

Merton's Mystical Visions: a Widening Circle

Susan McCaslin

Thomas Merton was not just a monk who happened to become one of the premier contemplative writers of the 20th century, but also a mystic who, like the major mystics of his lifelong studies, had a number of deeply transformative experiences which he continuously integrated into his life. For Merton, a genuine mystic was not merely someone who has such numinous encounters, but one who trod a spiritual path toward lessening egotism, greater service to the divine and to the world, and ultimately, intimate union with what some call God or the unnameable unity within and beyond all things. By following the golden thread of four of Merton's most important mystical experiences, one can trace his growth to spiritual maturity through various stages. These experiences, to be discussed in turn, are: his revelations in Rome at the age of eighteen (1933); the illumination in Cuba (1940); the epiphany at Fourth and Walnut in Louisville, Kentucky (1958); and his final unitive awakening at Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka (1968). By examining the commonalities and differences among these events, it is possible to trace a widening circle of ever-deepening connection to what Merton calls the hidden ground of love or "hidden wholeness." Seen together, they enact a movement in which the insights of the earlier visions are gathered up and taken forward into the later ones. Though he can be sometimes inconsistent in his concepts about ultimate reality, there is a steady growth toward sanctity, love, compassion—the fruits of the spirit. Merton's central mystical experiences are not merely signs, graces, or special gifts, but radical expansions of consciousness with universal significance.

In the 1950s, at his Trappist monastery in Gethsemani, Kentucky, Merton clarified in a journal entry that, when it comes to the spiritual life, the experiential has primacy over the merely theoretical:

Gone are the days when "mysticism" was for me a matter of eager and speculative interest. Now, because it is my life, it is torment to think about. Like being in the pangs of childbirth and reading an essay on mother love written by a spinster.¹

Timeless moments in nature, archetypal dreams, locutions, epiphanies, and hints about profound imageless states reached in contemplative prayer punctuate Merton's journals and published writings. Yet he also explains that the mystic's privileging of the experiential can lead to making an idol of one's merely private experience. As he puts it in his mature mystical theology, *The Inner Experience*, written in the late 1950s,

the experience, the vision, the intuition, is only a sign and is ... capable of being dissociated from any reality and being a mere empty figure. The illuminist [pseudo or false mystic] is one who attaches himself to the sign, the experience, without regard for the invisible substance of a contact which transcends experience.²

Merton makes clear throughout his writings that such phenomena as raptures, visions, and ecstasies are the accidents rather than the essence of the spiritual life. "Mystical graces," he insists, should never be sought, induced, or valued for their own sake: "If you're interested in the mystical graces, get busy on the degrees of humility."³

Yet at the same time, it is a feature of the lives of the major mystics of the world's religions that highly charged interior events often accompany the contemplative life, constellating at crucial times to expand spiritual insight and create more integral ways of being and knowing. Merton taught that such experiences are open to everyone, not signs of special favour for an elite, and that it is better not to seek them out. However, he urges also that neither should we close

them off when they arrive, as they often do when one deepens in the spiritual life. In fact, he sees them as part of a person's normal spiritual growth.

While Merton's beliefs and theology condition his experiences, his experiences reciprocally condition his beliefs. However, he is not a systematic theologian looking for a consistent belief system that will codify and explain everything. Rather, he takes a more poetic and fluid approach to mystical theology, exploring its living symbols, metaphors and formulations, but remaining open to the influx of newness.

A survey of Merton's writings and visions suggests that he discovers a ground in silence for his experiences in what European Christian mystical theology has called the *via negativa* or *apophatic* way. That is, his experiences (along with the images and symbols by which he expresses them) spring from a place of "unknowing"—of nameless mystery. The *via positiva* or *kataphatic* way, which complements the apophatic and is inseparable from it, is a way to God or the divine through images, ideas, symbols, forms, names, and phenomena. In Merton's work these two ways constitute a dance. Mystical theologians of the Middle Ages borrowed these Greek terms to describe the active and contemplative ways respectively, but in the end they signify complementary poles of a vital whole. Merton stands in the line of admired mentors like Gregory of Nyssa, Pseudo-Dionysius, John of the Cross, and the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* who emphasize the limitations of language, symbols, and concepts to fix or hold the nameless source of all. Considering how prolific Merton was and how much of himself he entrusts to words and to the writing process, it seems counter-intuitive to locate him within the apophatic tradition. Yet the paradox at the heart of all his writing is that the deep unity bursts forth in polyvalent symbols and metaphors, pointing beyond themselves and back to an anterior ground of silence.

There have been several excellent book-length critical studies of Merton's mysticism and mystical theology, beginning with that of

Baptist minister Raymond Bailey's *Thomas Merton on Mysticism*;⁴ continuing with George Kilcourse's *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ*;⁵ and more recently Christopher Pramuk's *Sophia: the Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton*.⁶ Despite these important studies, however, Merton is still not generally acknowledged as a mystic. In the case of well-known mystics from his Christian tradition like Teresa of Avila, visions and interior experiences were given prominence because they were valued in her age, and she was ordered by her superiors to record them. In Merton's modernist and our post-modern times, his accounts of his inner experiences lie strewn like jewels throughout his journals, workbooks, essays, and longer studies, remaining marginalized, sometimes psychologised, and his lineage as a mystic not clearly recognized.

In fact, Merton is known primarily as a writer on contemplation rather than on mysticism. Yet he uses these terms almost interchangeably throughout his work and also produces many studies of mysticism East and West. In much of his writing, Merton foregrounds the term "contemplative" rather than "mystic," perhaps because of the latter's negative connotations in the modern era, its associations with affective (emotional) piety, raptures and out of body flights—in short, with forms of ecstatic experience that can captivate the ego or what he calls the "false self." Yet Merton retains the term "mysticism" and devotes much effort in his writings to distinguish carefully between genuine and false forms of it.

If we examine the body of Merton's writings, it is apparent that his engagement with the mystics and mysticism was a lifelong one. In his early days at Columbia he attended a Quaker meeting, drawn briefly to his mother's Quaker heritage, and also sought out the Hindu monk and sage Mahanambrata Brahmachari, who advised him to explore his own Christian heritage rather than embracing an Asian religion.⁷ Merton wrote his Master's thesis on William Blake, the great visionary poet and mystic of the British Romantic period. Early on at the monastery at Gethsemani, we find him in correspondence with Aldous Huxley whose book on mysticism, *Ends and Means*, he first read in 1937. In later correspondence with

Huxley Merton rejects Huxley's idea that it is acceptable to induce mystical states by using drugs or any other artificial means, and argues that such states are supernatural gifts of God:

It seems to me that a fully mystical experience has in its very essence some note of a direct spiritual *contact of two liberties*, a kind of flash or spark But what I mean is that this is not the kind of intuition that smacks of anything procurable because it is a presence of a Person and *depends on the liberty of that Person*.⁸

Others have traced Merton's continuing investigations and studies of the mystics throughout his life from his early, more orthodox and Thomist *Ascent to Truth* (1951), commissioned by his superiors in the early years at the monastery, to his later engagement with diverse forms of mysticism in books like *The Inner Experience* (completed circa 1959; posthumously published with revisions, 2003), *Mystics and Zen Masters* (1961), and *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (1968). His studies include the mystical sayings of the early desert and patristic Fathers; the Jewish, Islamic (Sufi), Eastern Orthodox, Russian, and English mystics; as well as the traditions of the East: Taoism, Hinduism and the various lineages of Buddhism: Mahayanan and Theravadan, Zen and the Tibetan schools. In his more than decade-long correspondence with D.T. Suzuki, he wavers on the issue of whether Zen is a psychological practice that lays the ground for genuine mystical experience or a mystical practice, but the point is that he keeps his antennae open to world wisdom traditions as they relate to the mystical stream within his own Christian faith and sees the insights of Zen and the Christian mystics as comparable and capable of mutual enrichment.

One of Merton's earliest recorded mystical experiences occurs in the context of his discoveries of the Byzantine mosaics in various Romanesque and Byzantine churches during his visit to Rome in 1933 at the age of eighteen. This trip in Merton's own estimation marks his transition from tourist to pilgrim. It is after sitting in the silence of the sacred spaces of the Roman churches that he first mentions the notion of wishing to "become a Trappist

monk,” though it will be many years before he settles upon his monastic vocation.⁹ It is interesting that later in the 1950s Merton will turn to a study of Eastern Orthodox Christianity and revisit his long-time attraction to the world of the Byzantine icons. In an unpublished notebook from that period he writes:

If I had vaguely recognised some sophistication in the formal aspect of archaic Greek sculpture, here, in Byzantine art was something more than that: something deeper than sophistication; a kind of vision, a kind of wisdom. This was something I found out quite suddenly. I happened to be getting fed up with the remains of the Roman Empire, and wandered into one of the churches [the Basilica of Saints Cosmas and Damian] by the forum, where there was a mosaic above the altar. I glanced at it, I looked back, and I could not go away from it for a long time, it held me there, fascinated by its design and its mystery and its tremendous seriousness and its simplicity.¹⁰

Here Merton’s use of the terms “seriousness” and “simplicity,” coupled with the sense of being “held” by the mystery of the mosaics, anticipates his response to the iconic statues of the Buddhas in Polonnaruwa at the end of his journey. And from the beginning, Merton’s Christ is much more the mystical, cosmic Christ of the icons than the Jesus of history, though he never questions the historicity of Jesus, affirming the union of the divine and human in the Christ. As late as 1968, in a letter to Quaker activist June Yungblut, he writes that he has always been drawn to “the Christ of immediate experience all down through the mystical tradition,” and that his Christ is “the apophatic Christ—light that is not light, and not confinable within any known category of light....”¹¹

An experience in Rome of sensing his father’s presence takes place directly after his visits to the Byzantine churches when, alone in his quarters, in another kind of searing light, the light of self-awareness, he discovers how far he has become dislocated from his spiritual centre:

I was in my room. It was night. The light was on. Suddenly

it seemed to me that Father, who had now been dead more than a year, 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 that made me realize something of the condition I was in and I was filled with horror at what I saw And now I think for the first time in my whole life I really began to pray—praying not with my lips and with my intellect and my imagination, but praying out of the very roots of my life and of my being, and praying to the God I had never known, to reach down towards me out of His darkness and to help me to get free of the thousand terrible things that held my will in their slavery.¹²

The language here is similar to that of Augustine’s *Confessions* in its depiction of the individual’s sense of sin, but the horror he expresses also parallels an awareness he will discover later in Buddhism with its First Noble Truth, the recognition of the universality of restlessness and suffering (*dukkha*) that arises when we find ourselves prisoners of a false self-construct. A healing flood of tears follows upon this penitential awareness. Rarely is Merton as raw as in this account where the presence of his father merges with the presence of a transcendent Father or divine Parent. It is as if the praying moves through and in him in this first breaking open of the heart shortly after his father’s death. One can reduce the experience to a psychological explanation, but it is clear that Merton wishes to convey the visceral sense of his father’s presence, a presence he doesn’t rationalize. It is enough that he senses his father with him, and that the love of his father merges with the love of the transpersonal “dark” God to whom he finds himself praying.

This experience in Rome is the first recorded mystical experience in Merton’s life, and sets the stage for all that follows. It is in Rome that Christ becomes for him not merely an object of intellectual

speculation, but a living person whom one would actually encounter, know, and be known to. As James Forest puts it:

It's significant that his experience in Rome was mediated (his verb) by the visual—mosaic icons—and that these not only opened a door to Christ never before opened in his life but also in some sense became the means of meeting his father at a much deeper level, a father who clearly had a strong sense of connection with Christ, which from time to time he sought to share with his son and then finally, no longer able to speak, communicated to his son silently, through icon drawings.¹³

This powerful early vision contains many of the elements of the next three: suddenness, brevity, transcendence, and transformation.

Merton's dramatic epiphany in Havana, Cuba upon hearing a choir of children cry "Creo" (I believe) during the Mass occurs in 1940 while on another pilgrimage. Like the Roman experience, it takes place during his travels in a foreign culture. It is significant in retrospect, given Merton's intense later interest in the language, poetry, and politics of Latin America, that the setting is that of Latin Roman Catholicism. The mystical realization occurs in the context of liturgy or public worship, rather than in the private sphere. It is also clear from its placement in his autobiography that this moment is pivotal in Merton's decision to enter monastic life.

The sacramental revelation through the children happens in full waking consciousness in a specific time and place. The children playing their part in the liturgy embody innocence and new beginnings that mirror Merton's own glimmerings of awakening into a new life:

I was in the Church of St. Francis at Havana. It was a Sunday. ... The building was crowded. Up in front, before the altar, there were rows and rows of children, crowded together. ... I was far in the back of the church, but I could see the heads of all these children.

It came time for the Consecration. The priest raised the Host, then he raised the chalice. When he put the chalice

down on the altar, suddenly a Friar in his brown robe and white cord stood up in front of the children, and all at once the voices of the children burst out:

"Creo en Diós. . . ."

"I believe in God the Father Almighty, the creator of heaven and earth ..."

The Creed. But that cry, "*Creo en Diós!*" It was loud, and bright, and sudden and glad and triumphant; it was a good big shout, that came from all those Cuban children, a joyous affirmation of faith.

Then, as sudden as the shout and as definite, and a thousand times more bright, there formed in my mind an awareness, an understating, a realization of what had just taken place on the altar, at the Consecration. ...

But what a thing it was, this awareness: it was so intangible, and yet it struck me like a thunderclap. It was a light that was so bright that it had no relation to any visible light and so profound and so intimate that it seemed like a neutralization of every lesser experience.¹⁴

When Merton speaks of the contagious exultation in the children's voices, one can read this passage as simply an affirmation of the creed. Yet the shout, "creo," suggests more than intellectual or emotional assent; it is also an expression of absolute trust in the goodness and mercy of the universe. The word "creo" in Latin means "to create," "to give birth to," "to cause," and "to choose," and in this context gathers up these more active meanings. Also, Merton speaks here of the inner experience that accompanies the outer ritual, the higher awareness that comes upon him as direct, sudden and definite, "like a thunderclap."

As Merton elaborates on the nature of the light that permeates the scene in the church of St. Francis, he makes clear that what he perceives as mystical is an expansion of ordinary awareness. Mystical experience is not difficult, esoteric, or elsewhere, but arises in the holy present:

And yet the thing that struck me most of all was that this light was in a certain sense “ordinary”—it was a light (and this most of all was what took my breath away) that was offered to all, to everybody, and there was nothing fancy or strange about it. It was the light of faith deepened and reduced to an extreme and sudden obviousness.¹⁵

Next, language comes up against its limits: “When I call it a light that is a metaphor which I am using, long after the fact. ... It disarmed all images, all metaphors¹⁶ This brief apophatic experience of the invisible light, Merton says, “ignored all sense experience to strike directly at the heart of truth, as if a sudden and immediate contact had been established between my intellect and the Truth Who was now physically really and substantially before me on the altar.”¹⁷ Merton clarifies that this “contact” is “concrete and experimental” (i.e. experiential) “and belong[s] to the order of knowledge, yes, but more still to the order of love.”¹⁸

Merton observes that genuine mystical experience bears good fruits: it is unforgettable, often leaving in its wake joy and peace: “It left a breathless joy and a clean peace and happiness that stayed for hours and it was something I have never forgotten.”¹⁹ Finally, he explains that such an experience cannot be commanded or recaptured at will: “But it was easy to see that there was nothing I could do to give any act of faith that peculiar quality of sudden obviousness: that was a gift and had to come from somewhere else, beyond and above myself” or, as he says earlier, “far above and beyond the level of any desire or any appetite I had ever yet been aware of.”²⁰ The experience in Cuba opens Merton to the simplicity and unifying power of the presence of divine love immanent in the children enveloped in a light beyond light.

The often-quoted epiphany at the corner of Fourth and Walnut recorded in Merton’s journals (1958) and published in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966) is a visionary experience that occurs, not in a foreign locale while on pilgrimage, but right at home in the monk’s own neighbourhood of nearby Louisville. It needs to be seen in the context of the reforms of Vatican II, Merton’s

mid-life awakening to a more politically-engaged faith, and his newly emerging sense of his role as a monk in the world. By the late 1950s Merton had travelled far beyond his earlier patriarchal and parochial Catholicism and was ready to encounter the presence of the mystical Christ immanent in each person. The Fourth and Walnut experience blasts away any lingering dualism between the sacred and the everyday as well as Merton’s earlier sense of flight from the world. Here, without compromising his contemplative path, he sheds the notion of himself as a priest set apart from others. Rather than focussing on a sacramental atmosphere or sacred icon, he meditates on the faces of ordinary men (and particularly women) in the street, thus rejoining himself to humanity.

As in the Cuban experience, Merton draws on the kataphatic mystical symbolism of light. In Cuba, Merton had perceived the light in ordinary children, and here again it irradiates in ordinary men and women. Like Blake, he divines the blazing divine fire in particularity:

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream. Not that I question the reality of my vocation, or of my monastic life; but the conception of “separation from the world” that we have in the monastery too easily presents itself as a complete illusion: the illusion that by making vows we become a different species of being, pseudoangels, “spiritual men,” men of interior life, what have you.²¹

This epiphany enables Merton to crystallize for himself and his readers a non-dual way of seeing that affirms the image of the indwelling Christ-Sophia as the true core in each person. A sense of relief, joy,

and release follows upon Merton's reflections on his interconnection with the world. The occasion also represents his mature mystical expression of incarnational spirituality, not as mere doctrine, but as an experiential sense of how the divine descends into the human as the human simultaneously opens to the divine:

I have the immense joy of being *man*, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. 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! There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.²²

A few pages later in this section, Merton's meditation moves to the mystical symbol of the "divine spark," used by Eckhart and other mystics, and he links it to the French Catholic scholar of Islam, Louis Massignon's notion of "*le point vierge*":

At the centre of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. ... It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely ... I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere.²³

Merton suggests that this invisible centre of "nothingness" within us that we cannot access by any rational means is accessible through love.

What *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* does not make clear, that is apparent in the journals from which the book is drawn, as well as Merton's readings during this period, is that this epiphany is encased in the context of Merton's emerging dream-visions of Sophia-Wisdom, the divine feminine presence of God in

both Jewish mysticism and Eastern Orthodoxy. Merton scholar Lawrence Cunningham points out that sophianic mystical theology was the means by which Merton "was to enter into deep contemplative dialogue with other seekers on a one-to-one basis ... He was aided in this quest by his conviction and experience that Christ as the Word, Christ as Wisdom, permeated the entire cosmos."²⁴ Christopher Pramuk points out that Sophia becomes the link that enables Merton to transcend the limits of scholastic theology and come into conversation with other religious traditions.²⁵ Merton believed that sophianic Christianity retained some of the mystical elements of religion that lay lost or buried in Western Roman Catholicism, particularly in its theology of *theosis* or "divinization" in which the innermost or true self "in Christ" is intimately yoked to the innermost centre of the Godhead. In the journals from which Merton crafts *Conjectures*, he records several dream encounters with a dark-haired mysterious young Jewish girl whom he associates with Wisdom-Sophia, or Hokhmah in Proverbs 8:

On the porch at Douglaston I am embraced with determined and virginal passion by a young Jewish girl. She clings to me and will not let go, and I get to like the idea. ... I ask her her name and she says her name is Proverb. I tell her that is a beautiful and significant name....²⁶

In a related dream less than a year earlier, a Sophia figure performs a dance. "In the middle of the dance she bent over sideways and touched the floor with a curious gesture."²⁷ This mysterious gesture signifies Sophia's connection with the earth, and at the same time, the mystical *ground* of all being. In the journal entries describing the experience at Fourth and Walnut, and in Merton's correspondence with Russian writer Boris Pasternak, the actual women Merton encounters on the street become human embodiments of Proverb-Sophia.²⁸ "Everybody was Proverb,"²⁹ he writes. His vision enables him to expand the circle to include ordinary women as manifestations of the divine feminine:

For the woman-ness that is in each of them is at once

original and inexhaustibly fruitful bringing the image of God into the world. In each one is Wisdom and Sophia and Our Lady³⁰

Merton's dreams of Sophia preceding and following upon the Fourth and Walnut experience come to fruition later in his long poem, *Hagia Sophia* (1963), where he celebrates Sophia as the feminine divine. This poem is, according to Christopher Pramuk, "the culmination of a mystical theology construed under the light of Wisdom, a classic marriage of Eastern and Western spirituality" where "Sophia ... opens into an integral spirituality of engagement with the world."³¹ Merton's studies of Eastern Orthodox mystical theology in the late 1950s lead him to identify the Christ or Logos as the son of Wisdom, or Sophia, who crowns him and sends him into the world. She is the feminine *ousia* or dark ground of being, an outpouring of the soft or diffused light of the love and mercy of the Godhead in creation and in humanity.

Wisdom for Merton is associated with earthiness, tenderness, gentleness, peace, and apophatic silences. Humans "shining like the sun," then, are clearly the sons and daughters of Sophia, capable of incarnating her presence. The "*point vierge*" is the inviolable centre within where we are unconsciously one with the indwelling, emerging Christ-Sophia. This vision is important for Merton because it allows him to embrace the feminine in himself and others, and to recover the lost feminine archetype and presence of God within his own Christian heritage.

The vision of the mysterious Buddhas at Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka is Merton's final transformative experience. His reflections in his journals, posthumously published as *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, mark the apogee of his journey to the East and coalescence of wisdom traditions in the East and West. This illumination sums up the meaning of his venturing into the heart of Asia, the religious culture perceived as the most "other" by Westerners. It is yet another expansion of the widening circle whereby he becomes effectively a transcultural, transreligious person.

Like the mystical awakenings in Rome, Cuba, and Louisville,

this experience begins in ordinary time and place; yet, distinct from the previous two, is set firmly in the natural world. Merton approaches the hollow areas surrounded with trees, where the path dips down, to come upon the giant figures which seem to emerge out of the earth:

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 every possibility, questioning nothing, knowing everything, rejecting nothing, the peace not of emotional resignation but of Madhyamika, of sunyata, that has seen through every question without trying to discredit anyone or anything—*without refutation*—without establishing some other argument.³²

Merton derives the terms "Madhyamika" and "sunyata" from Buddhist philosophy. "Madhyamika," a word from the Sanskrit meaning "of the middle" is the path taught in the Mahayana school of Buddhism that carves out a middle or non-dual way between the temporal and the eternal or unconditioned. The founder of this school, Narjuna (second century) affirms that all things have intrinsic or "self" value ("thusness") and that they co-arise from what the West might call the apophatic ground of "sunyata," emptiness, or namelessness.³³

The explosion of stone from earth emerges from an "emptiness" or poverty that in both mystical Christianity and Buddhism is simultaneously compassion. Despite the "clarity of the figures," the silence in which they are grounded places this vision in the realm of the apophatic—beyond conjecture, opinion, argument, and position:

For the doctrinaire, the mind that needs well-established positions, such peace, such silence, can be frightening. I was knocked over with a rush of relief and thankfulness of the *obvious* clarity of the figures, the clarity and fluidity of shape and line, the design of the monumental bodies composed into the rock shape and landscape, figure, rock and tree.³⁴

As Christopher Pramuk points out, “Pollanaruwa [sic] need not be interpreted as a complete break from Merton’s Christ-haunted view of reality. On the contrary, Pollanaruwa sums up what is for him the whole climate of the New Testament: ‘all matter, all life is charged with dharmakaya,’ the self-emptying love and mercy of God.”³⁵ Merton’s love of the kenotic or self-emptying Christ finds its analogy in the way the kenotic centre of all being pours itself out freely here, manifesting in “figure, rock and tree.”

As in the Cuban epiphany where Merton is hit as if with a “thunderbolt,” there is in this occasion a sense of surprise, much as in *Zen satori* or awakening when the false self suddenly falls away and one is jolted into the silence that is not merely a void. Merton continues:

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.³⁶

Merton’s phrase “jerked clean” is telling, for it suggests the suddenness of the realization that arrives in the collapse of worn out constructs, as when one is lifted to another plane. Merton tells us that what he is “jerked clean” from is the “half-tied vision of things.” Critics have pondered this phrase, wondering even if it might be a mistake for the phrases half-ried or half-baked. I would offer a reading that links to the etymology of the word “religion,” meaning, “to bind or to tie again,” not just to the rituals and beliefs of the church, but to the larger motions of nature, the cosmos and to the stillness of the inner self when grounded in the divine. So if one’s way of seeing is “half-tied,” one is only partially connected with the living, moving whole—the general dance. Perhaps Merton is saying that he was drawn for a moment out of experiencing himself as autonomous and entered a state of inter-communion or interconnection. His being is “re-tied” to what the West calls the Absolute, the eternal, or what the East calls the One, the Self, the great Emptiness which is simultaneously a great plenitude. The “jerked free” is the universe bringing us home from

separation. The sense of being arrested parallels the Fourth and Walnut epiphany where Merton is taken suddenly from a sense of alienation to a sense of community where each individual in his or her “thusness” is “shining like the sun.”

Like Merton’s contemplation of the Byzantine mosaics in Rome at eighteen, the event at Polonnaruwa is one in which sacred objects become sacramental images or icons, mediating openings into non-dual experience. Like liturgy in the Cuban realization, sacred art is not just the work of the individual, but of the people on behalf of the community. Merton writes in his *Asian Journal* that the images of the reclining Buddha with his disciple Ananda standing beside him exercised a power over him more “imperative” even than that of Da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*, the West’s most well-known image of serenity. This passage marks a leap from active contemplation into unknowing or mystical contemplation:

The queer *evidence* of the reclining figure, the smile, the sad smile of Ananda standing with arms folded (much more “imperative” than Da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* because completely simple and straightforward). The thing about all this is that there is no puzzle, no problem, and really no “mystery.” All problems are resolved and everything is clean, simply because what matters is clear. The rock, all matter, all life, is charged with dharmakaya...everything is emptiness and everything is compassion. I don’t know when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination. Surely, with Mahabalipuram and Polonnaruwa my Asian pilgrimage has become clear and purified itself. I mean, I know and 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 beyond the shadow and the disguise.³⁷

In John of the Cross and other mystics of the West, the unnameable is paradoxically both “*Todo y Nada*,” everything and nothing. Likewise, in Buddhism the nothing or emptiness, dharmakaya,

lies beyond all categories of being and non-being, formulations of outside and inside, here or beyond, as the consciousness sustaining all apparent oppositions.

Merton's description of the awakening at Polonnaruwa is distinct from the other three visions in that he drops the use of the masculine pronoun to speak of God, since "God" is all too often conceived as gendered, or appropriated as an object of knowledge. Yet his acknowledgment that in such transcendent experiences the gap between subject and object closes implies that such descriptors as God, the One, Emptiness, are living symbols gesturing beyond all dualities, yet embodying the reality they represent. God is neither male nor female; both male and female; and beyond all such binaries. Merton's experience usually leads him to avoid collapsing the interior self or the inner Christ in each one and God or the absolute transcendent, as he favours a model of indwelling or co-participation between the divine and the human. Yet here in the *Asian Journal* he is less inclined to worry about such theological distinctions. Rather, he adopts the Eastern term *dharmakaya* (which in Sanskrit means "the cosmical body of the Buddha, the essence of all beings"³⁸) to suggest how all life forms in the material world are permeated by or "charged" with Spirit so that we are capable of seeing paradise in the particularity of the forms around us and finding the kingdom both without us and within.

Merton's death followed quickly upon this last Eastern vision, so it is tempting to see it as final or a form of closure to his life-long quest for sanctity, or as the East might say, his awakening or enlightenment. Yet awakening is a process, not simply a series of epiphanies or sacred moments in and out of time; therefore, from another vantage point, this experience is one more expansion of the widening circle. Here he moves to his most inclusive and unitive expression of mystical awareness. The thing about Merton's visions is that each one gathers up and includes the good of all the others, yet surprises with newness.

One striking feature of all four visionary experiences is that in

various ways they dwell on human faces: the faces of the Byzantine mosaics as tied to the sense of divine presence and the presence of Merton's biological father; the faces of children acting their part in liturgy; the faces of ordinary men and women on a street in Louisville embodying Sophia or divine Wisdom; and, finally, the faces of the alluring statues of the Buddha and his disciple Ananda. Merton affirms both immanence and transcendence, the presence of the divine in and through us and anterior to our knowing, a sense that we all are potential embodiments of the Christ-consciousness. His experiences are incarnational in that they delight in form and embodiment.

As well, none of Merton's more significant visions are purely private, but encompass the relation of the individual to the community. They are personal revelations that have universal significance. They focus on the sacred in the midst of the everyday and collapse our usual distinction between ordinary and sacred time. In 1961, Merton writes to Chinese author John C. H. Wu: "I do not know whether or not I am always happy with mystical writings that are completely out of touch with ordinary life. On the contrary, it seems to me that mysticism flourishes more purely right in the middle of the ordinary."³⁹

Merton's four experiences are all rooted in concrete places—Rome, Cuba, Kentucky, and Sri Lanka—but open to include higher levels of being. There is in them a sense of suddenness and surprise; yet they emerge out of an interior quickening that has been going on within Merton all along "without [him] knowing anything about it."⁴⁰ They are first lived, then relived or re-visioned through the lens of Merton's writing where he reinterprets them through his creative imagination. By sharing these visionary accounts with readers, he re-enters them under a second pressure that allows others to enter them too. Finally, his visions emphasize self-emptying, kenotic love and compassion.

One could say, then, that Merton's union of kataphatic and apophatic mysticism is his gift to the inter-spiritual movement. His explorations suggest that the mystical-apophatic stream in

all the major traditions lends itself to interfaith dialogue because it moves beyond God as a mere concept or object of knowledge. Also, because true interior growth results in service to the world, the mystical and the prophetic or justice-making aspects of religion go hand in hand. Mystical contemplation is for Merton the only true basis for effective political engagement since it roots us, not in the demands of the egocentric self, but in universal love and compassion. Without the mystic pauses, silences, and unions, activism burns itself out and becomes ineffective.

As Merton moves to the end of his journey, he becomes more and more drawn to the commonalities and correspondences among religions. However, his inter-spiritual legacy is to celebrate a unity of diversities rather than an amalgam of sameness. Merton's grounding in a mystical Christian path enables him to meet others with an attitude of receptivity, while bringing to the dialogue the gifts of his tradition. His vision compromises nothing of its distinctness in his honouring of other paths of spiritual realization. He deepens into his own tradition while broadening to the mysteries of others. As the mystic Catherine of Siena puts it: "There is heaven all the way to heaven; for He said, 'I am the Way.'" Both way and end for Merton cut a single swath. If the path is unique, then the end, which gathers up all the particularities of the path, will be unique as well. However, this is not the kind of distinctiveness which divides, but the kind that leaves one amazed at the many facets there are in a single diamond. When Merton is touched by the faces, objects, and images of his daily life, he delves to the ground of unknowing that makes them all shine. From that place of dazzling darkness he is able to affirm both the truths of Christianity and the truths of other religions without sinking into a tepid pluralism. When we stand with Merton at the end of his journey before the great figures of the Buddhas, we have the opportunity to "taste and see" in another of its modalities the translucence of universal Spirit in the particulars. Together with Merton and all the generations that have approached such sublime treasures—humanity's silent gestures to eternity—we kneel and kiss holy ground.

Endnotes

1. Thomas Merton, journal entry February 24, 1953, in *A Search for Solitude: the Journals of Thomas Merton. Volume Three: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham. (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 36.
2. Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation*, ed. William H. Shannon. (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), 108.
3. Thomas Merton, *The Desire for God*, Credence Recordings, from a talk given to the novices at Gethsemani, Kentucky in the early 1960s.
4. Raymond Bailey, *Thomas Merton on Mysticism* (New York: Doubleday, 1975).
5. George Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993).
6. Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: the Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009).
7. Bonnie Thurston, "Unfolding of a New World," in *Merton and Buddhism: Wisdom, Emptiness & Everyday Mind*, ed. Bonnie Thurston (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2007), 16. Thurston writes: "I wonder if Merton were not ferried over [to Christianity] by a Hindu monk."
8. Thomas Merton, letter to Aldous Huxley, November 27, 1958, in *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon. (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985), 438. Merton's emphasis.
9. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1948), 114.
10. Thomas Merton, *The Labyrinth* [Unpublished manuscript], Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky, 45.
11. Merton, Letter to June J. Yungblut, March 29, 1968, in *The Hidden Ground of Love*, 643-644.
12. Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 112.
13. Jim Forest, correspondence with Susan McCaslin, Feb. 18, 2010.
14. Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 284.
15. Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 284.
16. Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 285.
17. Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 285.
18. Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 285.
19. Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 285.

20. Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 285.
21. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday, 1968), 156-157.
22. Merton, *Conjectures*, 157.
23. Merton, *Conjectures*, 158.
24. Lawrence Cunningham, *Thomas Merton and the Monastic Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 63.
25. Christopher Pramuk in *Sophia: the Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* also links Merton's experiential relation to sophianic Christianity to his opening to other faiths without losing grounding in his own.
26. Merton, journal entry Feb. 28, 1958 in *A Search for Solitude*, 176.
27. Merton, journal entry May 28, 1957 in *A Search for Solitude*, 93.
28. Thomas Merton, letter to Boris Pasternak, October 23, 1958 in *The Courage for Truth: the Letters of Thomas Merton to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993), 90.
29. Thomas Merton, *Courage for Truth*, 90.
30. Merton, journal entry March 19, 1958 in *A Search for Solitude*, 182.
31. Pramuk, *Sophia*, xxiv.
32. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1973), 233. Merton's emphasis.
33. *The Columbia Encyclopaedia*, Sixth Edition, 2008 [www.encyclopedia.com/topic/Madhyamika.aspx].
Merton's source for his Buddhist studies is T.R.V. Murti's *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism: A Study of the Madhyamika System*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1955; cited in notes to Merton's *The Asian Journal*, 385.
34. Merton, *Asian Journal*, 233. Merton's emphasis.
35. Pramuk, *Sophia*, 172.
36. Merton, *Asian Journal*, 233-234.
37. Merton, *Asian Journal*, 235-236. Merton's emphasis.
38. Merton, *The Asian Journal*, note by editors, 372.
39. Letter dated Dec. 12, 1961 in Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, 620-621.
40. Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 108. This phrase recurs in his writings: "And thus without knowing anything about it, I became a pilgrim."