for the eventual actualizing of Wisdom. The problem, however, is that without the insight that the differentiation of consciousness that allows for the subject/object distinction is secondary, human subjects will take their "self-conscious self" to be absolutely primary; and this mistaken judgment is precisely what amounts to what Merton calls the "false self," "the self alienated from its spiritual depths" (*MZM*, 22-23). This is very important. Merton does not identify intentional and operational consciousness, or subjectivity, with the "false self," rather he identifies the false self with the judgment that the "self-conscious self" (a product of intentional consciousness) is primary or a "fundamental reality."

The rejection of mirror-wiping Zen is an affirmation that the subject/object distinction, and the mediation of the world by meaning, results from differentiations within consciousness. Hui Neng's proclamation that "not one thing exists" is a description of the transcendence of the subject/object division and also a grasping of the relation between the level of transcendental experience,¹⁷ which is preverbal and postverbal, and the objectification of such experience through mediation by meaning. Zen is radically concerned with the former and often suspicious of the latter, because the latter can also be mistaken to be eternal and unconditioned. The "idol cracking" of Zen¹⁸, is

¹⁷Merton uses "transcendental experience" and "transcendent experience" as correlative with what Lonergan calls "religious experience" or "the experience of being in unrestricted love," and that is how I am using it here. At other times, however, Merton uses these same terms as indicative of what Lonergan would call knowledge of the act-of -being, or what in Thomistic terms would be called knowledge of God as "actus purus" or "the fullness of being." Since Merton uses the terms "transcendental experience" and "transcendent experience" as inclusive of several meanings, understanding him can be difficult.

¹⁸In a letter to Rosemary Radford Ruether dated February 14, 1967 Merton writes: "About Zen: not abstract at all the way I see it. I use it for idol cracking and things like that. Healthy way of keeping one's house clean. Gets the dust out quicker than anything I know."

precisely a measure of insurance that a "suprastructure" never be taken to be absolute in itself.

Merton's understanding of the rejection of mirror-wiping Zen helped him to clarify his own belief that while he and Suzuki could still remain divergent in their interpretations regarding the meaning of such experience, they nonetheless shared a common spiritual climate established by the fundamental acceptance and affirmation of such experience as profoundly transformative. By speaking of such experience within the horizon immediately correlative with his own consciousness, and not within the horizon of revelation (which goes beyond immediate correlation with human consciousness) Merton was able to express his understanding of transcendental experience in "The Zen Revival" in such a way that Suzuki could thoroughly understand him.¹⁹ It is important, however, to understand that the new terms that enabled this more effective communication were not employed by Merton at the expense of his Christian theological position, and I will attempt to demonstrate this in the forthcoming section.

Merton commented that he and Suzuki were engaged in dialogue on two levels, as monks or Zen-men and as writers (*Encounter*, 52). And

I am not talking about purity, just breathing, and not piling up the mental junk." Mary Tardiff., ed. *At Home in the World* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), p. 24.

¹⁹In a humorous letter dated July 10, 1964 to his best friend, Robert Lax, written in their own special language, Merton shares the praise he received from Suzuki and his secretary, Mihoko Okamura, regarding his understanding of Zen. Merton wrote: "I was to visit with Suzuki, yes Suzuki, you heard me right. I was to visit with him very old, but secretary young and spry make the tea ceremony and Suzuki with ear trumpet propose many koans from a Chinese book and in the middle they gang up on me with winks and blinks and all kinds of friendly glances and assurances and they declare with one voice: "Who is the Western writer who understand best the Zen IT IS YOU" they declare. You in this connection means me. It is I the person they have elected to this slot and number of position to be the one in the west. First west in Zen is now my food for thought" (*RJ*, 176).

though Merton recognized and affirmed a unity on the prior level, which to him was "most significant" he did not deny the conflicts of interpretation that exist on subsequent levels and that he thought must remain until moments of greater insight. At numerous points in their dialogue Merton draws attention to the common ground he and Suzuki inhabit that enables them to dialogue fruitfully. Merton comments that in dialogue with Suzuki he feels as though he is talking to a "fellow citizen" who shares with him a "common spiritual climate, a unity of outlook and purpose" that is "supremely significant" (*ZBA*, 138). He praises Suzuki for his "capacity to apprehend and to occupy the precise standpoints where communication could hope to be most effective" (*ZBA*, 60). The questions arise: "what are these precise standpoints and what is this common spiritual climate"?

I take their unity of outlook and purpose constituted by the apprehension and occupation of certain standpoints to be strictly correlative with what Lonergan calls shared "horizons." Common meanings and values are shared by people who have a unified outlook and purpose. Since the dialogue between Merton and Suzuki centered around ultimate concerns, and self-transcendence, I will attempt to demonstrate that they mutually affirm common meanings and values with respect to "Ultimate Reality." I will do this by distinguishing three meanings of "God" or "Ultimate Reality" and focusing on their affirmations or denials with respect to those meanings. I will explicate these meanings not by attempting to correlate terms with an independent object, and not by establishing that their words are really describing the same ultimate thing prescinding from their subjectivity, but by demonstrating the meanings as they are established in correlation with

human consciousness. And though my specific focus continues to be the dialogue itself, I must cite writings from Merton and Suzuki that are beyond the purview of their explicit dialogue in order to support my analysis.

8. Three Meanings of "God" and Human Consciousness

Bernard Lonergan argued that "for every term and relation there will exist a corresponding element in intentional consciousness".²⁰ The term "God," for Lonergan, has three successively related meanings, two of which are immediately correlative with human consciousness. The first correlates with the transcendental intending of consciousness, or consciousness as given. The second meaning correlates with the experienced fulfillment of consciousness in unrestricted love and freedom, which the theologian judges to be the grace of the Holy Spirit. The third meaning is one that does not directly correspond to human consciousness, rather its meaning depends upon God's own self-communication in word, so the meaning corresponds only mediately to human consciousness. The first meaning is the most general and might be expressed as "the ultimate ground and goal of intentional consciousness" The meaning correlates with the dynamism of unlimited wonder manifest in human consciousness through questions. Lonergan writes:

[T]he question of God . . . is not a matter of image or feeling, of concept or judgment. They pertain to answers. It is a question. It rises out of our conscious intentionality, out of the a priori drive

²⁰Bernard Lonergan, *Method*, p. 343.

that promotes us from experiencing to the effort to understand, from understanding to the effort to judge truly, from judging to the effort to choose rightly. In the measure that we advert to our own questioning and proceed to question it, there arises the question of God . . . It follows that, however much religious or irreligious answers differ, however much there differ the questions they explicitly raise, still at their root there is the same transcendental tendency of the human spirit that questions, that questions without restriction, that questions the significance of its own questioning, and so comes to the question of God.

The question of God, then, lies within man's horizon. Man's transcendental subjectivity is mutilated or abolished, unless he is stretching forth towards the intelligible, the unconditioned, the good of value. The reach, not of his attainment, but of his intending is unrestricted.²¹

The question of God really typifies the intentional consciousness of human subjects. The question arises naturally for a person who "adverts" to his or her own questioning and proceeds to question it. This adverting, in a sense, leads one to the discovery of one's self *as* a question. So there is a direct correlation between the self as question and the question of God. This discovery, in whatever way it may be formulated, allows one to grasp the possibility of transcendent reality; and so it is by the question that the term God, in this sense, becomes meaningful.²² That is to say, this meaning is not determinate, rather it corresponds to my intention, so the meaning is one of mystery. In other words, if I affirm that the horizon of my questioning is unrestricted, I can infer that I ultimately intend the absolute, and that by this intending I am already in relation to that

²¹Bernard Lonergan, *Method*, p. 103.

²² For Merton on what Lonergan calls "the question of God" see *NSC*, 1-14, and *NM*, 3-4. Lonergan's position here is also thoroughly consonant with that of Keiji Nishitani, who represents the Kyoto School of Buddhist philosophy. Nishitani writes: "When we have become a question to ourselves the religious quest awakens within us." See Nishitani's *Religion and Nothingness*, translated by Jan Van Bragt, forward by Winston L. King (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 1-4.

ultimacy. Now this ultimacy can be objectified, among other ways, as "Absolute Being" "Absolute Mystery" or "Absolute Void".²³ The question of God establishes a horizon of transcendence²⁴, and once this horizon is established the intending subject can articulate more specific questions.

James Price writes:

Once the question of God has emerged . . . and the possibility of a horizon of transcendence glimpsed, the issue of religion arises in a second, more specific way. The horizon of transcendence becomes the specific focus of attention and a new set of questions emerges: What is the ground of consciousness? How is it experienced? How is it related to human consciousness? In what sense can it be known? how can it be most adequately expressed? Note that this set of questions (albeit articulated in terms of interiority) addresses the major issues raised by the [contemplatives] of the various traditions.²⁵

The question of God arises from the simultaneous affirmation of one's own limitations for knowing and of one's unrestricted desire to know. Since the question of God is a question, my "knowing" of the mystery intended by my question is apophatic, indeterminate, and only by anticipation. It is, as Merton says, a discovering of one's self in "existential mystery" (*NSC*, 9). Both Merton and Suzuki share this experience, which establishes for them a common realm of meaning for the term Ultimate Reality.

Outside the context of their dialogue, Suzuki comments on the orientation of the "mind" toward Ultimate Reality and speaks of a

²³These are just some of the terms Merton and Suzuki employ.

²⁴The horizon of transcendence is established by ultimate questions and ultimate concerns. The question of God is one that alerts us to the fact that the reach of our *intending* is unrestricted, though the reach of our *attainment* is not (at least cognitively speaking).

²⁵James Price, "Typologies and the Cross-Cultural Analysis of Mysticism" p. 185, in *Religion and Culture: Essays in Honor of Bernard Lonergan*, S. J. Edited by Fallon and Riley (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987) pp. 181-190.

meaning of "God" within the horizon of transcendence as "eternity" and "eternal abyss." Suzuki writes that "in the working of the . . . mind there is something calm, quiet, silent, undisturbable, which appears as if always looking into eternity. This quietude, however, does not point to mere idleness . . . It is the silence of an eternal abyss . . . it is the silence of God."²⁶

When Suzuki characterizes enlightenment as transcending intentional consciousness, he is affirming the transcendent reality of the ground and goal of consciousness itself. Suzuki writes:

So we see that Enlightenment is not the outcome of an intellectual process in which one idea follows another in sequence finally to terminate in conclusion or judgment. There is neither process nor judgment in Enlightenment, it is . . . more fundamental, something which makes a judgment possible, and without which no form of judgment can take place. In judgment there are a subject and a predicate; in Enlightenment . . . they are . . . merged as one, but not as one of which something can be stated, but as one from which arises judgment . . . all intellectual operations stop here. This is the wall against which all philosophies have beaten in vain. This is an intellectual terra incognita, in which prevails the principle, 'Credo quia absurdum est'. This region of darkness, however, gives up its secrets when attacked by the will, by the force of one's entire personality. Enlightenment is the illuminating of this dark region, when the whole thing is seen at one glance, and all intellectual inquiries find here their rationale. The Buddha must have experienced something that went far deeper into his inmost consciousness than the mere intellectual grasping of empirical truths . . . He must have come in touch with that which makes our intellectual operations possible, in fact that which conditions the very existence of our conscious life.²⁷

Implicit in this passage is the distinction between consciousness as intentional, manifested in its operations, and the transcendent ground

²⁶Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove Press, 1964, with a forward by Carl Jung), p. 35.

²⁷*Essays in Zen Buddhism: First Series* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1949), pp. 68-69.

and goal of consciousness itself. The fundamental affirmation that Suzuki makes here is that Ultimate Reality grounds and transcends all conscious operations, yet he is still employing those operations in order to affirm this ultimate ground (as, of course, he must do). So one might suggest that although enlightenment is certainly experience based, it also involves an affirmative judgment, but this question must be put on hold.

Suzuki is also suggesting here that enlightenment is more than the raising of the question of God. For the question of God brings one to the region of darkness, the "terra incognita" where trust must prevail over understanding. But enlightenment is the "illuminating of this dark region" where, to speak in terms of a faculty psychology, the "will" must transcend what can be grasped by the "intellect." To put this in terms of transcendental method, Lonergan says that "besides the factual knowledge reached by experiencing, understanding, and verifying, there is another kind of knowledge reached through the discernment of value...on the existential level of intentional consciousness and in the dynamic state of being in love".²⁸ Lonergan calls this knowledge "faith" and he compares it to Pascal's reasons of the heart, "which reason does not know."

Suzuki suggests that enlightenment is more than "the intellectual grasping of empirical truths," which, for Lonergan, would mean that enlightenment is more than a direct insight and subsequent judgment of fact. Enlightenment is more than this because it is a coming into contact with that transcendent, infinite ground that conditions all our conscious operations, and this contact is a matter of the "will," and force of one's entire personality. This knowing by the "will" is a classical expression of

²⁸Bernard Lonergan, *Method*, p. 115.

what Lonergan calls the knowledge born of religious love, on the highest level of subjective operation. This knowing "illuminates" the region that remains dark to human understanding and brings us to the second meaning of "God."

We have seen in previous chapters that Merton too makes a basic affirmation of Ultimate Reality as the ground and goal of consciousness, even before he begins to treat Zen in these general terms, especially in his own accounts of understanding himself as a "question." This basic affirmation constitutes a common horizon and realm of meaning for Merton and Suzuki that partly accounts for their "unity of outlook and purpose." There is, however, a further, and more important meaning of Ultimate Reality shared by Merton and Suzuki, and Merton calls this a "second level of awareness." Merton writes:

The life of contemplation implies two levels of awareness: first, awareness of the question, and second, awareness of the answer. Though these are two distinct and enormously different levels, they are in fact an awareness of the same thing . . . We awaken not to find an answer absolutely distinct from the question, but to realize that the question is its own answer . . . the contemplation of which I speak is a religious and transcendent gift . . . it is the gift of God Who, in His mercy, completes the hidden and mysterious work of creation . . . by awakening in us the awareness that we are words spoken in His One Word, and that Creating Spirit dwells in us, and we in Him (NSC, 4-5).

Merton here moves beyond the question of God to an answer. This enormously different level of awareness is not absolutely distinct from the question, the question is already in and from the answer, because we are questions (words) spoken in that Creating Spirit. Merton's awareness of the answer beyond the awareness of the question is directly correlative with Suzuki's enlightenment, which goes beyond "the question of God," a

question that opens out into the intellectual "terra incognita" and discovers an answer through the "illuminating of this dark region." Within the horizon of the first meaning of "God" discourse centers around "question, darkness, intention" while within the horizon of the second meaning of "God" the language is of "illumination and fulfillment."²⁹

Lonergan would characterize the second meaning of "God" as established by "religious experience" and "spiritual transformation." For Lonergan, this further meaning is established by an affirmation made in light of the experience of the incipient total fulfillment of intentional consciousness. That is to say, the first meaning of Ultimate Reality is correlative with our anticipation and intention while the second correlates with the basic fulfillment of our unlimited wonder and yearning discovered through the experience of unrestricted love or freedom.

Lonergan writes:

The transcendental notions, that is our questions for intelligence, for reflection and for deliberation, constitute our capacity for self-transcendence. That capacity becomes an actuality when one falls in love. Then one's being becomes being-in-love . . . as the question of God is implicit in all our questioning, so being in love with God is the basic fulfillment of our conscious intentionality . . . Being in love with God, as experienced, . . . is being in love without limits or qualifications or conditions or reservations.³⁰

²⁹I am speaking of the "second meaning of God" as established not simply by religious experience, experience which transforms one's horizons and gives particular form to the question of God, but also as established by the acceptance of that experience on the part of the subject who has it.

³⁰Bernard Lonergan, *Method*, pp.105-106.

This experience is not the product of knowledge or decision. It is an experience that leads to further questions.

The experience of being in unrestricted love leads to a fuller meaning of the term "God" or "Ultimate Reality." Lonergan contends that it is this experience of being in love without limits that the mystics, who are generally apophatic and withdraw from objectification, rely upon for their positive affirmations regarding God. With the objectification of God, or Ultimate Reality, as "love, goodness, holiness," the human person is faced with the decision of whether he or she will love in return, live out of this Ultimate Love committed to its invitations and demands.

The decision to do so, for Lonergan, constitutes religious conversion. The experience of unrestricted love "dismantles and abolishes the horizon in which our knowing and choosing went on." The acceptance of this love "sets up a new horizon in which the love of God will transvalue our values and that love will transform our knowing."³¹

This second meaning of God or "Ultimate Reality" is one that Merton understands as mutually affirmed by both Suzuki and himself in their dialogue. Suzuki makes this affirmation in the context of his dialogue with Merton by endorsing St. Augustine's dictum "love God and do as you will" and by his insistence that "the most important thing is Love"(ZBA, 62).³² While Merton affirms the second meaning of "God" in

³¹Bernard Lonergan, *Method*, p. 106. Lonergan's words are in reference to religious experience but I am emphasizing the necessity of commitment, which corresponds to decision making, because (and Lonergan supports this) the experience of unrestricted love is still open to acceptance or rejection on the part of the human subject. It is acceptance and commitment that actualizes religious conversion.

³²Merton also wrote in his journal on June 16, 1964, reflecting on his meeting with Suzuki in New York, that "the thing he insisted on most—in Xianity & Buddhism—love more than enlightenment" (*Encounter*, 83). In light of the meanings of "God" discussed here, I take this to mean that Suzuki holds the second meaning as supremely important. But Suzuki's distinguishing between love and enlightenment here is rather confusing. Buddhism affirms

nearly everything he writes, a clear articulation of this affirmation appears early in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* where he writes: ...God has revealed himself to men in Christ, but He has revealed himself first of all as love. Absolute truth is then grasped as love: ...Only he who loves can be sure that he is still in contact with the truth, which is in fact too absolute to be grasped by his mind (CGB, 44).³³ This fuller meaning of Ultimate Reality, shared by Merton and Suzuki, accounts for the fuller establishment of their "unity of outlook and purpose." Because the first two meanings of "God" or "Ultimate Reality" are immediately correlative with human consciousness, and therefore transcultural³⁴ in their simplest expressions, Merton and Suzuki could find themselves occupying the precise standpoints where communication about ultimate concerns could prove most effective (ZBA, 60).

At this point, I ought to say something about religious conversion facilitating or advancing the transvaluation of values. For Lonergan, falling in love without limits transforms the human subject, first of all with respect to his or her apprehensions of value. Judgments of value

that *Karuna* (compassion) is the fruit of *Prajna* (transcendental wisdom), so I am not quite sure how to interpret this distinction. Perhaps, from the standpoint of intentionality analysis, Suzuki is suggesting that "religious conversion" is more important than "intellectual conversion" which here he associates with enlightenment. See section 10 of this chapter for a discussion of "enlightenment" in terms of "intellectual conversion."

³³This quote also implicitly affirms the three meanings of "God" in successive relation, as I will discuss them in the following section. God's revelation in Christ bespeaks the third meaning of "God." God's revelation as love bespeaks the second meaning of "God." And the affirmation of "the truth which is too absolute to be grasped by the mind" bespeaks the first meaning of "God" as infinite mystery.

³⁴I have already discussed the transcultural reality of religious experience in chapter one, but for a more complete presentation of this position see Lonergan's *Method in Theology*, pp. 105-112, and his "Prolegomena to the Study of the Emerging Religious Consciousness of Our Time" in *A Third Collection* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985, edited by Frederick E. Crowe), pp. 55-74.

involve the person at the apex of subjectivity (they are "fourth level" operations). But the person who falls in love will also be opened to new experiences, will understand, and will make judgments in light of this transformative love. In other words, even though Lonergan "locates" religious conversion as a response of the subject at the height of his or her subjectivity, the commitment that one makes on this level transforms one's whole way of being in and with the world. Metaphorically speaking, one begins to see with the eyes of faith, with the "inner eye" of love. The "unity of outlook and purpose" that Merton and Suzuki share can also be demonstrated with respect to their apprehensions of value.

Even while Merton continued to be puzzled by divergent points in the "doctrines" of Christianity and Buddhism regarding their understandings of the human person, he was continually heartened by a mutual radical affirmation of the value of human life, affirmed, if not in creed, certainly in code. Merton wrote that "on the Buddhist side there seems to be no positive idea of personality at all: it seems to be a value that is completely missing from Buddhist thought. Yet it is certainly not absent from Buddhist practice" (*ZBA*, 118). And in the context of remembering Suzuki he wrote:

One cannot understand Buddhism until one meets it in this existential manner, in a person in whom it is alive. Then there is no longer a problem of understanding doctrines which cannot help being a bit exotic for a Westerner, but only a question of appreciating a value which is self-evident (*ZBA*, 62).

It is in terms of falling in love without limits and the transvaluation of values that Merton primarily understands the convergence between the Christian conception of the "New Man" and the Taoist and Buddhist

conceptions of the "Superior Man" and the "True Man" (ZBA, 60-62). The realm of meaning correlative to the second horizon constituted by this acceptance of unlimited love, which is also an experience of liberation and of radical freedom, enabled fruitful and effective communication between Suzuki and Merton. However, when Merton employed a further meaning of Ultimate Reality which is not immediately correlative to intentional consciousness, communication proved most difficult.

Lonergan contends that religious experience does not occur with "labels attached." Experience is preverbal, whether it is experience of sensory data or of the data of one's own conscious operations. But experience leads to understanding and expression and Lonergan talks about this as a movement from infrastructure to suprastructure. He distinguishes between "an infrastructure of insights as discoveries or of feelings as felt and, on the other hand, a suprastructure of insights as formulated in hypotheses or of feelings as integrated into conscious living."³⁵ The experience of God is on the level of infrastructure (what Merton would call the "inner experience") and its communication is through formulation and objectification on the level of suprastructure. When communities mediate religious experience in language, doctrine and deeds and are bound by shared understandings and affirmations, or confessions, we have religions. Any religious tradition is a community of meaning and value and it mediates its affirmed meaning of Ultimate Reality to its adherents and the adherents shape and fill out that meaning.

Buddhism and Christianity provided Suzuki and Merton with their

³⁵Bernard Lonergan, "Prolegomena to the Study of the Emerging Religious Consciousness of Our Time." p. 58, in *A Third Collection*, edited by Frederick E. Crowe, S.J. (New York: Paulist Press, 1985).

"intellectual antecedents" that sometimes made communication very difficult. While they were nonetheless able to mutually affirm, on the level of suprastructure, many common understandings regarding Ultimate Reality and the ultimacy of Love, understandings immediately correlative to their inner experience, they also met with difficulty on the level of suprastructure because of a further affirmation that Merton makes regarding "God."

Affirming the meaningfulness of Christian doctrines is dependent upon accepting the testimony of a community that carries with it a meaning of "God" that is not immediately correlative with intentional consciousness. The Christian meaning of the word God is formulated in the doctrine of the Trinity and the affirmation of this meaning depends upon the acceptance of Jesus Christ as the Word of God, and the acceptance of the testimony of the Christian tradition as the historical extension of the Word. In other words, the Christian understanding of God is one that purports to be dependent upon God's self-communication in history through Jesus Christ, through sacred scripture and tradition, and through the community of disciples. This further meaning of "God" emerges only mediately, and correlates only mediately with human consciousness. That is to say one hears the testimony of a community's confession and trusts in and affirms its ultimate validity and value. A person cannot arrive at this meaning of "God" by the practice of meditation alone, or by acknowledging and affirming their basic orientation to the transcendent and its potential implications for the discovery of the ultimately real, or even by falling in love without limits or conditions or qualifications. No doubt these lead to genuine meanings of "God" or "Ultimate Reality" but Christian doctrines and dogma make claims about Who God is by the

acceptance of the mediation of the Word. Affirming this further meaning of "God" establishes yet another horizon and another realm of meaning and discourse which Merton and Suzuki do not commonly share.³⁶

Merton suggests that in Christianity, the experience of God (an experience initially objectified as one of "Absolute Being, Absolute Love, Absolute Mercy or Absolute Void") is "through word and love" while for the Buddhist it is..."through insight and emptiness."

Yet Christianity too has its tradition of apophatic contemplation of knowledge in "unknowing," while the last words I remember Dr. Suzuki saying (before the usual good-byes) were "The most important thing is Love!" I must say that as a Christian I was profoundly moved. Truly *Prajna* and *Karuna* are one (as the Buddhist says), or *Caritas* (love) is indeed the highest knowledge (*ZBA*, 62).

I take this as an affirmation of the third meaning of "God" (the Christian meaning of Father, Son, and Spirit), as something distinct from but not in conflict with the first and second meanings. I believe that Merton is implicitly affirming here that the specifically Christian meaning of "God" is known by the affirmation of the *mediated word* while the knowing of God through unknowing, which he affirms is shared by Zen Buddhists and the Christian contemplative tradition, is through interiority, through "insight and emptiness". Although Merton is also emphasizing that

³⁶For purposes of clarification I must say something more about the correlation of "meanings" with human consciousness. Meanings are always mediated. As such, the first and second "meanings of God" are mediated insofar as they are meanings, but the meanings correlate directly with (a) the unrestricted intending of consciousness and (b) the experienced fulfillment of conscious intending. The third "meaning of God" is arrived at only through the experience, understanding and affirming of mediated meaning; it emerges from the understanding and affirming of a story (i.e., the affirmation of meaning and value). In this sense, the third "meaning of God" is only "mediately" correlative to human consciousness.

Christians experience God as love, he acknowledges that this encounter with God is shared also by the Buddhists.

Emptiness, interiority and the experience of unrestricted love yield meanings of "Ultimate Reality" immediately correlative to human consciousness. When Merton wrote "The Zen Revival" he was speaking primarily from within the horizon of their "unity of outlook and purpose" and their "common spiritual climate." When Merton and Suzuki communicated from within this horizon, Merton called this their dialogue as "monks and Zen men" and he found it profoundly important to be able to occupy these precise standpoints. But when Merton attempted to treat Zen in the language of Christian theology, employing distinctions between the natural and the supernatural, between the recovery of Paradise and the eschatological fullness of Heaven, he met with the realization of a communication breakdown between him and Suzuki. What I find most significant here is that Merton did not judge points of divergence in his dialogues as things to be ignored, or trivialized, rather he asserted that "differences must remain until moments of greater insight". Merton's ability to say "yes" to the other whenever he could, while remaining faithful to his own position at points of apparent impasse indicates his understanding of how these meanings of "God" are related.

9. The Meanings of "God" as Successively Related

I have been suggesting, by way of Lonergan's position, that these meanings of "God" are successively related. They are established by experiences and subsequent understandings and affirmations that

constitute horizons and corresponding realms of meaning. If we image them in terms of "viewpoints," the first meaning of "God" would correspond to a horizon established by the transcendental orientation and the question of God, and so Lonergan calls this the "horizon of transcendence." The second meaning of "God" is fuller, more determinate, it not only corresponds to a belief in transcendent reality correlative with intentional consciousness as its ground and goal, but affirms an experience of unlimited love³⁷ as the inchoative fulfillment of the transcendental orientation.

This second meaning is not in dialectical opposition to the first. It does not contradict the truth of the meaning of "God" within the first horizon, but it fills out that meaning in a more complete way, goes beyond and sublates it. So the second meaning correlates with a further horizon of human consciousness, a further realm of meaning and discourse. Lonergan calls this the horizon of "religious conversion." In other words, the term Ultimate Reality becomes more meaningful to the person who has affirmed an experience of the incipient fulfillment of their fundamental orientation, so the term "God" carries more meaning. Within this horizon, "God" who was previously only infinitely mysterious, objectified as Absolute Being, or Absolute Void, is now known in love, by love, and as Love, or Absolute Mercy.

Finally, for the Christian, the third affirmation of what "God" means transcends and includes the prior two meanings. The third meaning does not emerge from an added experience immediate in human

³⁷While Lonergan speaks almost exclusively about the experience of being in "unrestricted love" as establishing the second meaning of God, both Suzuki and Merton speak frequently of the experience as being one of transcendental freedom and liberation from bondage and illusion.

consciousness, but from a further affirmation. The Christian meaning of "God" is one that "focuses and inflames" the inward gift of love by the acceptance of the "outward expression of God's love in Christ Jesus dying and rising again."³⁸ This focusing, through intersubjective relation to Christ and other Christians, constitutes a distinct meaning of "God" that Merton affirms to be fuller, more complete, and inclusive of the meanings of "God" as the ground of being and as unrestricted love or freedom.

Because Merton not only endorses this third meaning of "God" but also understands it as successively related to the prior two, he does not hold his commitment to Christ as a stumbling block to dialogue. He does not consider that his Christocentric world view impedes his ability to understand Zen and appropriate and affirm its truth and value.

Regarding this complementarity Merton wrote:

Zen is not Kerygma but realization, not revelation but consciousness, not news from the Father who sends his Son into this world, but awareness of the ontological ground of our own being here and now, right in the midst of the world . . . the supernatural Kerygma and [this awareness] are far from being incompatible . . . they well compliment each other, and for this reason Zen is perfectly compatible with Christian belief (ZBA, 47).

³⁸In a lecture given at Gonzaga University in 1972 Lonergan presented, in part, this theory of the successively related meanings of "God." There he said: "If I have concluded that there is a common element to all the religions of mankind, (namely, the second meaning of "God" established by religious conversion and religiously differentiated consciousness), I must now add that there is a specific element proper to Christianity. Christianity involves not only the inward gift of being in love with God but also the outward expression of God's love in Christ Jesus dying and rising again. In the paschal mystery the love that is given inwardly is focused and inflamed, and that focusing unites Christians not only with Christ but with one another." Bernard Lonergan, *Philosophy of God, and Theology*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973), p. 10.

In his essay "Contemplation and Dialogue" Merton suggests a way in which the third meaning of "God" unites genuine knowledge of God with the apophatic spiritual experience expressed in the paradox of "fullness and emptiness, *todo y nada*, void and infinity, which appears at the heart of all the great traditional forms of contemplative wisdom." Merton suggests that the revelation of God at work in history through Christ's cross and resurrection offers something profoundly important to the contemplative experience. He asserts that the mysteries discovered in contemplation find their ultimate meaning and validation in the "Cross of Christ, which is the mystery of kenosis, the self-emptying of God, the sacrificial submission of the 'Suffering Servant' (Isaiah 52) who became obedient 'even unto death' (Philippians 2:5-10)." Merton continues:

Here too we paradoxically encounter, in the 'word of the cross,' the emptying of all human wisdoms (1 Cor. 1:18-25) . . . Texts such as these . . . will then be seen as . . . Christian answers to the profound questions raised by all these ancient traditions, which seem to have been grasping at the central truths in their own way. Thus the full idea of Christian contemplation is a *theoria* that powerfully unites and fuses both 'incarnational' and 'eschatological' Christianity and then opens out into the realm of divine illumination, the *theologia* in which the highest mystery, the Trinity of Persons in one Nature, is not contemplated as 'object' but is celebrated in the hymn of the Spirit, 'Abba, Father! (MZM, 212-213).

Merton's position on the successive meanings of "God" is not as critically and explicitly worked out as Lonergan's, since the latter has based his analysis on a fully developed study of human consciousness and its methodological implications for religious studies and theology, but it is consonant with Lonergan's position.³⁹ Merton's affirmation of this set of

³⁹I have found no indication that Merton had ever read anything that Lonergan wrote.

relations regarding the meanings of "God" is implicit in much of his later writings but is perhaps most explicit in his essay "Final Integration: Toward a Monastic Therapy."⁴⁰ At this point, by use of an extended quotation from the aforementioned essay, I wish to present Merton's Christocentric anthropology as thoroughly consonant with the foregoing analysis of the meanings of "God." Merton writes:

The infant who lives immersed in a symbiotic relationship with the rest of nature . . . must be "born" out of this . . . and acquire an identity as a responsible member of society... But once he has grown up, acquired an education, and assumed a useful role . . . there is still another birth to be undergone . . . In Sufism, Zen Buddhism and in many other religious or spiritual traditions, emphasis is placed on the call to fulfill certain obscure yet urgent potentialities in the ground of one's being... The man who is "fully born" . . . apprehends his life fully and wholly from an inner ground that is at once more universal than the empirical ego and yet entirely his own . . . He has attained a deep inner freedom--the freedom of the Spirit we read of in the New Testament. . . . the state of insight which is final integration implies . . . the void, poverty and non-action which leave one entirely docile to the "Spirit." The man who has attained final integration . . . is fully "Catholic" in the best sense of the word. He has a unified vision and experience of the one truth shining out in all its various manifestations, some clearer than others, some more definite and more certain than others. It is suggested also in the degrees of truth and the degrees of love in St. Bernard's tracts on humility and the love of God.

However, . . . for a Christian, a transcultural integration is eschatological. [It is] the rebirth of man and of society into the transformed and redeemed time, the time of the Kingdom, the time of the Spirit . . . a disintegration of the social and cultural self, the product of merely human history, and the reintegration of that self in Christ, in salvation history, in the mystery of the redemption, in the Pentecostal "new creation." But this means entering into the full mystery of the eschatological Church (CWA, 202-211).

⁴⁰My reference will correspond to the newest edition of CWA (published in 1998 as the first volume of *Gethsemani Studies in Psychological and Religious Anthropology* by the University of Notre Dame Press with a forward by Robert Coles, MD..) wherein this essay comprises pp. 200-212.

Now it is not difficult, I think, to see the three meanings of "God" employed and affirmed by Merton in this passage as successively related. The call to fulfill the obscure but urgent potentialities in the ground of one's being bespeaks the transcendental orientation of the human person and correlates with a meaning of Ultimate Reality as the transcendent, mysterious ground and goal of such potentiality (the first meaning of "God"). The deep inner freedom of the "Spirit" corresponds with the total incipient fulfillment of that initial call, and so to the second meaning of Ultimate Reality correlative to the horizon of religious conversion or spiritual transformation.⁴¹ And finally, the "reintegration of the self in Christ, in salvation history, in the mystery of redemption, in the Pentecostal 'new creation'" clearly attests to a meaning of Ultimate Reality correlative with the horizon of Christian faith.

My focus thus far has been primarily to understand Merton's appropriation of Zen and his simultaneous ability to remain fully committed to his religious tradition. I have relied on the help of Bernard Lonergan in order to reach an understanding that I judge to be accurate not only with respect to what probably went on in Merton's appropriation

⁴¹Merton's clear reference to the Holy Spirit, which is a term of Trinitarian theology, might beg the question why I consider the expression here correlative to the second meaning of "God" and not the third. The distinction in Christian theology between the inner word of God written in the hearts of all people (the gift of the Holy Spirit) and the "outer" Word, Jesus, crucified, risen and proclaimed by the apostles and disciples provides the answer from the horizon of theological discourse. For a theological explication of the position that affirms the experience of the Holy Spirit as one that is transcultural see Frederick Crowe's essay "Son of God, Holy Spirit and World Religions" in *Appropriating the Lonergan Idea* (edited by Michael Vertin, Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1989), pp. 324-344. For a Zen Buddhist's affirmation of the approach to interreligious dialogue with Christians in light of the experience of the Holy Spirit, see Thich Nhat Hanh's *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995) especially pp. 13-25. Thich Nhat Hanh believes that the safest way for a Buddhist to approach the doctrine of the Trinity "is through the door of the Holy Spirit" and he believes "all of us have the seed of the Holy Spirit in us, the capacity of healing, transforming, and loving" (pp. 14-15).

of Zen but also, at least implicitly, in accord with Merton's own understanding of the relationship between his affirmations of Catholic Christian tradition and his contemplative appropriation of Zen.

Since Merton not only remained thoroughly Christocentric in his religious commitments but was also able to express an understanding of Zen highly praised by Suzuki, the question of how he was able to achieve and understand his own accomplishment was important to me with respect not only to understanding Merton's own integration, but with respect to highlighting his accomplishment as exemplary for Catholics and other Christians who sincerely desire to learn from other traditions while remaining faithful to their own religious commitments. In the final chapter of this dissertation I will offer some reflections on what Merton learned from Suzuki and how his study of Zen helped to advance his own continual self-transcendence. But before I do that, I want to comment on further ways that I believe intentionality analysis can help clarify issues in the Merton/Suzuki dialogue that might subsequently help to clarify issues in interreligious dialogue in general. In the final section of this chapter, then, I would like to offer some tentative proposals for addressing some of the concerns raised by Merton and Suzuki in their dialogue.⁴²

⁴²These suggestions are merely tentative because they concern issues that have not been central to my dissertation and for me to offer anything more than tentative suggestions here would demand more research than I have been able to do. For, in my use of intentionality analysis I have relied mostly on an understanding of self-transcendence with respect to religious conversion as an interpretive tool. I believe that the simplest and most effective way to elucidate the points of convergence in the dialogue has been to focus on the meanings of "God." But the proposals that I am now suggesting concern self-transcendence with respect to "intellectual conversion." While in the former task I emphasized the importance of the "withdrawal from objectification" and the "infrastructure of religious experience", now the emphasis is on "the mediation of immediacy by meaning" and the objectification and appropriation of intentional consciousness.

10. Toward an Understanding of the Relationship Between the Inner Spiritual Experience and the World Mediated by Meaning

Suzuki had trouble with Merton's interpretations of emptiness, ultimate experience, etc..... not simply because Merton was often speaking explicitly from within a tradition that Suzuki did not share, but also because of Suzuki's concern to abolish all interpretation, to be free of the "superstructure" that potentially obscures the simplicity of the "light of suchness." This suspicion of superstructure was precisely what prevented Suzuki from being able to endorse a positive account of the human person, which brings us to Merton's difficulty with Suzuki.

Merton is sympathetic to the concern that motivates the iconoclastic spirit of Zen yet he affirms that "the death of the old man" actualized in self-transcendence and transcendental wisdom "is not the destruction of personality but the dissipation of an illusion" (*ZBA*, 119). Years later when Merton visited Suzuki he lamented that "we could not get anywhere definite on the idea of 'person'," and so we know that the concern, at least for Merton, stayed with him (*Encounter*, 82). And though Suzuki would rebuke any charge that Zen is nihilistic or that it promotes a radical, moral relativism, and Merton would not concede that Christianity is fundamentally dualistic, in the first phase of their dialogue they never reached an acceptable resolution to their impasse.

In the light of intentionality analysis we can provide a critical understanding of their impasse and point to possible resolutions (resolutions not imposed on their dialogue but already nascent within it). The key issue has to do with the relationship between the infrastructure of religious experience and the suprastructure of religious language and tradition. From the standpoint of intentionality analysis the issue can be

addressed in such a way as to advance the dialogue toward the resolution of these problems, and do this in a way that I believe would mutually satisfy both Merton's and Suzuki's concerns.

Zen anticipates actualizing selflessness, recovering emptiness, something that Suzuki says must originate in an inner spiritual experience, and cannot be understood without such experience.

In *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* Suzuki writes:

Personal experience . . . is everything in Zen. No ideas are intelligible to those who have no backing of experience. The foundation of all concepts is simple unsophisticated experience. Zen places the utmost emphasis upon this foundation-experience, and it is around this that Zen constructs all the verbal and conceptual scaffold which is found in the literature known as "Sayings." Though the scaffold affords the most useful means to reach the inmost reality, it is still an elaboration and artificiality. We lose its whole significance when it is taken as a final reality. The nature of human understanding compels us not to put too much confidence in superstructure. Mystification is far from being the object of Zen itself, but to those who have not touched the central fact of life Zen inevitably appears as mystifying . . . Zen, therefore most strongly and persistently insists on an inner spiritual experience (pp. 33-35).

Suzuki does not place too much confidence in "superstructure" because "we are sinners, that is, we are knowers not only individually but collectively, communally, socially" (*ZBA*, 108). According to Suzuki, enlightenment is primarily on the level of an "inner spiritual experience" that is distinct from the "sayings" which only help to facilitate such experience, and are not to be taken as a "final reality." Suzuki insists that "zen abhors media, even the intellectual medium" because it ultimately aims at an experience, "an experience which no amount of explanation or argument can make communicable to others unless the latter themselves had it previously. If *satori* becomes perfectly clear to another who has

never had it, that *satori* will be no *satori*."⁴³ The point here is that an understanding of enlightenment in the abstract is not enlightenment.

Suzuki's distinction between the experience and the 'sayings' is thoroughly consonant with Lonergan's distinction between the infrastructure of religious experience and the suprastructure of religion in the world mediated by meaning. The inner spiritual experience, however, is not the "experience" of sensory data⁴⁴, nor simply the experience of one's own consciousness as limited and transcendently intentional, but also the "aha" of discovery and the subsequent *affirmation* of the *primary unity* between consciousness as intentional and the reality of its transcendental ground and goal *in love and freedom*.⁴⁵ Insights as discoveries are still on the level of infrastructure so they are understood as part of what both Merton and Suzuki call "the inner experience." But

⁴³D. T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, p. 92.

⁴⁴I am speaking of the "inner spiritual experience" here within the horizon of the second meaning of "God". I say that this experience is not of sensory data because it is an "inner experience," not of what is seen, touched, tasted, smelled, or heard. Though the experience of unrestricted love is first "felt," when it is affirmed as "unrestricted" this love is no longer understood as just a feeling. The commitment to unconditional love sustains a person when it is difficult to love, when one does not "feel" loved by another, etc... Furthermore, it is important to emphasize, that for all of our interlocutors, Lonergan, Merton, and Suzuki, what is affirmed ultimately is not just one's experience, but the reality that is first manifest *via* experience.

⁴⁵ There is also a question as to what kind of insight or discovery is present here. From the perspective of Lonergan's cognitional theory, God cannot be understood via a direct insight because God is unrestricted and human acts of understanding are always limited. Or as Merton says the truth than can be grasped as love is "too absolute to be grasped by the mind." Perhaps, the "reaching of the inmost reality" or "touching the central fact of life" is, aside from being an experience of the inchoative fulfillment of intentionality, a discovery of Ultimate Reality by inference, a limited understanding of the unlimited, and a judgment of value based on the experience of unrestricted freedom and/or love. It is important, however, not to assume that judgments of fact, are "objective" while judgments of value are "subjective," and therefore more suspect. This would miss the whole point of Lonergan's work, that convincingly demonstrates that correct judgments of fact and value are both matters of authentic subjectivity and both kinds of judgments yield knowledge of the real.

insights as formulated and expressed constitute "superstructure" for Suzuki, or "suprastructure" for Lonergan.

Suzuki's emphasis on Zen's abhorrence of media and his simultaneous insistence on experience that is only assisted by the "verbal and conceptual scaffold" is also thoroughly consonant with what Lonergan calls the "mediated return to immediacy" (*Method*, 77).⁴⁶ In other words, for Suzuki, the superstructure is primarily functional, but what is most important is the withdrawal from objectification that leads to the inner spiritual experience.

Lonergan shares Suzuki's concern about placing too much confidence in suprastructure when he writes:

In this larger world [suprastructure] we live our lives. To it we refer when we speak of the real world. But because it is mediated by meaning, because meaning can go astray, because there is myth as well as science, fiction as well as fact, deceit as well as honesty, error as well as truth, that larger real world is insecure.⁴⁷

However, Lonergan is confident that the appropriation of one's interior life helps to ensure the triumph of fact over fiction, of honesty over deceit, of truth over error, and of love over apathy in the world mediated by meaning, which for Lonergan is *real* and not just an artificial scaffold. But, for Lonergan, appropriating the interior life is not simply a matter of withdrawal but also of objectification. Lonergan writes:

⁴⁶In other words, one enters the "the cloud of unknowing" through the withdrawal from objectification, but this return to immediacy is vastly different from the infant's world, as the consciousness of the infant is undifferentiated and the consciousness of the adult is not. The consciousness of infancy is transcended when the infant acquires language and moves into the world mediated by meaning. The "withdrawal" from mediation can only occur for a person who participates in the world of meaning, and only for them can the return to immediacy be something that is meaningful.

⁴⁷Bernard Lonergan, *Method*, p. 77.

Besides the immediate world of the infant and the adult's world mediated by meaning, there is the mediation of immediacy by meaning when one objectifies cognitional process in transcendental method.⁴⁸

For Lonergan, the mediation of immediacy by meaning, through objectification of what we do when we know, and not just the return to the immediacy of inner experience, is tremendously important.⁴⁹ This objectification allows us to have critical control over the world(s) in which we participate and that which we generate by our judgments of fact and value and our decisions and actions. The mediation of cognitional process allows us also to pronounce the world mediated by meaning a real world,

⁴⁸Bernard Lonergan, *Method*, p. 77.

⁴⁹I am speaking now of what Lonergan calls "intellectual conversion" which is distinct from "religious conversion" and "moral conversion." Lonergan characterizes intellectual conversion as transcending the position that affirms that knowing is simply a matter of taking a good look, and that the real is something "already out there now." Through the objectification of one's conscious operations one can grasp the isomorphic relation between consciousness and the world mediated by meaning. But the key to grasping the reality of the latter in relation to the former has to do with understanding and affirming the role of judgment in human knowing.

Although I have been discussing Zen insight in terms of "religious conversion" there is much in the Zen "sayings" about enlightenment that speak more of "intellectual conversion" than "religious conversion." For example, a popular Zen saying goes "when I was a child I thought that a tree was just a tree and a mountain just a mountain. When I grew older I thought that a tree was not a tree and a mountain not a mountain. Now I know that a tree is simply a tree and a mountain simply a mountain." I would tentatively propose that this 'saying' could be suggestive of "intellectual conversion." The first perspective is suggestive of naive realism (and perhaps empiricism), the second is suggestive of nominalism, or idealism, and the third is perhaps suggestive of affirmational realism, or of Lonergan's "intellectual conversion." The point is, however, that this 'saying' doesn't say much at all about the experience of being in unrestricted love or freedom, rather it centers on epistemology. Furthermore, a fully developed study of Suzuki's writings in light of intentionality analysis would have to address the question of how "religious experience" and dimensions of "intellectual conversion" are both conflated under the term "enlightenment."

and not just an artificial scaffold imposed by us on an undifferentiated void.⁵⁰

Because Suzuki is concerned primarily with the mediated return to immediacy (and the infrastructure of the inner spiritual experience), his judgments about the world mediated by meaning are often negative. But Suzuki does not stop at apophatic world-denial, rather he employs the *via negativa* as a way of grasping the right relationship between infrastructure as generative of suprastructure, and the co-operative dynamism between the two, and ultimately as an affirmation of the "real world".

Zen maintains an apophatic posture of negation against any claims or assertions about Ultimate Reality, since they belong to the world of suprastructure that Zen holds in suspicion. In this way, Zen is easily interpreted as "world denying" and "nihilistic". But such a judgment would not be accurate. Suzuki argues that Zen is really an "absolute affirmation quite beyond the ken of our discursive understanding... Zen is not all negation, leaving the mind all blank as if it were pure nothing; for that would be intellectual suicide. There is in Zen something self-assertive, which, however, being free and absolute, knows no limitations and refuses to be handled in abstraction."⁵¹

⁵⁰Lonergan's study of human consciousness is by his own account a program to advance the self-appropriation of one's own rational self-consciousness. From this appropriation results an understanding of one's own understanding, an affirmation that knowing is simply a matter of understanding correctly and that reasonable judgments of correct understanding and of apprehended value manifest the real world, a meaningful world much larger than the world available to immediate experience. See *Insight* (pp. 22-24). See also "Dimensions of Meaning" in *Collection: Volume 4 of the Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, edited by Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988, pp. 232-254). See especially pp. 232-233. *Collection* was first published by Herder and Herder, New York, and Darton Longman & Todd, London, 1967.

⁵¹See "Is Zen Nihilistic?" in D. T. Suzuki's *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove Press, 1964) pp. 48-57.

The iconoclastic spirit of Zen that encourages "throwing away" all interpretation, all images, all light, serves a function: to facilitate a realization grounded in attentive experiencing. In order to "be attentive" one must let go of distractions, let go of fears and expectations, and focus only on what is present. Enigmatic koans, the "blows of the hossu," the intentional use of paradox and contradiction are tools strategically employed by a master to help mediate the return to immediacy and the experience and subsequent transformation of *kensho* or *satori*. Thus when Suzuki denies that Zen is a metaphysical doctrine, and when Merton insists that to define Zen in terms of a system or structure is to deny it (*ZBA*, 3), they are simply insisting that Zen aims at a withdrawal from objectification, a withdrawal that facilitates the appropriation of one's interior core, of one's "original face." This appropriation leads to what Suzuki calls the "penetrating insight" into the relationship between Innocence (interiority and the inner spiritual experience) and Knowledge (the suprastructure of the world mediated by meaning).⁵²

Concerning Innocence and Knowledge Suzuki writes, "our actual life consists in the one supporting the other, or better, that they are inseparably co-operating" (*ZBA*, 105). The penetrating insight that grasps the proper

⁵²This "penetrating insight" has more to do with "intellectual conversion" than "religious conversion." This insight is into the isomorphic relation between consciousness and the world mediated by meaning, between interiority and exteriority, between Innocence and Knowledge.

Through what relatively little reading I have done in Zen Buddhism I have come to the tentative conclusion that Prajna is a term inclusive of religious, moral and intellectual transformation. The intellectual dimension of Prajna, expressed in the doctrine of dependent co-arising, is an affirmation of the isomorphic relation between consciousness and the world and of both of those as integral expressions of the transcendent Unconscious (Hui Neng's term, not as employed in the psychoanalytic tradition). But there is much work to be done here, and establishing direct correlations is difficult because intentionality analysis depends upon an explanatory viewpoint and a theoretical language, while Zen language, for the most part, remains descriptive, poetic, and phenomenological.

relation between Innocence and Knowledge allows ultimately for the affirmation of the world mediated by meaning, but from the standpoint of interiority, and no longer from the illusory and alienated perspective that sees the two worlds as contradictory where "we can not have them both at the same time" (*ZBA*, 105).

Suzuki's refusal to affirm the existence of a "self" is directly linked to his radical suspicion of superstructure. But the superstructure of which Suzuki is suspicious is basically a "classical culture" and he is suspicious of its abstract definitions of human beings. His is a suspicion of the reduction of dynamic incarnate interdependent subjects into isolated, abstract human beings in possession of souls or of "thingish ego substances" constitutive of their reality. But it is precisely Suzuki's "penetrating insight" into the relationship between subjective infrastructure and the objectification of suprastructure that allows for the development of the latter.

Loneragan suggests that our contemporary philosophical anthropology needs to be "existential and historical" and to "ask about man, not in the abstract, not as he would be in some state of pure nature, but as in fact he is here and now, in all the concreteness of his living and dying..."⁵³ An affirmation of the "self" as incarnate subject, as opposed to an abstract object, is precisely what Merton judges to be implicit in Zen. Even though Merton cannot get Suzuki to affirm the existence of the "self" he recognizes that Suzuki does not deny the reality of persons in the concrete. This is why Merton so confidently says that Zen is not the denial of

⁵³Bernard Lonergan, *Collection: Volume 4 of the Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, edited by Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), p. 245.

personal reality "but its highest affirmation" and that "when Zen denies the existence of the empirical self and of external objects" it is "not a denial of their reality but of their relevance insofar as they are isolated in their own forms" (ZR, 15). Using Lonergan's distinctions between the suprastructure of the "world mediated by meaning" and the "withdrawal from objectification" that facilitates religious experience on the "level" of infrastructure, helps the interpreter to understand Suzuki's apophatic language as functional rather than positionally nihilistic. But the objectification of transcendental method establishes a position that allows for a firmer affirmation of the validity and value of the world of suprastructure that goes beyond the radical suspicion of all "interpretation". Indeed it clears up the ambiguity advanced by the seemingly self-contradictory position that would invoke the suprastructure of language and interpretation to communicate experience and insight, while simultaneously undermining the value of that mediation. To illustrate this point we can revisit a quotation from Suzuki cited earlier.

Suzuki wrote:

So we see that Enlightenment is not the outcome of an intellectual process in which one idea follows another in sequence finally to terminate in conclusion or judgment. There is neither process nor judgment in Enlightenment, it is . . . more fundamental, something which makes a judgment possible, and without which no form of judgment can take place. In judgment there are a subject and a predicate; in Enlightenment . . . they are . . . merged as one, but not as one of which something can be stated, but as one from which arises judgment . . . all intellectual operations stop here. This is the wall against which all philosophies have beaten in vain. This is an intellectual terra incognita, in which prevails the principle, 'Credo quia absurdum est'. . . Enlightenment

is the illuminating of this dark region... and all intellectual inquiries find here their rationale.⁵⁴

Note here that enlightenment is not distinguished from the absolute ground of consciousness, but is firmly distinguished from intentional consciousness itself. The point that I believe Suzuki is making here is that enlightenment is not another level of intentional or operational consciousness but the very ground and goal of conscious intentionality discovered in self-transcendence, and this is more than a knowing "of empirical truths." I think Lonergan would agree with Suzuki that enlightenment is not another level of *intentional* consciousness,⁵⁵ but there is an oversight here as well.

Intentional consciousness is already present and operative whenever there is an experience, and subsequent operations emerge in affirming the experience as profoundly transformative. What is neglected here is the fact that what Suzuki knows *is* a result of conscious operations, and to say what Suzuki says he is consciously operating, since what he says does convey some understanding of an experience and is a judgment regarding

⁵⁴D. T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism: First Series* (London: Rider and Company, 1949), pp. 68-69.

⁵⁵Lonergan does say that the ultimate stage in a person's self transcendence is falling in love without limits and as experienced is "content of consciousness without a known object," and one "can say it's on the fifth level. It's self-transcendence reaching its summit and that summit can be developed and enriched, and so on, But of itself it is permanent" (*Philosophy of God, and Theology*, p. 38). But Lonergan is also clear that the summit of self-transcendence is not another operation of consciousness, added to experiencing, understanding, judging and deciding. I think Lonergan's point here is that the "fifth level" is not another level of intentional or operational, i.e., human consciousness, but precisely what is commonly known in theological discourse as supernatural grace. It is given to human consciousness not as an additional "level" the way one might add another story to one's house, but as the fulfillment of intentionality. Furthermore, when Lonergan says that the summit can be "developed and enriched" he is not suggesting that the human adds anything to God, rather that our increasing understanding and affirmations in light of God's revelation can bring us to clearer and more complete knowledge of the fullness that is given first as the experience of unlimited love.

enlightenment and he invokes the suprastructure of meaningful language to communicate this. In other words, it is important to attend not just to what Suzuki says *about* enlightenment, but to what Suzuki does in order first to attain it, and then to talk about it. Perhaps Lonergan's distinction between judgments of fact and judgments of value would allow Suzuki to affirm that while enlightenment is not "a knowing of empirical truths," i.e., a direct insight and subsequent judgment of fact, it is still a knowing and therefore involves an affirmation (of some understood experience), and perhaps, in this case, a judgment of value.

A further example of ambiguity and self-contradiction in the first phase of the dialogue appears after Suzuki had already affirmed the co-dependent and genetic relation between infrastructure and suprastructure (ZBA, 105), when he then sets them up in dialectical opposition by saying "there are two types of mentality which fundamentally differ one from the other: (1) affective, personal and dualistic, and (2) non-affective, non-personal, and nondualistic. Zen belongs to the latter and Christianity naturally to the former" (ZBA, 133). In terms of the successive meanings of "God" Suzuki is right in affirming that the Christian interpretation of Ultimate Reality is dependent upon the mediated Word, and therefore dependent upon "suprastructure" but he is mistaken when he calls this "mentality" "dualistic." He is also correct in affirming that Christianity is both affective and personal, but the question is, "what does he mean when he says Zen is none of these?" Indeed this judgment seems to undermine his own "penetrating insight" into the correlation between infrastructure and suprastructure. From the standpoint of intentionality analysis, the characterization of Zen enlightenment as "non-personal" again fails to acknowledge the role of the subject, the operations of consciousness in

experiencing, understanding and knowing. In other words, experiences, understandings, and affirmations are, properly conceived, always personal.

Suzuki himself suggests this when he characterizes enlightenment not only as experience, but also as understanding, and as affirmation.⁵⁶ In other words, enlightenment is not just the experience of the ground of consciousness, but also the "aha" that emerges as insight into experience. This "insight" as discovery is itself part of the "inner experience" and as discovery precedes the objectification of such in language, image and doctrine. But it is also a judgment, insofar as it is an affirmation and a radical "Yes", as Suzuki says. But whenever there is an experience, or an understanding, or an affirmation, there is a subject, a person who comes to know. So in order to understand what Suzuki means when he says that Zen is "non-personal" we have to advert again to the operations of consciousness.

What Merton calls the transcendental experience is an experience of radical fulfillment. But the fullness of that experience arises through the self-emptying of the mediated return to immediacy. That is to say, at the level of pure experience the conscious subject does not differentiate between the self-as experiencing, and the content of consciousness experienced. That differentiation does not occur until subsequent levels of

⁵⁶Both Merton and Suzuki insist that Prajna, emptiness, or Wisdom, is not just an experience, not just an understanding, not simply an affirmation, but all of these and more. See Suzuki's *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove Press, 1964) where he identifies enlightenment with experience (p. 33-34), and with understanding (p. 44), and with judgment (p. 39, 53), yet with none of these since he continues to insist that emptiness is not the experience that a subject has of an object apart from himself or herself, nor can it be limited to a closed, abstract concept, nor is it simply an arbitrary judgment. A close reading of *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* reveals Merton's own struggles and developments first describing emptiness as an "intuition" or experience, then as an "insight" or understanding, then as an "affirmation of the fullness of positive being".

intentional consciousness arise. It is at this level that Suzuki's insistence that Zen is non-personal has meaning, from the standpoint of intentionality analysis. But the failure to recognize that intentional consciousness is necessarily operative in the experience even though its presence is only made explicit later, is an oversight.

Emphasizing the self-emptying necessary for religious experience, Merton writes:

. . . it is basic to Zen, to Sufism, and to Christian mysticism . . . to radically question the ego that appears to be the subject of a transcendent experience, and thus of course to radically question the whole nature of the experience itself precisely as "experience." . . . Then if the empirical ego is conscious at all, is it conscious of itself as transcended, left behind, irrelevant, illusory, and indeed the root of all ignorance (Avidya)? (ZBA, 74).

At the level of such experience the "self-conscious self" is nowhere as it is not differentiated from that which is experienced. Without this differentiation there is no explicit subject and no explicit object of experience. Since ultimate experience is not simply an experience of sensory data, it is not understood to be an experience of a "something." And indeed in relation to the profundity and power of the fullness of freedom and love experienced in emptiness, the "self-conscious self" seems like nothing at all.

The problem with such insistence on the primacy of experience when talking about enlightenment, is that the further operations of consciousness that a person necessarily employs to reach the affirmation can seem, at first blush, to be ignored by Suzuki, resulting in further misunderstandings that Zen promotes an implicit epistemology that equates knowing with experiencing. This conclusion, of course, promotes

a kind of "mirror-wiping" Zen and undermines the objective of transcending a dualistic view of the world, in which a subject knows by experiencing the real that is somehow an object apart from the subject's intentionally operative consciousness.⁵⁷ For "the discovery of your original face before you were born" is an affirmation that you now know who you always have been. And that is an affirmation of the universal ground of personal consciousness, the transcendental Unconscious, and that affirmation is made by fidelity to one's personal intending, by an affirmation at the height of subjectivity.

The objectification of transcendental method seems to me to be precisely what is needed to help clarify what Suzuki wants to say about enlightenment. An explanatory viewpoint, attained by adverting to the dynamism of human consciousness and affirming the intelligibility of that dynamic unfolding process, would allow Suzuki to objectify the unified relation of his experiencing, understanding, judging and deciding. Grasping and affirming this unified relation facilitates the further affirmation of the reality of the world mediated by meaning, and thus of the tremendous value of "suprastructure" and of our responsibility to and in that larger world. This same objectification would have allowed Merton, in the earlier stages of the dialogue, to critically defend his "interpretations" from Suzuki's suggestions that all "interpretations" are implicit affirmations of "dualism" because interpretations depend upon differentiation between subject as interpreter and object of interpretation.

⁵⁷ There is enough evidence in Suzuki's own writings to refute this evaluation. Even though Suzuki may not give the subsequent operations of consciousness due consideration with his emphasis on "experience", especially when he says "enlightenment is when the whole thing is *seen* at one glance" he does not neglect the further operations entirely and his rejection of mirror-wiping Zen is fundamentally a rejection of naive realism (italics added).

Finally, intentionality analysis enables even the interpreter of the dialogue to understand just what both Suzuki and Merton might mean when they say enlightenment is an experience, but not an experience of some other thing; an insight, but not simply an abstract understanding or a knowing of an empirical truth; an affirmation, but not simply an arbitrary and ungrounded judgment. Indeed, without that explanation, an interpreter might easily and mistakenly conclude that Merton and Suzuki are simply confused, or that they are trying to confuse each other, or worse, that they don't really know what they are talking about. But they are not confused, they do know what they are talking about, and far from trying to confuse one another, they are genuinely trying to understand each other and to say "yes" to one another where they find that they can.

Chapter Five

Conclusions on Consciousness, Dialogue, and Self -Transcendence

In this concluding chapter I offer a way of addressing the question of what Merton gained through his appropriation of Zen from the standpoint of intentionality analysis. Secondly, I discuss the importance of Thomas Merton's dialogue with Suzuki in terms of building a world community of meaning and value. And finally, I propose that Merton's approach to interreligious dialogue, exemplified in his dialogue with Suzuki and his appropriation of Zen, successfully navigates through the horns of the apparent dilemma that faces Christians regarding genuine openness to the other religions and simultaneous fidelity to their affirmation of Jesus Christ as the universal savior.

1. Learning in Depth from the Buddhist Discipline

The dialogue between Thomas Merton and D. T. Suzuki centered on self-transcendence and self-transformation. In the previous chapter I demonstrated that the common ground of their dialogue was established by mutual affirmations regarding the transcendental orientation of the human person, and the fulfillment of that orientation in the "transcendental experience" or religious experience of unrestricted love and/or freedom. I demonstrated that these two affirmations established successive meanings of "God" or "Ultimate Reality" that enabled fruitful dialogue about ultimate concerns. But their dialogue disclosed not only points of convergence and mutual affirmation, but also divergence and challenge.

Merton's challenges to Suzuki mostly concerned a subsequent affirmation that Merton made regarding the meaning of "God" established by the acceptance and affirmation of the meaning and value of Christian revelation. But Suzuki's challenge to Merton had to do with the latter's understanding of "emptiness." In 1959 Suzuki had said Merton's understanding of Zen emptiness "did not go far and deep enough." In 1964, after reading Merton's essay "The Zen Revival," Suzuki said that Merton had communicated "more true understanding of Zen" than any other Western writer he had read. The question arises, in what way did Merton's understanding of Zen develop?

Suzuki's initial challenge led to nuances in Merton's accounts of Zen enlightenment, and subsequently to nuances in his own self-understanding. In the light of these challenges and developments we can address the question of what Merton learned from his encounter with Zen.¹ To answer this question I will utilize the essays that comprise Part One of *Zen and The Birds of Appetite*. However, it is important to note that I do not aspire to offer a definitive answer to the question of what Merton learned from Zen. Indeed there are probably many accurate answers to that question. Rather, I intend to offer two answers that intentionality analysis brings to light and that support my analysis in the previous chapter regarding Merton's integration of Zen and his Catholic heritage. First, I suggest that Merton's practice and study of Zen helped to facilitate the advancement of his interiorly differentiated consciousness and so advanced his intellectual conversion. Secondly, I suggest that his

¹I addressed this question briefly in the section on "The Zen Revival" in the previous chapter, but will go into more detail here.

practice and study also assisted him in further appropriating religiously differentiated consciousness and so advanced his religious conversion.

As Merton tells readers of *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, "this book is really back to front" (ZBA, 139). Part Two of *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* was written in 1959, while essays in Part One were written in the latter part of the nineteen sixties. Thus the essays in Part One communicate the fruits of nearly another decade of Merton's continued study of Zen. One theme that comes to light in these later essays, and that is of central concern to my analysis, is the way that the study of Zen led Merton to a greater understanding of his own consciousness as limited and intentional, yet concretely grounded in transcendent reality, reached primarily through attentiveness to religious experience and insight into the subsequent operations of his own consciousness posterior to the experiential level of consciousness.

Suzuki's challenge pushed Merton to distinguish between the religious experience and the mediation of what he experienced through the subsequent operations of intentional consciousness. That is to say, from the standpoint of intentionality analysis, one can detect a development in Merton's understanding of his own consciousness in light of the immediate experience of what he understands and affirms to be its transcendent ground. Though Merton never offers an explicit account of intentional consciousness in its successive operations, and of the pivotal role of judgment in knowing, his later writings in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* reveal significant developments in terms of his own interiorly differentiated consciousness.

As an example of this, we can compare two correlative expressions regarding self-transcendence from Part Two and Part One of *Zen and the*

Birds of Appetite. The first expression utilizes the metaphysical terms of Christian doctrine and the second is exemplary of a move to interiority facilitated by his study of Zen.

In Merton's early dialogue with Suzuki he wrote of the Fall:

The knowledge of good and evil begins with the fruition of sensible and temporal things for their own sakes, an act which makes the soul conscious of itself, and centers it on its own pleasure . . . As soon as this takes place, there is a complete change of perspective, and from unity or wisdom (identified with emptiness and purity) the soul now enters into a state of dualism. It is now aware of both itself and of God as separated beings . . . and is no longer lost in Him as in a transcendent subject . . . Each act of self-affirmation increases the dualistic tension between self and God . . . As one loves temporal things, one gains an illusory substantiality" (ZBA, 127).

Years later in his essay "The New Consciousness" (ZBA, 15-32)², Merton wrote:

• Posterior to this immediate experience of a ground which transcends experience,³ emerges the subject with its self-awareness. But, as the Oriental religions and Christian mysticism have

²"The New Consciousness" is a truncated version of Merton's "The Self of Modern Man and the New Christian Consciousness," first published by the R. M. Bucke Memorial Society's (Montreal) *Newsletter-Review* 11 (1967).

³Regarding the "immediate experience which transcends experience" Merton says that "beyond and prior to the subject-object division...underlying the subjective experience of self-awareness there is the immediate experience of Being. This is totally different from an experience of self-consciousness. It is completely nonobjective. It has in it none of the split and alienation that occurs when the subject becomes aware of itself as a quasi-object. The consciousness of Being (whether considered positively or negatively and apophatically as in Buddhism) is an immediate experience that goes beyond reflexive awareness. It is not *consciousness of* but *pure consciousness*, in which the subject as such 'disappears'"(ZBA, 23-24). This is analogous to what Merton had written earlier in "The Zen Revival" when he said "it is less our awareness than being's awareness of itself in us." What "immediate" means in this case is that the transcendental experience, *as experience*, has not been mediated by the subsequent operations of consciousness, by questions for intelligence, for reflection, or for deliberation, nor by answers to those questions.

stressed, this self-aware subject is not final or absolute; it is a provisional self-construction which exists, for practical purposes, only in a sphere of relativity. Its existence has meaning in so far as it does not become fixated or centered upon itself as ultimate, learns to function not as its own center but "from God" and "for others". . . Here the individual is aware of himself as a self-to-be-dissolved in self-giving, in love, in "letting go"(ZBA, 24).

In the first account of the Fall, Merton uses metaphysical language to talk about the "soul" centering in upon itself and becoming alienated from "God." In the second account Merton uses the terms of operational consciousness to distinguish the unity of personal consciousness with its transcendent ground in the immediate transcendent experience, from the "self-aware subject" that emerges posterior to that experience, as the "observing, thinking, measuring, and estimating 'self'"(ZBA, 22), which is relative, provisional and not to be taken as final or absolute.

The "self" that gains "an illusory substantiality" by centering in upon itself, and relating to created things only for itself, can be contrasted with the "self-aware subject" who is aware of himself or herself as a "self-to-be dissolved in self-giving, in love, in letting-go." From the standpoint of intentionality analysis, the prior "self" is the self to be transcended, or the morally and religiously unconverted subject, while the latter is the self as transcending and transformed through acceptance of the experience of unrestricted love and the transvaluation of values; for Merton identifies the immediate experience of the ground of consciousness, and of being, as an experience of unrestricted "Freedom and Love"(ZBA, 25).

What I find most interesting here is that Merton is now defining "self" not in terms of an abstract nature, but operationally in terms of consciousness, i.e. "observing, thinking, measuring and estimating." This

identification of the "self-aware self" or the "self-conscious-self" with the reflexive awareness of intentional acts, was facilitated by his encounter with Zen, and especially by Suzuki's challenges to Merton's earlier "platonic" accounts of emptiness⁴ and by Hui Neng's rejection of mirror-wiping Zen. That is to say, the "platonic" or "mirror-wiping" accounts of emptiness failed to affirm that "self" and "other" are secondary differentiations, and thus too easily propagate the position that the subject/object distinction, is really a fundamental and primary division, an affirmation that leads to the self centering in upon itself.

These challenges compelled Merton to distinguish between the "undifferentiated union of subject and object in experience" and the subsequent distinction of them made by the "self-aware-self." This distinction facilitated Merton's differentiation and objectification of the interior operations of consciousness of which the immediate experience is primary but only part of a larger whole.

Self-transformation is, for Lonergan, not only moral (the transformation that takes one beyond choosing only with respect to satisfaction, to choosing value over satisfaction when the two are in conflict), not only religious (the transformation brought about by the acceptance of the experience understood to be one of unrestricted being in love), but also intellectual (the transformation that results from affirming that the real is not simply already out there now and known by "taking a good look").

⁴ Merton confessed that his earlier accounts of emptiness were "platonic" insofar as they maintained that "supreme consciousness resides in a distinct heart which is pure and ...and worthy to receive a vision of God" and therefore aware of a "separate self-consciousness" (ZBA, 9).

Intellectual self-transformation, like all conversions, can be gradual or momentous, and as a gradual process successive steps or developments can be distinguished. Conn discusses the critical grounding of Merton's moral conversion as an advance toward the fullness of "intellectual conversion." And while Merton for a long time was beyond the illusion that the real was simply "already out there now", an affirmation that he could make in light of his faith that God, although ultimately real, was not a limited object, or "thing" out there within a larger household of reality, he never really came to an explicit account of his own knowing as more than just sensing, more than just understanding, more than just willing something to be so. But such an account depends upon the objectification and appropriation of the operations of one's intentional consciousness. It is with respect to this objectification that Merton's encounter with Zen can be affirmed as fundamental to the advancement of his own self-transformation and self-transcendence, even though, as the last section of the previous chapter suggested, Merton's "intellectual conversion" was not complete with respect to the way Lonergan defines it. He did, however, make significant strides toward an explicit account of conscious operations as related to their transcendent ground and goal. And it is with respect to the operations of consciousness that emerge posterior to immediate experience, which lead to the mediation of the world by meaning, that the importance of the dialogue itself comes to light.

But the interior differentiation of consciousness also enabled Merton to grasp the paramount importance that attentive experiencing holds in Zen. It helped him to achieve and to understand the radical self-emptying that

Lonergan calls the mediated return to immediacy, as facilitating the fulfillment of intentional consciousness in religious experience.⁵

Merton claims that in Zen, experience is paramount to everything else. The key in Buddhist meditation is "not to *explain* but to *pay attention*" (ZBA, 38). He quotes Wittgenstein's dictum "Don't think: Look!" as consonant with the basic message of Zen (ZBA, 49). And he says that as long as "you are given to distinguishing, judging, categorizing and classifying... you are filtering the light through a system as if convinced that this will improve the light" (ZBA, 7). In relation to the transcendental experience the subsequent operations of consciousness are only provisional pointers. Judgment is employed only "to point beyond judgment to the pure void." Zen "does not settle down in its judgment as final. It does not erect its judgments to be defended against all comers" (ZBA, 6).

With phrases such as these Merton is insisting on the importance of following the first transcendental precept, "be attentive," for facilitating the experience of the fulfillment of consciousness. But being attentive in this purest sense, is descriptively given the quality of humility, of nakedness and emptiness, because it must go beyond a selfish motive. Being attentive, or *bare attention*, can not be realized or attained at the level of the "self aware self's" desire to experience something else, or to *have* a certain kind of experience, rather one must lose one's self, become empty of the self that desires the possession of such an experience. This is exactly what Merton asserts in his "Author's Note" when he says:

⁵I do not intend to suggest, however, that religious conversion depends upon intellectual conversion. It does not, and ordinarily religious conversion precedes intellectual conversion, as it does also in the life of Thomas Merton. See Lonergan's *Method*, pp. 237-247.

Zen enriches no one. There is no body [carrion] to be found. The [meat-eating] birds may come and circle for a while in the place where it is thought to be. But they soon go elsewhere. When they are gone, the "nothing," the "no-body" that was there, suddenly appears. That is Zen. It was there all the time but the scavengers missed it, because it was not their kind of prey (*ZBA*, ix).⁶

Here Merton is poetically expressing the radical self-emptying necessary for the full and clear religious experience. It is not something that the birds of appetite can consume, rather the birds must be gone before the "nothing" can appear. Nor is religious experience primarily a sensory experience of simply seeing "what is right there and not adding any comment, any interpretation, any judgment" although practicing seeing in this manner is a basic "exercise of Buddhist meditation" (*ZBA*, 53). The transcendental experience, which is cultivated by the practice of "bare attention," is, paraphrasing Suzuki, "not to be identified with ordinary experience...for in the case of prajna...there is no definable object to be experienced" (*ZBA*, 53). Hence, this experience as "experienced" is not of an "object" apart from the "subject," nor even as a union between them, because these distinctions arise posterior to the experience (*ZBA*, 54).

It is important, however, to know that what Merton is talking about here is not the experience of the undifferentiated consciousness of infancy, "the narcissistic ignorance of the baby." Nor is it the "blank and silly" emptiness of quietism. Nor is it simply the experience of the data of operational consciousness, the experience of one's own seeing, tasting, smelling, hearing, touching, questioning, thinking, formulating, assessing,

⁶ In the Author's Note, Merton makes clear that 'the birds of appetite' are individuals who approach Zen as if it were "carrion lying" for them to devour and by which to be nourished. The birds of appetite are all who think that "life and death are two," and who "attack the dead, to their own profit" (*ZBA*, ix).

deliberating, etc... But it is an "inner experience," or an experience of what is inner, rather than an experience of the data of sense. But the data of this experience are not simply the conscious operations themselves, but the unrestricted fulfillment of intentional consciousness. And because the experience has the quality of non-limitation, it can be misleading to suggest that the experience is *of* data at all.

In Lonergan's terms, Merton is not speaking of the infant's consciousness, but of "religiously differentiated consciousness."

Lonergan writes:

Religiously differentiated consciousness is approached by the ascetic and reached by the mystic. . . . [it is a] withdrawing from the world mediated by meaning into a silent and all-absorbing self-surrender in response to God's gift of his love.⁷

Merton says that religious conversion is the birthing of the transcendent Self through the love and freedom of the gift of God's Self, "so that there appears to be but one Self" (ZBA, 72). It is a matter of "superconsciousness rather than a lapse into preconsciousness or unconsciousness" (ZBA, 74). It is an experience of "love and being...which is described as emptiness only because, being completely without any limit of particularity it is also perfect fullness. When we say 'fullness' we inevitably tend to imagine a 'content' with a limit which defines and bounds it" (ZBA, 85). So Zen prefers negative language to emphasize "the nonlimitation and nondefinition" of the experience of *Nirvana*, which is "not an apprehended 'content of consciousness'" (ZBA, 85).

⁷Bernard Lonergan, *Method*, p. 273.

But all of Merton's rejections come with implicit affirmations. On the one hand he is determined not to allow for the reduction of God or Ultimate Reality to some object that exists out there that can be experienced as something apart from ourselves. So his denials serve to clarify what he does not mean by "transcendent experience." Namely, religious experience is not simply of sensory data. In this way religious experience is more aptly discussed as an experience of what is "inner." On the other hand, Merton will not allow for the "inner experience" of "prajna" or "love and freedom" to be reduced to a lapse into infancy, as Freud had argued it was in *Civilization and Its Discontents*.⁸ So Merton's denials continually serve to affirm the meaning and value of prajna as he understands it, as a grace, as a gift from transcendent Being.

Returning now to the question of what Merton learned from his dialogue with Suzuki, and from his more expansive study of Zen beyond the purview of that dialogue, I would suggest that primarily Merton learned to "crack idols." That is to say, he utilized Zen koans in the posture of apophatic negation in order to mediate more effectively his "return to immediacy." The "idol cracking" continually helped him to distinguish the primordial gift immediately present as love and freedom, as "emptiness and compassion," as permanent, dynamic operative grace, from all contingent, limited, anthropomorphic pictures and symbols expressing that reality. In other words, Merton's encounter with Suzuki, and with Zen, helped advance his own religious conversion by facilitating the increasing clarity of his own religious experience.

⁸See Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 2nd edition, translated from the German by James Strachey, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1961).

2. The Language of Mystics and the Dialogue for a World Community of Transformation

In light of Merton's insistence on the importance of transcendent experience it is not difficult to conclude that he identifies the further operations of consciousness with the false self, and though both he and Suzuki say much that would seem to support this conclusion, making this judgment would ultimately be inaccurate. In fact, what both Merton and Suzuki often mean by "experience" is something much more than mere "sensation" on the primary level of consciousness. That is the infant's world of immediacy. I have already discussed this in the final section of the previous chapter, but I want to address this again in view of discussing the importance of dialogue. For the label "religious experience" already suggests that the person using it has understood and affirmed an experience in a certain way.

So the question arises, what might Merton and Suzuki mean when they speak about the cessation of questioning posterior to this transformation? I want to suggest here that both Merton and Suzuki are operating with an implicit distinction between the level of living (on which these transformations occur), and the level of reflecting on those transformations, the level on which theologians and "dialecticians" attempt to explain what the experience is all about, where it comes from, what it means, etc.⁹ Furthermore, since "conversion" or "transformation"

⁹For more on this general distinction between living and reflecting see Lonergan's *Method*, (138-139) where he discusses this distinction in terms of religion (living) and theology (reflecting). Lonergan's point is that once a person or a historical society has reached differentiated consciousness and posed old questions in new contexts, or even new questions, theology becomes a necessity and its development is an advance over previous modes of religious thought (symbolic/metaphorical/anthropomorphic).

itself is the focus of their dialogue, and because both Merton and Suzuki are speaking from within what Lonergan calls "religiously differentiated consciousness," both are more concerned with the level of living than with the level of reflecting.

When emphasizing the transformative quality of the experience of *Prajna*, Suzuki says: "The strange thing, however, is that when we experience it we cease to ask questions about it, we accept it, we just live it. Theologians, dialecticians, and existentialists may go on discussing the matter, but the ordinary people inclusive of all of us...live 'the mystery'" (ZBA, 134). Merton too has something similar to say regarding the cessation of questioning in light of the experience of *Prajna*.

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 thought of self. In one of his letters to Suzuki, Merton shared a description from Philoxenus (a Syrian Christian of the fifth century) of the "'paradise life' of 'prajna and emptiness'" that Adam and Eve enjoyed before the Fall. Merton wrote:

After . . . God . . . showed them everything . . . They received no thought about him into their spirit. They never asked: Where does he live, who shows us these things? How long has He existed? If He created all, was He Himself created? By whom? And we, why has he created us? . . . All these things were far from their minds, because simplicity does not think such thoughts. Simplicity is completely absorbed in listening to what it hears . . . It is like the little child completely absorbed in the person speaking to it(*Encounter*, 73).

Then Merton added, "I think that Buddhism is very aware of this (simplicity), and it is therefore aware of that which is the intimate ground

of all knowledge and all faith . . . There is only one meeting place for all religions and that is paradise" (*Encounter*, 74).

Since both Merton and Suzuki emphasize the cessation of questioning in the "transcendent experience" they seem to identify the "questioning self" or the "self-conscious self" as a post-lapsarian phenomenon. Thus Suzuki says

Buddhist philosophy considers discrimination of any kind--moral or metaphysical--the product of Ignorance which obscures the original light of Suchness which is Emptiness. But this does not mean that the whole world is to be done away with because of its being the outcome of Ignorance (*ZBA*, 105).

Furthermore, Lonergan also recognizes that in light of the power of such experience contemplatives are often "not interested in any of these [philosophical] questions. They consider all these books rather silly and superfluous...you can't interest them in joining any investigation."¹⁰

But the reason for this is not that mystics, or Zen masters for that matter, are anti-intellectual. Rather it is, as Lonergan suggests, that they are "content with the negations of an apophatic theology" because they are *in love*.

By such love [they] are oriented positively to what is transcendent in lovableness. Such a positive orientation and the consequent self-surrender [enable them] to dispense with any intellectually apprehended object . . . [and they] are content with enumerations of what God is not.¹¹

¹⁰Bernard Lonergan, *Philosophy of God and Theology*, p. 62.

¹¹Bernard Lonergan, *Method*, pp. 277-278.

Any dialogue that remains on the level of what the Pontifical Council on Interreligious Dialogue has called the *dialogue of religious experience*, is largely confined to this affirmation by denial sort of language. This dialogue from within the horizon of religiously differentiated consciousness is available not only to Christians but to "the [contemplatives] of Judaism, Islam, India, and the Far East."¹² It is only when the dialogue pushes further to questions that intend more determinate, complete answers expressed in positive doctrine that a new kind of dialogue needs to emerge. This other sort of dialogue, from a Christian point of view, depends upon more determinate knowledge that can only be reached by human consciousness because God's revelatory initiative has gone beyond the inward gift of the Spirit. Dialogue concerning this more determinate knowledge is what the Pontifical Council calls the *dialogue of theological exchange*.

From this point of view, then, what Merton, Suzuki, and Lonergan are saying must be understood within the horizon of the dialogue of religious experience. And what they say with regard to the cessation of questioning has to do with what kind of questions seemingly cease, or become unimportant, in light of the lived experience. In order to understand the point we can again advert to this distinction between living and reflecting. Indeed, when Suzuki says "we cease to ask questions about it, we accept it, we just live it," he is still implicitly affirming the role of conscious operations on levels beyond "experiencing," at the height of subjectivity where we "accept" and "live."

We may, perhaps, cease to ask questions for intelligence, or understanding, because we infer by the overdetermined quality of the

¹²Bernard Lonergan, *Method*, p. 273.

experience, that it "is too absolute to be grasped" by a direct insight, or "by the mind" as Merton says. But we do not cease to ask questions that lead to affirming the value of the experience, even if the question never reaches objectification because its answer may seem so obvious that we seemingly leap to what Suzuki calls the "radical affirmation." Nor do we presumably cease to ask questions for deliberation, about what we are to do now in light of the accepted experience, even if the answer is "when hungry you eat, when tired you sleep."

It is on the levels of consciousness beyond direct insight and judgments of fact that we can understand what the point of Merton and Suzuki talking about transcendent experience is. For Lonergan, Merton, and Suzuki, the point is precisely expressed in Suzuki's judgment of value that "the world is not to be done away with" but that we are responsible to make a peaceful world of justice and of love and we do this primarily by our acts of meaning and meaningful acts. Lonergan writes:

Community is a matter of a common field of experience, a common mode of understanding, a common measure of judgment, and a common consent. Such community is the possibility, the source, the ground, of common meaning; and it is this common meaning that is the form and act that finds expression in family and polity, in the legal and economic system, in customary morals and educational arrangements, in language and literature, art and religion, philosophy, science, and the writing of history . . . the whole of that . . . world is the product . . . of human acts of meaning.¹³

Insofar as humans in community attend to needs, understand what needs to be done, plan out courses of action, and deliberate over the best possible measures to be taken, and finally decide and take responsible

¹³Bernard Lonergan, *Collection*, pp. 233-234.

action, communities develop. Insofar as humans fail to pay attention, are obtuse, irrational, or irresponsible, communities decline. And so at the heart of communal and institutional progress is authentic subjectivity. But beyond progress and decline there is transformation. A transformed community, a healed community, is a community of peace, love and justice which we are ever striving to build. And at the heart of a transformed community is personal transformation, and this transformation is at the heart of the Merton and Suzuki dialogue.

But in their dialogue Merton and Suzuki are both emphasizing that the level of reflecting on "enlightenment" or "religious experience" is not only secondary to the level of living on which these occur, but that we are ultimately called to a more radical, more abundant level of living. In other words, there is reflection on experiences understood in various ways, but reflection per se is never the ultimate goal. We reflect and dialogue as a means to advance our living abundantly, or as Merton would say, in order to build the Kingdom of God. In this way, what Merton says about "simplicity" and Suzuki about the "cessation of questioning" are not fideistic or anti-intellectual positions, rather they are simply insisting on the primary importance of *conversion* and *transformation*. Indeed Merton and Suzuki are operating, in their dialogue, on a reflective level, but that reflecting is at the service of a different sort of living, of living in the recovered paradise.

Suzuki ends his essay "Knowledge and Innocence" with an insistence on the necessity to "actualize the transcendental wisdom of *Prajna* in a world where the growth of Knowledge is encouraged in a thousand and one ways . . . in the midst of industrialization and the universal propogandism of 'an easy life.'" How to do this is a grave question. "A

solution is imperatively demanded of us in a most poignant manner . . . we are waiting for a new sun to rise above the horizon of egotism and sordidness in every sense" (ZBA, 115). We are waiting for conversion.

The "self-aware self" can be authentic or inauthentic, converted or unconverted. We are in need of transformation insofar as we take ourselves to be final or independently "substantial." It is precisely the endorsement of the illusion that the "self-conscious self" is final, or primary, or absolute, that Merton identifies with the establishment of the "false self." The "self-aware self" as a genuine person, knows herself to be provisional, relative, ordinary, and as a self to be given away in love. The genuine person is still "self-aware" posterior to religious experience, in the acceptance and affirmation of that experience, but is no longer the isolated individual who takes himself or herself as the center, but accepts himself or herself to be a gift of the "Center" neither imagined "somewhere 'out there' nor 'within ourselves'" (ZBA, 25).

The inchaotive fulfillment of conscious intentionality in religious experience propels one toward the radical self-transcendence of religious conversion. Conversion transforms the subject, not only on the level of experience, but also on the levels of understanding, knowing and choosing. It is because the experience is understood in a certain way, and that understanding is affirmed, that we find ourselves again to be "the ordinary Toms, Dicks and Harrys we had been all along" (ZBA, 115). The importance, however, of accepting and affirming the experience is that the "self-conscious self" comes to the judgment that he or she is fundamentally a "self-to-be-dissolved in self-giving, in love, in 'letting-go'" as Merton says, or in *Dana* "giving" and *Ksanti* "humility" as Suzuki says (ZBA, 111). Experience must be integrated into conscious living, into

the drama of our lives, and this is what Merton and Suzuki are both preaching.

Furthermore, what is given at the level of the infrastructure of religious experience is personal but persons are communal and communal transformation is necessarily a matter of suprastructure, of language, of dialogue, of polity, of economy, and of religion. And it is in community that the contemplative, once recognizing and affirming the unrestricted gift of the Spirit, begins to ask "so what am I to *do* now?"

Insofar as Merton and Suzuki are engaged in dialogue, in the attempt to understand one another, to discover and advance common meanings and to affirm the values that are "self-evident" they are intentionally operating in the effort to build community, to advance the transformation of the world in accord with their own continual self-transformation. This building of a world community of peace, love and justice was Merton's central concern at the end of his life. He was heartened in this project by meeting Suzuki, with whom he felt he was among family, and by meeting the Dalai Lama, with whom he felt "a deep spiritual connection," and by meeting Thich Nhat Hanh, about whom he wrote in his essay "Nhat Hanh is My Brother," and by meeting and engaging so many others through correspondence about religious experience and social concerns.

For Thomas Merton the dialogue is certainly not just "a matter of academic interest" but an outgrowth of that effort to build community "by living and sharing" our traditions in order to discover the "communion that precedes and transcends our communication" in the hope that we might advance the continual transforming and healing of the world (*AJ*, 313-315). It is the affirmation of this primordial and transcendental communion that facilitates the loving of neighbors as ourselves, because,

for Merton this communion is in the 'hidden ground of Love.' So dialogue "must be centered on what is really essential" and that is "true self-transcendence" which brings "the transformation of consciousness in its ultimate ground as well as in its highest and most authentic devotional love" (*AJ*, 316). This primordial and transcendent communion is inclusive of everyone. The dialogue, then, advances the growth of "a truly universal consciousness of transcendent freedom and vision...that is important enough to be of concern to all religions, as well as to humanistic philosophies with no religion at all" (*AJ*, 317).

3. Integrating Consciousness and Kerygma

Merton's openness to and ability to learn from non-Christians regarding the "transformation of consciousness" at the heart of all wisdom traditions, and his own steadfast commitment to Christ as the incarnate and redemptive Word of God is an invaluable legacy left to Christians. This integration of openness and fidelity was the fruit of his life's devotion to the monastic vow of "conversio," of continual self-transformation and self-transcendence in the life with God.

His quest to cooperate with the call to actualize the latent potentialities in the ground of his own being led him down many seemingly divergent paths as he initially turned toward the Hinduism of Gandhi, Coomaraswamy, and Bramachari, only to be led by the latter to "seek his own roots" in the fertile soil of Christianity. Then Merton's early triumphalist appropriation of Christian doctrine slowly gave way, through the practice of the monastic life or prayer, to the discovery of the transcendent hidden ground of Love which seemed to him to find its own expression in traditions that he had, for a time, only considered

"narcissistic" and "natural." Inspired by this discovery Merton set out to encounter the living wisdom as incarnate beyond the purview of his own Church, in "the voices of strangers." In light of a continually deepening experience, understanding, and affirmation of his undivided unity with others and the world in "that Love which is the ground of all being," he continually progressed toward an integration of his experiences, affirmations, and commitments, in a way that did not "impose one upon the other" or "set them up in opposition" but unified them "in an insight of complementarity" (CWA, 207).

This integration was the fruit of his own commitment to self-transcendence. Merton understood his vocation 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 (AJ, 307). The gift of Zen helped to facilitate Merton's "mediated return to immediacy" which made his religious experience clearer and more distinct, and accepting the gift of the Kerygma helped to give concrete focus and ultimate meaning to his own contemplative experience, in the "word of the cross" and the "kenosis of Christ." In this way, Merton's openness to others and his Christian faith commitments were not, in the end, in conflict with one another. Rather both together were the fruits of his fidelity to himself as transcending, as given, and as gift. In this spirit of fidelity and openness Merton could proclaim that "Christianity and Zen are the future," that 'consciousness and kerygma are complementary' (ZBA, 47).

Merton's legacy offers an invitation to others to commit themselves to the life of faithfulness to their deepest selves, to fidelity to their transcendental intending, and to wherever that may lead them. It offers an example to those who so commit themselves and wish to engage

others who are also so committed, be they Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Bantus, or those of no religion at all, in the communal endeavor to affirm and make manifest that transcendental communion in which we already 'live and move and have our being.' And, finally, the life of Thomas Merton offers 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.

4. A Closing Prayer

Since Thomas Merton discovered and affirmed a unity among people of all religions through the acceptance and integration of his own religious experience, expressed in my fourth chapter as correlative to the second meaning of "God," it is appropriate to close with his own prayer expressive of this affirmation. Thomas Merton was asked to offer the closing prayer at the "First Spiritual Summit Conference" in Calcutta, India, in November of 1968. Here is what he said:

I will ask you to stand and all join hands in a little while. But first, we realize that we are going to have to create a new language of prayer. And this language of prayer has to come out of something which transcends all our traditions, and comes out of the immediacy of love. We have to part now, aware of the love that unites us, the love that unites us in spite of real differences, real emotional friction . . . The things that are on the surface are nothing, what is deep is Real. We are creatures of love. Let us therefore join hands, as we did before, and I will try to say something that comes out of the depths of our hearts. I ask you to concentrate on the love that is in you, that is in us all. I have no idea what I am going to say. I am going to be silent a minute, and then I will say something . . .

Oh God, we are one with You. You have made us one with You.

You have taught us that if we are open to one another, You dwell in us. Help us to preserve this openness and to fight for it with all our hearts. Help us to realize that there can be no understanding where there is mutual rejection. Oh God, in accepting one another wholeheartedly, fully, completely, we accept You, and we thank You, and we adore You, and we love You with our whole being, because our being is in Your being, our spirit is rooted in Your spirit. Fill us then with love, and let us be bound together with love as we go our diverse ways, united in this one spirit which makes You present in the world, and which makes You witness to the ultimate reality that is love. Love has overcome. Love is victorious. Amen (AJ, 318-319).

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