

Journey Within: The Spirituality of Thomas Merton (1915-1968)

by

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PREFACE

To the question of how I came to discover Thomas Merton, I have no straightforward answer. I do believe that, for me, the journey that eventually led to the writing of this thesis started in early childhood. I was raised in a loving Christian home, in the context of a rather conservative Afrikaans culture and school system, and regularly attended Sunday services at the local Dutch Reformed church with my family. This laid the foundation for my subsequent studies in the humanities (people management and psychology) at undergraduate level, which culminated in the completion of an Honours degree in Biblical Archaeology. My passion for reading works on spirituality grew from that point onwards; and it was during such reading that I came across Thomas Merton. In a way, I could almost say that I did not find Merton, but that he found me.

Merton's simple but profound writing on mysticism (contemplation) somehow resonated with me. In reading his works, I discovered a new terminology, a new language, which I could use in the endeavour to put words to my deep desire for inner wholeness, love for my fellow human beings, and for union with the Divine. I came to realise that my imperfections, my foolishness, my brokenness are all obstacles to this union that I long for. Thankfully, through studying Merton, I also came to realise that it is these very imperfections, this foolishness and brokenness – in other words, 'my humanity' – that God is completely in love with. I have therefore come to discover how whole I am in my fragmented self. In Merton, I have found a source of encouragement: an incentive to engage my whole being in my loving search for God.

I have also discovered that the meaning of my life does not depend on how successful I am in this endeavour, but that this meaning is reflected in the absolute irrelevance of the contingencies of my efforts. Through Merton, I discovered a deep knowing that whether or not I succeed, God is 'right there' – perfectly, invincibly and utterly given to me, with complete abandon, as the intimate quality of my own *inner journey*.

This work, which turned out to be a journey in itself, would not have been possible without the patience and support of a number of 'fellow travelers' who lovingly accompanied me on the journey. It is to these individuals that I owe the completion of this dissertation:

My deepest gratitude goes to my wife and partner in life, Carien, for her endless patience, encouragement, and support. Carien, I love you more than words can describe.

A study of this magnitude can never be undertaken without some sacrifices. One such sacrifice for me was the reduced time I had available to spend with my two lovely teenage children, Marco and Elmarie. Thanks so much to you both for your patience and understanding in allowing me the opportunity to fulfil this dream.

To my mother, Marie: Thank you, Mom, for listening so patiently and attentively during our countless discussions. This afforded me an opportunity to reflect on my work, and contributed in no small way to my own transformation and growth.

Dad (Koot), thank you for the example you set, and are setting, that life is ‘to be lived’.

I am also highly indebted to my supervisor, Professor Kourie, for the professional, yet caring way in which she guided me through my studies. Celia, your friendship means a lot to me.

Last, but not least, I would like to acknowledge my editor, Alice, thank you for your dedication and putting your heart into the editing of my work .

May the mystery of life continue to inspire us all and may our hearts continue to be transformed by the love that guides us on our own individual journeys.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my brother, Leonard.

Having had the opportunity to have grown up together and sharing the bond we do is probably what Merton had in mind when he spoke of grace.

DECLARATION

I, Elmor van Staden,
declare that

Journey Within: The Spirituality of Thomas Merton (1915-1968)

is my own work
and that all sources that I have used or quoted
have been indicated and acknowledged by means of the reference.

SIGNED: _____

DATE: ____April 2016

SUMMARY AND KEY TERMS

This research project investigates the relevance of the spirituality of the well-known twentieth century Trappist monk, Thomas Merton (1915-1968), for a postmodern contemporary society. The research follows a phenomenological approach. This investigation is done especially in terms of his understanding of the *inner journey* which is, paradoxically, also the journey to God. The study commences with a short biography of Merton, highlighting the key events that shaped his life and that influenced his spirituality. Merton's concept of the *true self* versus the *false self* is then analysed in relation to spiritual growth, *psycho-spiritual development*, or what Merton, towards the end of his life, referred to as 'final integration'. This is followed by an analysis of *contemplation*, a major element in Merton's spirituality. It includes an investigation of the relevance of contemplation for holiness, the world of technology, inter-religious dialogue, passivism and non-violence. Merton's prophetic wisdom is also analysed especially in light of the value of contemplation within the work-place. The study is concluded by drawing together the threads of the research and extrapolating the major findings.

Key Terms

Thomas Merton; spirituality; psycho-spiritual development; spiritual/inner journey; true/false self; contemplation; mysticism; interfaith dialogue.

OPSOMMING EN SLEUTELTERME

Hierdie navorsingsprojek het ten doel om die relevansie van die bekende twintigste-eeuse Trappiste monnik, Thomas Merton (1915-1968) se spiritualiteit vir die 21ste eeuse postmoderne samelewing te ondersoek. 'n Fenomenologiese benadering word deurgaans gevolg. Die ondersoek fokus op die spirituele-/innerlike reis, wat, paradoksaal, terselfdertyd ook die reis na God is. Die studie het 'n bondige biografie van Merton as vetrekpunt, met 'n fokus op die hoofmomente van sy lewe veral in soverre as wat hulle sy spiritualiteit gevorm het. Merton se begrippe van die *ware* versus die *valse self* word ontleed in die konteks van spirituele groei, psigo-spirituele ontwikkeling, of soos Merton veral aan die einde van sy lewe daarna verwys het, 'finale integrasie'. Kontemplasie, as een van die hoofkomponente van Merton se spiritualiteit, word vervolgens ondersoek, en die relevansie daarvan in terme van heiligheid, die wêreld van tegnologie, intergeloof-gesprekke, pasifisme en nie-geweld word ontleed. Merton se profetiese wysheid word daarna ondersoek, veral in die lig van die waarde van kontemplasie vir die werksplek. Die studie word afgesluit met 'n ondersoek na die samehang van die onderskeie insigte en 'n ekstrapolering van die belangrikste bevindinge.

Sleuteltermes

Thomas Merton; spiritualiteit; psigo-spirituele ontwikkeling; spirituele-/innerlike reis; ware-/vals self; kontemplasie; mistiek/e en intergeloof-gesprekke.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research problem

1.1.1 Raison d'être for the research

The years that the catholic writer and mystic, Thomas Merton, spent in the monastery at the Abbey of Gethsemani were marked by vast changes in both the Church as well as society. In the Church, the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) acted as a catalyst for change and renewal which started a ferment that continues to this day. On the wider stage, the world experienced the devastating effects and existential threat of the atomic bomb. The war in Vietnam was at its peak which contributed unintentionally to the bringing together of the 'East' and 'West'. On the home front in America, another 'war' was being fought - the war of civil rights under the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. Merton's thoughts, without any doubt, were shaped by these global conditions which eventually also found its way into his repertoire of more than sixty books, written mostly on spirituality, social justice and quiet pacifism.

Father Louis, as Thomas Merton is also sometimes referred to, was an existentialist in the purist sense of the word, '...what was important was *what is*¹ – not thoughts or ideas, but reality experienced' Pennington (1987:4). Pennington also states that Merton '...came into a real experience of God' and in this he '...resolved to let go of all to be to God' (1987:4).² The 'oneness' that Merton sensed with his fellow American citizens on the corner of 4th and Walnut Streets in the town of Louisville radically affected the course of Merton's psychological and spiritual development with the result that Merton could no longer exclude anyone in his deep desire for union with God. As a result he became an outspoken activist against any form of 'un-freedoms that chained, such as those most blatantly present in racial prejudice expressed in segregation, he had to anguish over them and, in accord with his vocation as a monk and writer, he had to pray and speak out for the conversion which would bring freedom' (Pennington 1987:4).

¹ Italics are mine.

² In line with the norm during the fifties, sixties and seventies, Thomas Merton was not sensitive to gender inclusive language. For the sake of simplicity and ease of reading, I use the masculine form throughout the study.

Today, fifty seven years after Merton's death, the spiritual legacy of Merton is still alive in the hearts and minds of many. The question why Merton still intrigues is perhaps the same question as to why yet another study on Merton is necessary. Conceivably the answer lies in the fact that Merton understood the *spiritual journey* to be directly linked to the *human journey* – never to be separate from one another. As Anthony Padovano proclaims:

If one wishes to know where the Western World was in the second half of the Twentieth Century, Thomas Merton offers considerable enlightenment. He showed us our spiritual potential in the midst of our secular endeavors. He made holiness equivalent with a life that seeks to be whole, honest and free. He taught us that it was possible to be truly religious without being formally religious. He proved that contemplation could occur in the throes of restlessness and that it was permissible to be fully human (Padovano 1982:170).

On an even deeper level perhaps Merton is intriguing because he stands for something that resonates within the depths of the human heart.³ The words of Pennington ring true when he says: '...we have in Thomas Merton, monk, Christian, man, a marvelously inspiring guide and companion for the journey, just because he was so much the monk – the man for every man and woman...' (Pennington 1987:4).

1.1.2 Stating the research problem

In light of the above-mentioned phenomena, the research question for this dissertation is stated as follows: *Is the contemplative spirituality of Thomas Merton still relevant in contemporary society?* The *hypothesis* is that contemplation offers an effective way of integrating various aspects of the personality and is therefore still relevant in contemporary society.

1.2 Aim of research

Merton's autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948) introduced readers to the contemplative dimension of Christianity which ultimately became a major element of Merton's spirituality and the major theme of his writing. This contemplative spirituality was fueled by the fact that Merton firmly believed that the contemplative dimension leads to a deeper level of living. Merton's message is simple: it is possible to experience God, to awaken spiritually and to

³ Raimundo Panikkar, in his book: *Blessed Simplicity: The Monk as Universal Archetype*, refers to the 'monastic archetype'. (Panikkar 1982).

become aware of God's presence. And in doing so, it is possible for one to become a fully integrated individual – to become truly oneself. This integration, however, does not lock one into solitude and estrangement with the rest of the world; on the contrary it deepens one's empathy with other human beings and nature.

Merton's life was a testimony to the great truth which he had proclaimed: '...the mysterious fact that the full spiritual journey not only of cultures but of individual persons remain a secret gift that is in the possession of another. We do not find ourselves until, in meeting the other, we receive from him the gift, in part at least, to know ourselves.' (Merton 1979, cited in Lipski 1983:73). Merton is seen to be a spiritual guide for many who are searching for answers to the difficult questions in life – questions confronting us in the 21st century more than ever. His mystical teaching enables women and men to learn the value of meditation and stillness which ultimately raises their awareness and develops their compassion. In addition, his inter-religious dialogue contributes to a superior understanding of the great wisdom traditions of the East which leads to a reduction in judgment and an acceptability to other cultures and religions.

The aim of the proposed research is to bring these elements to the fore, and contribute to the field of Merton studies. As Anthony Padovano stated: 'The story of Thomas Merton is worth preserving for the same reason that any good story is worth keeping. It enables us to get on with life, to see connections beyond the random happenings of everyday experience, and, most important, to participate in the process by which life is continuous...' (1982:3).

1.3 Demarcating the area of research

Due to the vastness of literature that is available on the life and legacy of Merton and the practical limitations on the length of an academic dissertation such as this, it is absolutely essential to demarcate the area of the intended study.

For the purpose of this dissertation I will be focusing on mainly three important aspects of Merton, namely: his notion of the *self*; contemplation as a key element of his spirituality; and finally the contribution his spirituality brings to contemporary society.

1.4 Methodology and Theoretical Framework

1.4.1 Literature research

This dissertation is a literature study, which leans heavily on the corpus of Merton's work, but also incorporates contemporary research literature on Merton, as well as other areas of spirituality. The study will be undertaken from within a *phenomenological*⁴ perspective. The theoretical framework encompasses an inter-disciplinary and inter-religious approach, including the disciplines of spirituality, theology, mysticism and psychology. Waaijman (2002:535), in discussing 'phenomenology', recognises the value of the phenomenological approach in the study of any given spirituality, since 'phenomenology is... a method of working... that is focused on experience and the internal examination of experience...'. Major elements of phenomenology as a study method include the fact that it is expository, analytic and synthetic, as opposed to polemical and argumentative (Kruger 1982:ix). Following a phenomenological approach from within a religious studies perspective is also helpful, as it is conducive to inter-religious dialogue.

In the light of the above, a decision was taken to approach Merton through his *inner and outer journey*,⁵ and to conduct the examination of the various aspects that comprised his spirituality through the lens of his own subjective experiences. The value of this study lies in its particular focus on Merton's many life experiences, his reactions to these experiences and the way in which they influenced his spirituality.

⁴ Phenomenological methods are particularly effective at bringing to the fore the experiences and perceptions of individuals from their own perspectives. The phenomenological view is based on the premise that women and men live in and relate to the world and are not an objects in isolation. This is particularly important as it highlights that humanity can only be understood in terms of their whole existence. Pure phenomenological research seeks essentially to start from a perspective free from hypotheses or preconceptions (Husserl 1970). Ultimately, phenomenological studies deal with individuals' experiences of certain life phenomena and the meaning attributed to these phenomena.

⁵The reader of Merton is always a companion on his inner and outer journey.

1.5 Delineation of chapters

As mentioned previously, much has already been written on the life and legacy of Thomas Merton; yet there is still so much more to be discovered about this gifted man. By way of a succinct literature review, **Chapter Two** will look at some of the major contributions, with particular relevance to those relevant to the research problem.

Chapter Three will deal with the remarkable, though fairly short life of Merton. The intention is not to offer a complete biography, but to rather focus on the most important events that helped shape his life and contributed to his vocation as contemplative and spiritual writer as well as his spiritual development. Reference will be made to the epic poem Merton wrote towards the end of his life: *The Geography of Lograire*, which covers so many aspects of Merton's journey. As a result of Merton's discontent with his own western society, which at various times he blamed for being greedy, selfish, capitalistic and over-emphasizing technological advances, he sought a more perfect society either in the past, the European Middle Ages, or in the non-Western world, Asia. Merton's encounter with Eastern Religions, had a profound effect on his life and contributed significantly to his understanding of contemplation and his spirituality in general. Of all the Eastern traditions Merton was perhaps most interested in and wrote the most about Zen. His advanced knowledge of the Desert Fathers and the Christian Mystics gave him a deep understanding of what the devoted disciples of Zen sought and experienced in their seeking. Merton's encounter with Zen Buddhism and the effect it had on his life and thought will also be covered as part of this chapter.

Merton's view of God changed drastically during the course of his life, which contributed to his psycho-spiritual development and the unfolding of his self. **Chapter Four** deals with Merton's concept of the self.

Merton's spirituality, more than anything else, is a spirituality of contemplation. It is through contemplation that the various aspects of Merton's personality were integrated. These elements are discussed in **Chapter Five**.

What is so exceptional about Merton's spirituality is that it is as relevant today as when he lived and wrote. **Chapter Six** will deal with the value of Merton's spirituality for today.

Chapter Seven will draw together the threads of the research and will extrapolate the major findings.

1.6 What is spirituality?

The term 'spirituality' (which includes the concept of being 'spiritual') has become something of a 'buzz'-word in the last few decades, and is used by people from all walks of life. The contemporary use of the term *spirituality* is sometimes vague and difficult to define because it is '...increasingly detached from the religious traditions and specifically from its roots in Christianity' (Sheldrake 2007:1). There seems to be no single, clear, unequivocal definition of the concept that is acceptable to all. Sheldrake comments that there is a distinct difference between 'spirituality' and 'religion'. He adds: '...yet, despite the fuzziness, it is possible to suggest that the word "spirituality" refers to the deepest values and meanings by which people seek to live' (2007:1-2). In other words, spirituality has to do with a *destination* for the human spirit, and includes the '*map*' indicating how to get there. According to Sheldrake, the contemporary interest in spirituality tends to focus on *self-realisation* or some kind of 'inwardness'.

It is important to note that the term 'spirituality', in general, is not confined to an individual, but is also often used in other contexts, such as health care, education, urban life and even the workplace. In the context of religion, for example in the case of Christianity, spirituality refers to the fundamental '...values, life styles and spiritual practices...' which reflect on '...particular understandings of God, human identity and the material world as the context for human transformation' (2007:2). The term 'spirituality' is derived from the Latin *spiritualitas*, associated with the adjective *spiritualis*. These words are derived in turn from the Greek noun *pneuma* ('spirit') and the adjective *pneumatikos*, as they appear in Paul's letters in the New Testament. Kourie (2006:22), in *The 'turn' to spirituality*, makes a valuable contribution to the definition of spirituality, capturing the essence of the concept as an '...umbrella term which covers a myriad of activities ranging from the deeply creative to the distinctively bizarre.' It is

noteworthy that ‘spirit’ and ‘spiritual’ are not the exact opposites of ‘physical’ or ‘material’. The contrast therefore does not lie between body and soul, but between the attitudes to life (Sheldrake 2007:3).

The words ‘spirit’ and ‘spiritual’ have gained momentum in terms of their popularity and use over the last few decades; and there are clear indications that this tendency will continue in the years to come as the differences between ‘spirituality’ and ‘religion’ become more visible and clear. The emergence of ‘spirituality’ as the preferred word to describe studies of the Christian life became more pronounced after the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s; and it became the most widely used term by the 1970s. The term counters older distinctions between a supernatural, spiritual life and a purely natural everyday life (Sheldrake 2007:4). As mentioned, the spiritual life is collective by nature, rather than individualistic; and it integrates all aspects of life.⁶ In our daily lives, as a rule, spirituality is latently present as a quiet force in the background – an inspiration and an orientation (Waaajman 2002:1). Spirituality, indeed, is ‘...unavoidably ambiguous, referring to (1) a fundamental dimension of the human being, (2) the lived experience which actualizes that dimension, and (3) the academic discipline which studies that experience’ (Schneiders 1989:678).

It is the intention of this study to inform our understanding of Merton’s contemplative spirituality and to draw conclusions on the value thereof for our current pluralistic society. The life and work of Merton will be examined and the central theme of his spirituality (contemplation) will be highlighted and discussed. For Merton, to *be* was to be a contemplative. His life is marked by his monastic vocation; and contemplation is an integral part thereof. It was ultimately as a contemplative that he wrote on issues of social concern and, later in his life, engaged in interreligious dialogue. Any discussion on Merton, therefore, should be approached on the basis of his vocation as a contemplative.

⁶Spirituality crosses the boundaries between various religious cultures and extends into the wider ecumenism of interfaith dialogue.

1.7 Mysticism: acme of spirituality

‘Mysticism’ is another term that has so many definitions that the term itself no longer has a specific, clearly-defined meaning – a factor that often causes confusion. And yet, as Borchert (1994:3) states: ‘...there is a certain phenomenon that has to have a name, and the only name we can give it is mysticism.’ Borchert defines mysticism as ‘...the experimental knowledge that, in one way or another, everything is interconnected, that all things have a single source’ (1994:3). Although the terms *spirituality* and *mysticism* are closely related, the two cannot be equated. In discussing mysticism and its closest cognates, Kruger (2006:10) explains that spirituality ‘...has a wider and less determinate field of meanings, with mysticism the acme of spirituality’. Kruger agrees with Kourie (2006) that spirituality should be seen, in a more general sense, to encompass the *ultimate values* to which a person subscribes, the *ultimate meaning* in a person’s life. For Merton, such meaning would not have existed outside of contemplation: ‘but the summit of life, in man, is contemplation...’ (Merton 1961c:9). Although Merton’s spirituality also encompassed elements such as his love and devotion to the monastic life, his inter-religious dialogue with non-Christians, his sense of the aesthetic (which is evident in his love of nature, photography, poetry and the visual arts) and his activist approach to the ills of his time, his spirituality ultimately revolved around the mystical element of contemplation. It should be borne in mind, however, that mysticism is always a process or a way of life. Although the essential goal of mysticism may be conceived of as a particular kind of encounter between God and the human being, everything that leads up to and prepares the way for such an encounter, as well as all that flows from it [or is supposed to flow from it for the life of the individual], is also mystical (McGinn 1991:xvi). On this point Sherman (2014:224) agrees with McGinn when he states that contemplation is “...something essential human”. At the root of mysticism, however, is the idea that all things are connected and do not exist independently of one another.

Mysticism, as pointed out above, is the pursuit of communion with and awareness of God, the Universe and the realities that exist beyond the empirical senses, as a human experience. Merton pursued this *union* from a Christ-centred perspective. Borchert (1994:3-9) uses the concept of ‘being in love’ as an analogy to explain mysticism and the experience thereof. ‘What takes place is an intimate encounter between the mystic and another world.’ Borchert writes:

In order to explain this intimacy, mystics employ the imagery of sexual conjugation in marriage. They speak of union (unio; or *ichûd* as the Jews term it), of communion (communio), or fusion, of absorption in, of being completely taken up by, and so on...awareness of a separate 'I' disappears (1994:9).

Merton did not use the terms 'mystic' or 'mysticism' frequently, but preferred speaking of contemplation.⁷ For Merton, *mystical life*, *mysticism*, *mystical contemplation* and *contemplation* were equivalent terms. In his later years he came to discern a distinctly existential aspect in mysticism, 'not only in the sense that it experiences our own reality immersed in the reality of Him who IS, but also in the sense that is the participation in a concrete action of God in time, the climax of the divine irruption into human history...' (Merton 1961c:9). The ground of Merton's mysticism, without any doubt, is love. For him, mysticism is not about visions, ecstasies, raptures, voices or any other kind of extraordinary phenomena; rather, it is about *love*, *transformation* and *union*, which is very much in keeping with the traditional teachings of Christian mystics. At the heart of Merton's mysticism lies what Eastern Christianity calls *theosis*, the process of entering into union with God.

Darkness was one of Merton's favourite ways of describing contemplation or mysticism. This goes hand in hand with his interest in *apophatic theology*⁸ as encountered in the writings of authors such as Gregory of Nyssa, Pseudo-Dionysus, the Victorines, Meister Eckhart, John Ruysbroeck, the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* and John of the Cross. In a certain sense it can be said that mysticism is 'the knowledge of God through experience'. Merton sought to express such knowledge in terms of 'unknowing', which claims that God cannot be understood by intellectual reasoning alone, but must be experienced directly in the 'darkness' and/or 'emptiness' where no images can contain God. It is the apophatic tradition in Christian

⁷ For the purpose of this study, Merton's use of the term *contemplation* is not confined to a form of prayer (which in itself can lead to mystical union) but should be seen in terms of the broader context of *mysticism* itself. Mystical traditions include many accounts of the mystic losing his/her identity. Merton wanted to lose himself for Christ; and the particular ocean or mass in which he would do so was the community of the Trappists. A certain level of 'selflessness' is required of a Mystic (King 1995:4).

⁸ Apophatic theology (from Ancient Greek: *ἀπόφασις*, from *ἀπόφημι* – *apophēmi*, 'to deny') – also known as negative theology, *via negativa* or *via negationis* (Latin for 'negative way' or 'by way of denial') – is a theology that attempts to describe God, the Divine Good, by negation, to speak only in terms of what may not be said about the perfect goodness that is God. It stands in contrast to cataphatic theology (Apophatic theology - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. 2014). Merton's image of God relied heavily on the apophatic view that God is not a being among other beings, but is 'no-thing', or as the Hindu would say, *neti neti* ('not this, nor that'). Merton would certainly have agreed with his spiritual master, John of the Cross, that God's presence is *todo y nada* ('everything and nothing').

mysticism, which is a ‘waiting upon God in darkness’, that prepared the ground for Merton’s involvement with Zen Buddhism.

1.8 Summary

The many years Merton spent behind the protective walls of the monastery in Gethsemani brought about profound changes in his understanding of the world, but also, more importantly, changes in his understanding of his own personal ‘self’.⁹ This ongoing conversion impelled him into the political arena, where he became in a way the conscience of the peace movement of the 1960's. Referring to race and peace as the two most urgent issues of his time, Merton was a strong supporter of the nonviolent civil rights movement. For his social activism Merton endured severe criticism, from Catholics and non-Catholics alike, who assailed his political writings as unbecoming of a monk. These years also created the ideal opportunity for the brilliance of his writing talent to really come into its own. It also allowed Merton an opportunity to contemplate all the nuances of life and through his many books, journals and poetry he left us with a proverbial ‘instruction manual’ of how to experience God and dance the dance of life.

During his last years, Merton became deeply interested in Asian religions, particularly Zen Buddhism, and in promoting East-West dialogue. After several meetings with Merton during the American monk's trip to the Far East in 1968, the Dalai Lama praised him as having a more profound understanding of Buddhism than any other Christian he had known. It was during this trip to a conference on East-West monastic dialogue that Merton died, in Bangkok on December 10, 1968, the victim of an accidental electrocution.¹⁰ The date marked the twenty-seventh anniversary of his entrance to Gethsemani.

⁹ In their ground-breaking book: *Spiritual Intelligence – The Ultimate Intelligence*, Danah Zohar and her husband, Ian Marshall use the lotus flower as a symbol for the ‘self’. In their visually descriptive model the self is the central core (bud) of the lotus flower. The unconscious mind is the middle layer of the flower (the inner petals) and the outer petals represent the human ego (Zohar & Marshall 2000:123-124). Assagioli (the late Italian psychologist who developed ‘psychosynthesis’) also interpreted the self as the central core around which all other sub-personalities revolve. This personal self is a reflection of the transpersonal self that lives at a level of universality. Union between the personal self and transpersonal self leads to what was described in ancient times with the Sanskrit words ‘sat-chit-ananda’: being-conscious-bliss (Ferrucci 1982:39). The experience of *sat-chit-ananda* is a subjective experience of Brahman as boundless, pure consciousness - a glimpse of ultimate reality.

¹⁰ ‘The Trappist monk who spoke from the world of silence to questing millions who sought God.’ These words were written about Merton by the author of the front page article that appeared in the New York Times, the morning after Merton’s unexpected death on 11 December 1968. (New York Times 11 December 1968).

Chapter 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

Research on the life and writings of Thomas Merton has been undertaken world-wide on a wide variety of levels. In 1967, one year before his death, Merton established the *Merton Legacy Trust*, naming *Bellarmino College* as the repository of his manuscripts, letters, journals, tapes, drawings, photographs, and memorabilia. Two years later, in October 1969, the College established the *Thomas Merton Center*, with the Collection¹¹ as its focal point. The Center serves as a regional, national, and international resource for scholarship and inquiry on Merton and his works and the ideas he promoted, namely: contemplative life, spirituality, ecumenism, East-West relations, personal and corporate inner work, peace, and social justice.

Numerous biographies have been written on Merton. There are also quite a few anthologies on Merton's work, such as: *Thomas Merton Spiritual Master: The Essential Writings* (Cunningham 1992), and *Passion for Peace: The social Essays* (Shannon 1997b), Cunningham focusses almost entirely on Merton's spiritual-contemplative life whereas Shannon is more interested in Merton's prophetic witness.

It is within this vast literature collection that the research for this dissertation will be conducted; with the focus on Merton's spirituality of contemplation, his experience with Eastern religion and how these elements influenced his life and thinking. Although a few of the older Merton 'classics' have been included in the Literature Review, my focus is on more contemporary works. Works that make reference to Merton's poetry and essays have also been included in the study, since these are a valuable source for getting to know the man whose 'heart awakened to

¹¹ The Merton Collection has grown to over fifty thousand items, including the literary estate, fifteen thousand pieces of correspondence to over 2,100 correspondents, nine hundred drawings, eleven hundred photographs and six hundred hours of audio taped conferences given by Merton to his community at Gethsemani, and several hundred volumes from Merton's own library. It is the largest Merton collection in the world, incorporating items translated into thirty languages, over two hundred and sixty Masters and Doctoral theses, audiovisual materials, and a growing collection of paintings, drawings, sculptures, and fabric art depicting Merton (*The Merton Collection at Bellarmine University - Thomas Merton Center 2014*).

the reality of God within him...' (Bochen 2000:16).¹² The reviews that follow below are presented chronologically.

2.2 Review of literature on Merton

2.2.1 *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ (Kilcourse 1993)*

Ace of Freedoms explores Merton's spirituality in terms of its Christ-centeredness, and maps the development within Merton's own explicit and implicit Christology, which can best be observed in many of the poems Merton wrote. As Kilcourse states: 'There one finds the most compelling personifications of the "true self", or "inner self", where transformation of consciousness articulates Merton's mature Christology' (1993:1). Kilcourse goes on to explain that Christology, or the understanding of who Jesus, the Christ, is, and what he has done for humanity, 'proved to be intimately connected with two dimensions of Merton's experience: (1) the recurring existential question of self-identity, the spiritual dynamic of the false self versus the "true self", or "inner self"; and (2) the unique character of autobiography as dialogue: voicing the discovery of his deepest identity so as to empower readers to wrestle with their own spiritual identity' (1993:1). In the light of the foregoing, Kilcourse explains his motivation for writing *Ace of Freedoms* as follows: 'By integrating Christology, the inner self's identity and autographical voice, I hope to reorient readers to Merton's prose, journals, letters and especially his poetry, to discover what recommends his spirituality and how it has garnered a unique staying power for today' (1993:1).

Through the ages, there have been many claims and counterclaims about the divinity or humanity of Christ. This not only shaped the course of early Christianity, but also influenced Merton, whose '...authentic understanding of the Greek Fathers' theory of divinization includes the shift to an "ascending christology", the capacity of the human for self-transcendence and union with God' (1993:4). In an age of reputed doubt and 'unfaith', Merton taught that our era

¹² Among the vast number of dissertations and theses on Merton's thought, spirituality and mysticism, I have found the following, both written by South African scholars, particularly relevant for this present study: De Lange, E 2006. *Thomas Merton: Life, Work & Thoughts on Zen*. (In partial fulfillment of Master of Social Science - Religious Studies). Cape Town. University of Cape Town; Steyn, HC 1988. *Thomas Merton en Theravada-Boeddhisme: 'n Vergelykende Studie van Religieuse Ervaring*. (Unpublished MA-thesis.) Pretoria. University of South Africa.

offers authentic assurances of hope and understanding, provided that we are willing to tolerate theological discomfort. Kilcourse's aim is to trace the organic development of that Christological shift in Merton's thinking and writing. According to Kilcourse, Merton's quest for his own identity was rooted in his kenotic Christology and contributed to his ability to lead readers, in their turn, to find their own identity. Kilcourse develops his thesis from an examination of Merton's poetry, as well as his many narrative writings. According to Kilcourse, '...the drama of the "true self" vs. "false self" played out for Merton in Christological understanding as well as on an existential level...' (Kilcourse 1993:6). Kilcourse offers his reader a map to track the unfolding of Merton's spiritual path. For Merton, this path started with his conversion, continued in his likeness of God and ended in his social commitment to the world. 'His appropriation of the mystery of Christ's Incarnation in terms of a mature kenotic christology, finding Christ in "weakness and defenselessness", dominated the final decade of the monk's life...' (Kilcourse 1993:9).

Kilcourse includes a useful chapter on interreligious dialogue, in which this important topic is dealt with in terms of three particular questions: (a) What does Merton see as the nature of the Christian-Buddhist dialogue? (b) How does he understand the analogous religious experience common to the wisdom theology of Christianity and Buddhism? and (c) In what way does the 'true self' in Christ converge with the Zen Buddhist experience of 'emptiness', the dissolution of the empirical ego-self? In the last chapter of the book, Kilcourse '...explores the final frontier of Merton's christological reflections...' (1993:199) and his dialogue with other religious traditions. Kilcourse notes that '[t]he range of Merton's interreligious dialogue embraces not only Zen Buddhism but also Judaism, Sufism, Taoism, Hinduism and Confucianism' (1993:200). In each of these instances, he focuses on the problematic issue of Christ for non-Christians. While Judaism and Islam enjoy a special dialogue with Christianity because they share a common religious root in Abraham and Sarah's faith, Merton did not sustain or develop a dialogue with either of these religions that was equal in intensity to his study of Zen Buddhism.¹³ A major contribution made by Kilcourse is found in the last chapter of his book. Kilcourse offers a schema that can be followed to measure and map out the growth in Merton's thinking about

¹³ Kilcourse uses five Merton texts to provide a matrix for the exploration of this dialogue: (1) *Gandhi on Non-Violence* (1965), (2) *The way of Chuang Tzu* (1965), (3) *Mystics and Zen Masters* (1967), (4) *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (1968) and *The Asian Journal* (1973).

Christ and how this thinking contributes to the releasing of Merton's own 'true self'. Kilcourse's *Ace of Freedoms* indeed draws the reader back to Merton's prose, journals, letters and especially his poetry, thereby enabling the reader to discover some of the elements that influenced Merton's spirituality. A completely satisfactory understanding of Merton's image of Christ is not offered though, but this is not due to inability on the part of the author, but rather to the complexity of the Christ-image itself, as well as the fact that Merton often did not fully express his opinion on complex matters, leaving his reader in a state of suspense. Merton frequently stated that he was 'not prepared to discuss' certain 'extremely complex and difficult' issues (Merton 1968d:210) which arose in relation to the themes he was discussing.

2.2.2 *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination (Labrie 2001)*

A major characteristic of Merton's writing, both in poetry and in prose, is his intermingling of religious and Romantic¹⁴ ideas. Owing to Merton's widespread fame as a writer and forward thinker, this intermingling has led to a distinctive form of religious thought and expression. In *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination*, Labrie (2001) reveals the vastness of Merton's intellect by means of a systematic analysis of Merton's thought, which is generally considered to be diverse and unsystematic by nature. What most likely drew Merton's attention to romanticism and mysticism – and what held his attention virtually all his life – was his consciousness of the ontological significance of unity and wholeness. As Labrie states: 'He thought of romanticism and mysticism as having much in common, just as he later determined that his vocations as a monastic contemplative and poet did as well' (Labrie 2001:vii).

William Blake and the romantics in general had a profound influence on the formation of Merton's fundamental ideas as a thinker and an artist. Labrie notes that Merton '...was more engaged in the first generation of romantic poets (Blake, Coleridge, and Wordsworth) than by the second (which included Keats, Shelly, and Byron)' (2001:2). Labrie (2001:2) points out that one possible reason for this was that the first generation was more hospitable to religion than the second. Labrie skilfully examines Merton's letters, journals and individual works to show the full

¹⁴Romanticism (also the Romantic era or the Romantic period) was an artistic, literary and intellectual movement that originated in Europe towards the end of the 18th century and, in most areas, was at its peak from about 1800 until approximately 1850. Partly a reaction to the Industrial Revolution, it was also a revolt against the aristocratic social and political norms of the Age of Enlightenment and a reaction against the scientific rationalization of nature. It was embodied most strongly in the visual arts, music, and literature, but had a major impact on historiography, education and the natural sciences. (Romanticism 2016. Available at: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romanticism>.)

extent of his contribution to this particular dialogue. He does this by drawing on insights from the romantic literary as well as the mystical tradition. Labrie covers a wide range of topics such as consciousness, the self, being, nature, time, myth, culture, and individuation.

Labrie (2001:54) discerns that ‘...while Merton never abandoned the concept of God as transcendent and in that way separate from creation...’, he did, especially towards the end of his life, reject ‘...any notion of the divine that in any way resembled deism, focusing instead on the divine immanence in being’. Labrie continues in the same vein by pointing out that: ‘Rather than seeing God as the end point of existence, though, Merton thought of God as the unifying center of existence, from which position being could be eschatologically oriented yet made accessible in its fullness within the boundaries of the present moment’ (2001:54).¹⁵

Solitude was of enormous importance to Merton; and he went to a great deal of trouble to engage in long periods of withdrawal. ‘In connection with his withdrawal from secular society, Merton argued that this too had been fortuitous in allowing for a separation of “reality from illusion”’ (Labrie 2001:62). In this way, Merton could focus on aspects of reality that would be invisible in society at large. It is my belief that it was through these times of solitude and contemplation that Merton explored his inner being and that he grew as a person. As Labrie writes: ‘The act involved the uniting of mind and body in a temporary fusion, thereby enabling the contemplative to concentrate on the richness of being shared by all parts of the self’ (2001:62). Merton thought of solitude as a dynamic and fluid aspect of his life, making possible major transitions in ideas and convictions and, more importantly, changes in the composition and focus of his identity. Pushing the boundaries of contemplative solitude even further, Merton maintained that the consciousness generated therein had to be related back to one’s *being*, rather than being cultivated as a spiritual quest in itself.

Solitude and contemplation brought Merton closer to society but also, more importantly, closer to God. In *The Inner Experience*, which was completed in the late 1950s, Merton declared that

¹⁵ It is important to note that Merton’s view of the Divine is what ultimately attracted him to contemplation and induced him to explore and value other religions, especially Zen Buddhism.

the life of the contemplative was primarily a life of unity and of the search for unity (Labrie 2001:219).

In formulating his idea of unity, Merton managed to accommodate Christianity and Buddhism while acknowledging the fact that Christians tended to perceive spiritual unity as theologically grounded, whereas Buddhists characterized such unity as ontological and natural (Labrie 2001:220).

Merton indeed had no qualms about adopting a Buddhist perspective of *being* while retaining his Catholic theological underpinnings, owing to the fact that the unity he sought was not primarily doctrinal but experiential, and so could be compared with the experience of other contemplatives in different traditions. Labrie (2001) takes into account material from the fairly recent publication of Merton's journals and from his Columbia University notebooks on romanticism. He not only demonstrates Merton's intellectual growth during the years, but also provides an overview of his extensive interests as well. For this reason, Labrie (2001) makes a significant contribution to studies on Merton.

2.2.3 *Walking with Thomas Merton: Discovering His Poetry, Essays and Journals (Waldron 2002)*

Merton's love of poetry is one of the least-known aspects of his life, and has been overlooked to a large extent. In preparation for conducting a poetry retreat,¹⁶ award-winning author Robert Waldron re-examined Merton's spiritual classics, journals, essays, letters and especially his poetry, and found himself on a journey parallel to Merton's – a journey towards a deeper contemplative life. Waldron, with one eye on Merton and the other on what is happening in the world, takes the reader along with him on this journey.

Early in the book, Waldron refers to Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo's *The Intimate Merton* (1999), which, in Waldron's words, is a 'diary-like memoir composed of Merton's most poignant and insightful journal entries culled from the seven journals, covering twenty-nine years of Merton's life...' (Waldron 2002:2). *Walking with Thomas Merton* is a beautiful, easy-to-read

¹⁶ The Merton Retreat was conducted at St. Stephen's Priory, Dover, Massachusetts on May 18-20, 2001 with the theme: 'Merton and the Way of Poetry'.

book which is also compiled in the format of a journal that not only reflects the tension of preparing for the retreat, and the excitement of the day of the actual retreat, but also the satisfaction and joy of the aftermath in sections devoted to each of these aspects. Waldron was intrigued by Merton's writing, especially his journals, from a very young age. In *Walking with Thomas Merton*, he offers an excellent introduction to Merton, as well as an overview of his most important works. Like so many other people, Waldron regards Merton as a mentor and spiritual guide:

I can confidently state that no other essayist, diarist, poet, letter writer or novelist (Merton is all of these!) has ever exerted a greater influence on my life than the Trappist from Kentucky. From my first readings of Merton, I felt I was gazing into my own soul (Waldron 2002:2).

In reality, Merton is more than just a mentor to Waldron, who states: 'I can now say that Merton is no longer my mentor, he is, rather, my friend' (2002:3).

Waldron devotes the largest section of his book to his preparation for the poetry retreat. In the style of Merton, Waldron also kept a journal during his preparation, recording his thoughts, insights and questions. After much thought and consideration, Waldron decided on a title for the retreat: 'Contemplation, Poetry and the Spiritual Life'. He reflects that it is a 'good general title' and indicates his aim for the retreat as '...the opening of the spiritual eye of attention' (2002:10).

Some useful references are made to Robert Lax, Merton's close friend from his Columbia University days. Lax, who knew Merton well, captures the whole of Merton in his phrase, 'a certainty of thread' (cited in Waldron 2002:13).¹⁷ Of course we know that Merton did not always know where he was going. As he begins his famous prayer: 'My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end' (Merton 1956:83). But not knowing, according to Lax, did not stop Merton from walking, running and dancing.

Although this was not the aim of *Walking with Thomas Merton*, Waldron captures many interesting facts about Merton, and touches on some elements of the legacy that Merton left

¹⁷ Robert Lax writes extensively about Merton in his book, *Love Had a Compass: Journals and Poetry* (New York: Grove Press, 1996).

behind, such as those pertaining to contemplation and prayer. On the topic of prayer, Waldron refers to a letter that Merton wrote to the Sufi Abdul Aziz, in which he explains his method of praying:

Strictly speaking I have a very simple way of prayer. It is centered entirely on attention to the presence of God and to His will and His love. That is to say it is centered on faith by which alone we can know the presence of God... it is a matter of adoring Him as invisible and infinitely beyond our comprehension, and realizing Him as all... My prayer is then a kind of praise rising up out of the center of Nothing and silence (Merton 1985:63-64).

Waldron, in preparation for the retreat, read and compared the work of many other poets to that of Merton. These poets included T.S. Eliot,¹⁸ Rilke, Francis Thompson, Lorca, R.S. Thomas, Robinson and many others. Although Merton wrote quite a vast number of poems, Waldron eventually reduced his selection to twelve poems, of which copies would be handed out to the retreatants for discussion. His selection of poems covers different aspects of Merton's life and offers a good introduction to Merton as a poet. Besides comparing Merton to other poets, Waldron also draws comparisons between Merton and other fine writers. Henry Nouwen is included amongst these authors. Waldron is of the opinion that Merton is the more profound philosopher of the two. Both men were '...complicated in regard to their need for human contact' (2002:64). Merton's need for solitude, however, was greater than his need for people. On the other hand, Nouwen craved other people's affirmation, which eventually led him into the ministry of teaching, preaching, and spiritual direction.

Waldron's honesty and openness in *Walking with Thomas Merton* is striking. He shares his experiences pertaining to the preparation and hosting of the retreat with his reader in a way that is captivating and refreshing. Even his deepest emotions are not spared. The reader is really caught up in the journey, and literally breathes a sigh of relief as the retreat is concluded successfully. The real value of *Walking with Thomas Merton*, however, lies in the fact that it offers an excellent introduction to Merton's myriad works.

¹⁸ Similarly to Merton, T.S. Eliot also experienced a death of the old self and a rebirth of the new. Both men found rebirth within Christianity.

2.2.4 *Thomas Merton: An Introduction (Shannon 2005)*

Thomas Merton: An Introduction is an excellent overview of Merton's life, writings and spirituality. The renowned author, William H. Shannon,¹⁹ held the position of professor in the religious studies department at Nazareth College, New York, was a priest of the Diocese of Rochester, New York, and is a respected Merton scholar. In this must-read book, Shannon not only introduces the reader to Merton, but also provides a framework on how to study Merton. He also sheds light on the question as to why Merton is still relevant today.

Shannon offers four excellent chapters – all essential material for any serious reader of Merton. In Chapter One, Shannon covers Merton's life story in a concise manner. Chapter Two is devoted to the question: 'Is Merton For Today, Or Is He Passé?' In Chapter Three, Shannon gives a broad overview of the Merton Gallery, covering the numerous topics Merton wrote about, including nonviolence and Zen. Shannon concludes, in Chapter Four, with a proposal of 'What To Read First'.²⁰ One of the challenges that readers often experience in reading Merton is the fact that he wrote on such a vast number of topics, which makes it difficult to follow his train of thought, with the result that readers are often overwhelmed by his expansive repertoire. Merton's writing literally branched off in different directions, owing to the way in which his thinking and spirituality evolved as he matured. This well-structured book by one of the most recognised Merton scholars, not only offers a section on specific themes as a useful synthesis of Merton's spiritual growth, but also offers a reading plan – a compass, as it were, to serve as a guide for studying Merton.

2.2.5 *Becoming Who You Are (Martin 2006)*

This short book is a meditation based on Merton's view of the *true self*. Martin begins with a short biography of Thomas Merton.²¹ Martin makes specific reference to Basil Pennington, who was himself a Trappist monk and abbot, who wrote the following about Merton: 'His whole life

¹⁹William H. Shannon is the founding president of the International Thomas Merton Society (ITMS) and a recognised scholar of Merton. Shannon is the general editor of the published Merton letters and author of many books on spirituality.

²⁰ The sequence is as follows: *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948), *The Sign of Jonas* (1961), *No Man Is an Island* (2002), *New Seeds of Contemplation* (1961), *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966), *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (1968) and *The Asian Journal* (1968).

²¹ No details on the biography are provided here, as Chapter 3 of the present work provides a detailed chronology of Merton's life.

was a quest for freedom – the freedom to be open to the wonderful reality that God has made, to God himself, to what is’ (cited in Martin 2006:5).

The concise biography on Merton is followed by a chapter on the circumstances that led Martin to religious life and the priesthood. In many ways, Martin’s path mirrored Merton’s. At the age of twenty-seven, Martin, bogged down in the corporate world, was ‘...miserable: overworked, stressed, lonely, and feeling trapped’ (2006:14). His life was empty and devoid of any meaning. After having watched a programme on Merton, which was broadcast on the local PBS television station, Martin read Merton’s *Seven Storey Mountain*; and the idea that perhaps the religious life was also his own vocation began to take root.

In chapter five, Martin introduces the reader to another eminent writer in the field of spirituality, namely Henry Nouwen.²² Martin highlights four important elements that attract so many readers to Merton and Nouwen’s writing: Firstly, it is the honesty in their writing about their daily lives that is so refreshing and interesting to many people. Secondly, both Merton and Nouwen made their fair share of mistakes, which they were not afraid to admit. Thirdly, both men remained seekers throughout their lives. Fourthly, both Merton and Nouwen struggled with the demands of chastity. My reason for highlighting these four elements found in Merton’s and Nouwen’s writing is twofold: Firstly, the humanness of both men is thereby brought to the fore; and secondly, these elements teach the importance of knowing ourselves to the extent of being at peace with our own shortcomings, in order to fully discover our own true selves. Both Merton and Nouwen were masters in this regard.

Martin’s main thesis in *Becoming Who You Are* is that very few men in history have written about the personal *path to sanctity* as beautifully as Thomas Merton. Martin summarizes Merton’s message regarding sanctification as follows: ‘God has made each of us uniquely ourselves, and holiness consists of discovering the true self, the person we are before God, accepting that person, and becoming a saint in the process’ (Martin 2006:58). Martin draws a rather interesting comparison between Merton and Jesus of Nazareth by speculating about the self-knowledge Jesus possessed, or in other words, how Jesus came to understand his true self.

²² Martin and Nouwen met once while Merton was a monk at the Abbey of Gethsemani.

Martin toys with the question: When did Jesus achieve the ultimate level of self-knowledge? As a child? During his adolescence? Or at the time of his coming of age, as marked by his *bar mitzvah*? Unfortunately, the Gospel writers say nothing about the life of Jesus between the time he was discovered teaching in the temple at age twelve, and the beginning of his public ministry at the age of about thirty. Martin speculates on the importance of this period by stating: ‘Yet this period, often called the “hidden life,” was undoubtedly crucial in the growing self-awareness and maturation of Jesus’ (Martin 2006:62).

2.2.6 *Signs of Peace: The Interfaith Letters of Thomas Merton (Apel 2006)*

During the last decade of his life, Thomas Merton corresponded with many people around the globe about religion and interfaith understanding. In fact, few writers, past or present, have given us greater insight with respect to effecting reconciliation among representatives of the world religions than Thomas Merton. By initiating contact with figures such as Zen scholar D.T. Suzuki, Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh and Rabbi Abraham Heschel, he sought to expand his understanding of other faiths and to find like-minded friends who might share his dream of a global community of the spirit.

Apel (2006:1) comments as follows on Merton’s capability and love for letter writing: ‘Thomas Merton was a consummate letter writer. Although he sometimes complained of having to write too many letters, he loved to send and receive personal correspondence’. Apel also refers to another leading Merton scholar, William H. Shannon, who spent several hours working through Merton’s marvelous literary legacy, and who reminds us that the Merton letters almost rival his published works in their volume and importance:

The scope and variety of his correspondence are staggering. He wrote to poets and heads of state; to popes, to bishops, priests, religious and lay people; to monks, rabbis, and Zen masters; to Catholics, Protestants, Anglicans, Orthodox Christians, and Jews; to literary agents and publishers; to theologians and spiritual activists; to old friends and young ones too (cited in Apel 2006:3).

Apel discusses a variety of letters that Merton sent to correspondents around the globe. Every chapter, except the first chapter, which focuses on Merton as a letter-writer – focuses on the exchange between Merton and one of his interfaith correspondents and identifies a theme

common to both Merton and his correspondent. Apel's thematic approach affords the reader an opportunity to engage with the topics, all of which are important for interreligious dialogue and peacemaking, in a kind of *lectio divina*. The reader is invited to share in the reflective experiences of Merton and his correspondents. Included at the end of each chapter is a complete text of a significant letter sent by Merton to the interfaith friend discussed in that chapter. The addition of the letters allows us to experience Merton in his own voice, uninterrupted and without commentary or editorial intrusion. Every chapter in the book comprises an invitation for us to think deeply and prayerfully about Merton's call for us to become signs of peace.

As its title indicates, this book is about Merton's *interfaith* letters. These letters, in particular, clearly demonstrate that Merton knew that peace and interreligious understanding go hand in hand. His correspondence indeed provides us with a window through which to view his intimate self. His correspondence with the world-renowned Zen scholar, D.T. Suzuki, is of particular interest to the present study; and a careful consideration of their conversations will be presented in later chapters. Thomas Merton remains alive to future generations of readers in his correspondence. 'Merton's voice can almost be heard as he responds to the immediate concern of a correspondent, or as he thinks aloud with the reader of his letter about an observation he wants to share' (Apel 2006:8).

2.2.7 The Limits of Thomas Merton's Understanding of Buddhism (Keenan 2007)

Keenan begins by sharing with the reader a small, yet important part of his own life experience. Shortly after the death of his father, still feeling dissatisfied with the life prospects before him, he entered the St Charles Borromeo Seminary in Philadelphia in order to study for the diocesan priesthood. It was here that he was introduced to Merton's work. The young boy of fifteen who had just lost his father and felt that he had nothing to live for was able to identify closely with Merton. Noticing the simplicity of Merton's spirituality, Keenan consulted his spiritual director, and asked why he was required to learn history, Latin and Greek, while Merton seemed to bypass all of that in order to enter deeply into the darkness of God. Keenan's spiritual director pointed out that '...while monks were fine, we diocesan priests actually worked for the Kingdom in the give-and-take of the world...' (Keenan 2007:119). Keenan, at the age of seventeen, accepted this answer, but continued to read Merton's writings on spiritual life.

On one occasion during Keenan's eight years of training, in scripture class, his lecturer mentioned a book he had just read called *Zen Catholicism* (1994), a book written by Dom Aelred Graham.²³ O'Rourke, Keenan's lecturer, commented that the volume might be 'the most important book of the year' (2007:119). Keenan read the book and was surprised to find that the Zen practices that Dom Aelred applied in order to deepen his spirituality were the same practices that Merton prized so much: silence, quietness, withdrawal, peace and transformation. It was during these years that Merton became interested in Buddhism, studied it and wrote about it. Keenan reflects on Merton as follows:

Merton began to stretch our minds. He was not in fact the first to write about Buddhism in the west, for of course there had been many scholars of Buddhism and some Zen teachers long before him. But they were either far off in Japan or Europe or too scholarly for easy access. Here, as in his other trail-blazing efforts to limn a path of engaged contemplation, Merton embodied the new openness of Vatican II. He was our light-bearer (2007:120-121).

Following Suzuki, whom Merton regarded as the authoritarian figure on Zen during the sixties, Merton presents the heart of Zen as a wordless experience of pure consciousness, beyond intellectual approach and yet present at the centre of one's being. Merton echoes Suzuki in explaining that 'Zen is therefore not a religion, not a philosophy, not a system of thought, not a doctrine, not an ascesis... The truth is, Zen does not even lay claim to be "mystical"' (Merton 1967:12). Keenan remarks that '...based as his works are on D.T. Suzuki's Zen teachings, I think we must recognize that we cannot look to Merton for any adequate understanding of Buddhism. Because of the limitation of sources available to him in his time, his understanding of Zen Buddhism as presented for example in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* and in *Mystics and Zen Masters* was imperfect and incomplete' (Keenan 2007:123).

Keenan continues his analysis by cogently arguing that both Suzuki and Merton were not very good guides to Zen history, or even to the actual Zen practice of their time and place. Keenan quotes Robert Sharf (2002): 'Suzuki wrote voluminously but idiosyncratically. And importantly, he did not have Zen credentials or the weight of any Zen institution behind him' (cited in Keenan 2007:124). Keenan continues:

²³ Dom Aelred Graham was a Benedictine monk and writer.

It was precisely this version of Zen Buddhism as presented by D.T. Suzuki in the 1960s that Merton (along with many others at the time) accepted as normative: That beyond all the words of all the traditions there lies the silent experience of awakening, of abandoning oneself to the ocean of God. Words are not important, only the practice that leads to silence is important (2007:126).

Keenan criticizes Suzuki for championing the silence of ultimate awakening while denigrating the worldly conventions of the teachings and engagements of the tradition. ‘His Zen was just too pure and too naïve, too simplistic...’ (2007:126). Keenan points out that Zen is not the bare and pure experience of the ultimate that is beyond all words and doctrines – and that the ‘Zen notion that one must go beyond doctrine is itself a Zen doctrine!’ (2007:127). Keenan adds that Zen is indeed a school of Buddhism, one among many. In a chapter entitled *The Present Dialogue with Buddhism*, Keenan laments the fact that the Zen that Merton encountered in the writings of Suzuki had been styled to catch the attention of the western world and that ‘...the strategy for breaching interreligious barriers functions only by retreating from any attempt at insight or rational judgment, and thus from any shared effort to cross-fertilize our traditions’ (Keenan 2007:127).

Keenan finally suggests that we have much more information at our disposal nowadays and therefore have the ability to go much deeper than Merton could due to the shallow level that the authorities offered in his time. ‘Buddhism is not just the pure experience of awakening, but also the entire complex of words and ideas that make up its many traditions. Its varied teachings and practices are meant to lead one to awakening, embodying as they do an entire cultural heritage with all its literature and all its architecture and all its liturgies as expressed among men and women through Asia and in the latter days even in the West’ (2007:128). As an alternative, Keenan suggests that we ‘...ground ourselves, not in primal experiences, but in our histories, to embark upon a deep and detailed engagement with other traditions, not just a heady and warming intermingling’ (2007:130).

Keenan noticed early on Merton’s very simplistic spirituality. Whether it is this simplicity, more than any other factor, that drew Merton to Zen would be mere speculation; but Merton certainly did have similar practices in mind when it came to the practical side of his spirituality: silence,

quietness, withdrawal, peace and transformation. Keenan is very critical when it comes to Merton's knowledge of Zen, perhaps too critical. The mere fact that Merton did not have the same amount of information at his disposal as we have today, does not mean that Merton did not have a full grasp of the depth of the experience and the transformational power of Zen. After all, it is his deep understanding of the above that enabled him to have meaningful discussions with many religious people from the east, including the Dalai Lama. In Keenan's defense however, language, history and culture play an integral role in one's religious and mystical experiences. Merton was probably also aware of this fact and perhaps that is the reason why he remained faithful to the Trappists and Christianity.

2.2.8 Thomas Merton's Contemplation: Rarefied Emblem of Being Human and Living in Mystery (Crider 2008)

In an article first published online on 16 March 2009, Glen Crider demonstrates the importance of Merton's understanding of contemplation, which, according to Crider, '...embodies the rare combination of ancient, medieval, modern and post-modern sensibilities' (Crider 2008:592). Crider views Merton as an emblem of what it means to be fully engaged in the mystery of life as a human being, and points out that '...Merton became more and more open to the world itself – as a place of mystery and wonder' (2008:592). Crider begins his article by referring to Merton's book, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation* (2003). This book began as a revision of an earlier work that was published by Merton in 1948: *What is Contemplation?* In the re-worked book, the reader becomes acquainted with a much more 'mature' Merton. Merton made drastic changes to the original book, and explains why he did so:

A lot of water has gone under the bridge since 1948. How poor were all my oversimplified ideas – and how mistaken I was to make contemplation only part of life. For a contemplative [one's] whole life is contemplation (cited in Crider 2008:593).²⁴

²⁴Square brackets are mine.

*The Inner Experience*²⁵ represents Merton's most robust account of contemplation. Crider indicates that, like many other mystics, Merton found it difficult, if not impossible, to use the medium of language to express the inexpressible.

Crider lists two key areas regarding Merton's approach to writing about contemplation. The first is encountered in Merton's standard contemplative writings that '...reveal a Christian epistemology that is largely ancient and medieval...' (Crider 2008:595), while the second pertains to Merton's focus on the modern seeker who embraces the limits of language, for example through art or social action, but mainly through solitude. One aspect of Crider's approach lies in his emphasis on Merton's use of multiple ways for understanding contemplation. Another aspect is his demonstration of how Merton's contemplative writings compare to strands within the development of Western theological and philosophical thought that necessarily involved self-knowledge and knowledge of God.²⁶

According to Crider, Merton had the key to understanding what it means to integrate life into a single whole. This understanding has much to do with recognizing oneself as inherently integrated within one's own culture and with other individuals. This interpretation of 'self' is a radical challenge both to Western individualism and to common misconceptions about the contemplative life as a solitary state of interiority. This may comprise one reason why Merton was so attracted to Zen, since the 'real self' in Zen seeks nothing beyond its immediate experience (2008:596).²⁷ Zen makes no claims to be supernatural or mystical. It is therefore anti-metaphysical in nature. The mature Merton's interest in Zen is significant, because Zen stands in stark contrast to the ancient and medieval metaphysical traditions reflected in Merton's standard contemplative writings.

²⁵What makes *The Inner Experience* unique is that, in addition to being a 'bridge' between the early and later Merton, it is also the final contemplative writing bearing Merton's approval as of 1968. The value of the work is that it reflects Merton's mature position on contemplation, one that does not limit itself to writing about contemplation (Crider 2008:594).

²⁶ As Crider states: 'The overall "picture" of Merton's enquiries into contemplation embodies what he understood as the very essence of being human. Understanding this essence is necessary for knowing what Merton means by "contemplation"' (Crider 2008:595).

²⁷*The Inner Experience* uses Zen language to critically assess Western language about the 'self'. (See Chapter 6 for a more elaborate discussion on Zen and the influence it had on Merton's life.)

Crider illustrates Merton's frequent recourse to Augustine,²⁸ particularly in terms of the latter's Platonic-Christian portrayal of the relationship between God and humanity. Plato was one of the first philosophers to argue that reality is primarily ideal or abstract. With his 'theory of forms,' he asserted that ultimate reality is not found in objects and concepts that we experience on earth. Thus, there is a dualism between matter and the immaterial – a divide between God and the human being. Plato's thought, however, allowed for the possibility of ascension to God, in terms of the human ability to transcend the material world in order to experience oneness with God. Furthermore, Crider points out that Merton's language throughout his standard contemplative works is decidedly Augustinian, for example his explicit references to 'Christian love,' 'love,' 'Trinity,' 'faith,' 'faith in Christ,' 'knowledge of God,' 'God,' 'purity of heart,' 'the Spirit,' 'soul' etc.

With regard to the contemporary seeker, Crider states that Merton envisions the modern contemplative as one who can '...profit from being aware of the importance of pre-modern contemplatives' (Crider 2008:598), for example, the Desert Fathers, Pseudo-Dionysius, St Bernard of Clairvaux, Meister Eckhart, St John of the Cross and St Teresa of Avila (Crider 2008:598). These figures, according to Crider, represent aspects of the diverse theological tradition of the 'inner way' that have greatly influenced the development of Western Christian thought. Merton's use of pre-modern monasticism and mysticism builds on Augustine's explorations of self-knowledge in a way that anticipates Merton's interest in Zen.

Crider sums up by concluding that Merton, in the light of his contemplative life, is an example of one who 'seeks after God', and that Merton remains a great 'awakener' for those who choose to attune themselves to his life and work.

²⁸ Augustine of Hippo (13 November 354 – 28 August 430), also known as Saint Augustine or Saint Austin, was an early Christian theologian and philosopher whose writings were very influential in the development of Western Christianity and Western philosophy. He was bishop of Hippo Regius (present-day Annaba, Algeria) located in the Roman province of Africa. Augustine is viewed as one of the most important Church Fathers in the West. Among his most important works are *City of God* and *Confessions*, which continue to be read widely today. Augustine of Hippo - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. 2014. *Augustine of Hippo - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*. [ONLINE] Available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Augustine_of_Hippo. The *Confessions*, without any doubt, also had a great influence on Merton's writing.

2.2.9 Merton's Dialogue with Zen: Pioneering or Passé? (Dadosky 2008)

Dadosky has made a notable contribution to the field of Merton studies with this article. He refers to the then recently published *Merton & Buddhism* (2007) and, more particularly, to Keenan's (2007) article, reviewed above, which, he avers, warrants further consideration and reflection. Dadosky then discusses Merton's reliance on Suzuki, the recent critique of Suzuki by various scholars, as well as the issue of unmediated experience; and he makes some comments on a possible method for interreligious dialogue.

'A rich and substantial correspondence existed between Merton and Suzuki between the years 1959 to 1966. A formal dialogue between the two took place in print in Merton's *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*' (Dadosky 2008:54). Dadosky remarks that Merton was not only well aware of the fact that there is a complex system of doctrines in Zen – he also knew very well that his understanding of Zen was incomplete. In concurrence with Dadosky, it could be conceded that Keenan may be correct in his assertion that we should not rely on Merton for an adequate understanding of Buddhism. As Dadosky points out: '... if Merton were alive today he would probably agree' (2008:55). 'While his knowledge of Buddhism may have been pioneering for its time, and in some ways it might be now passé, what is truly going forward in Merton's engagement with Buddhism is his success at interreligious dialogue' (2008:55).

On the basis of a critique of the arguments of both Roger Corless (1989) and Robert Sharf (2002), Dadosky formulates an opinion on Zen, on Suzuki's real contribution to Zen, and also on Suzuki's true understanding of Christianity:

...it would seem that the polemical hermeneutic of suspicion that is being leveled against Suzuki and the Kyoto School is at times as reductive as their critics accuse the supposed 'Zen nationalists' of being. But the question remains, do Keenan, Corless, and Sharf have some legitimate criticisms of this Suzuki conception of Zen? (2008:62).

In light of the above an in reference to Bernard Joseph Francis Lonergan (1904-1984), Canadian Jesuit priest, philosopher, and theologian, Dadosky goes on to say: 'Thus, Keenan is perhaps correct to suggest that Merton's understanding of Buddhism must be kept in context' (2008:63). Dadosky continues:

In his critique of Merton and Buddhism, Keenan asserts that the question of pure experience remains an open question. While this may be true, I do not think he understands that for Lonergan the 'pure' of pure experience means something very specific. When he uses the expression 'pure pattern of experience' he does not mean that it is pure in the sense that the experience is free of all socially inhabited/constructed meanings. He means it is pure in the sense that in those moments the subject's consciousness is free of instrumentality, e.g. the differentiations of common sense (ordinary living) and theory—viewing the world through a scientific *Weltanschauung*. Nor does this type of experience necessarily pertain to religious-mystical experience. It occurs in the aesthetic pattern of experience and regularly in the fecund imaginings of the artist. On this point, I would agree with Keenan who suggests that these experiences occur in the ordinary events of everyday living (2008:63).

In the last section of his article, Keenan raises important questions about interreligious dialogue. I concur with Dadosky, who is of the opinion that Merton's lasting contribution, and therefore a key component of his legacy, is to be found in this area rather than in his knowledge of Buddhism. Dadosky, however, rightfully points out that dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism does not enjoy the same priority that is currently accorded to dialogue between Christianity and some of the other world religions. Although the Council of Vatican II (1962-1965) represented a paradigmatic shift in the Church's self-understanding and attitude to other religions, the method for a dialogue, which the official church has yet to fully realize, is yet to be implemented (Dadosky 2008:69). On this point, Dadosky and Keenan are correct. There is a need for a method of interreligious dialogue, although this mere fact has also placed the Church in quite a precarious position. The question that now arises is: When does the Church evangelize and when does it dialogue? Also, how does the Church keep its identity in such dialogue? As Dadosky states: '...there is a tension between proclamation and dialogue but they need not be mutually opposed. Moreover, dialogue is now considered to be a part of the mission of the Church' (2008:70). Dadosky, in looking toward Merton's life example, attempts to answer some of the questions raised above:

Thomas Merton's life example gives us a clue as to how dialogue can be successfully carried out. In this way, Merton was significant for two reasons. He was a pioneer by successfully carrying on dialogue before it was fashionable. Secondly, Merton was successful at it, perhaps more successful than any other major Christian thinker. Merton exemplifies the method of mutual self-mediation.

Of course, the latter is technical language; the more descriptive language of his methodology could be called friendship (2008:70).

It is indeed through the spirit of friendship that Christian and non-Christian can enter into dialogue and get to know one another – but also become acquainted at a deeper level. As Dadosky states: ‘Keenan and Sharf are correct in that we should not ignore or reduce the differences to “sameness”. Dialogue should preserve the difference’ (2008:71).

In concluding his article, Dadosky offers some final considerations, which warrant a response. Firstly, the concern that Thomas Merton’s knowledge of Buddhism was compromised because of his reliance on Suzuki seems to have arisen mainly as a result of a residual effect of the backlash against the scholarship of Suzuki (2008:71). This is evidenced, in part, by the fact that Keenan does not raise similar objections regarding Merton’s knowledge of Tibetan Buddhism or the Chinese expression of the Rinzai School, as exemplified by the Vietnamese monk, Thich Nhat Hanh. Regardless of what one thinks of Suzuki, his influence on the West’s perception of Zen was significant.

Secondly, religious traditions develop dialectically throughout history. Therefore, Keenan’s claim that we cannot rely on Merton for knowledge of Buddhism is not really fair. Any serious student of Buddhism, including Merton himself, would recognize that our knowledge develops and continues to develop. It is even possible that Suzuki may, in fact, represent a new movement in the development of Zen; if this is the case, history will ultimately determine its significance.

Finally, together with Dadosky, we must recognize that, for all their faults and limitations, Suzuki and Merton were cosmopolitan citizens of the world. In our current context of inter-religious struggles and the dramatic influence of fundamentalism, they can serve as examples of people who were earnestly trying to understand each other. Their contributions to the study of Zen may be incomplete – or even wrong – in some instances; nevertheless, it would seem that their friendship provides a model for interreligious relating, from which we would do well to learn (Dadosky 2008:73).

2.2.10 Thomas Merton: Twentieth-Century Wisdom for Twenty First-Century Living (Dekar 2011)

This book offers a comprehensive summary of Merton's concerns pertaining to the ills of our world, ranging from war, the disregard for matters related to ecology, and technological idolatry, to the desperate need for monastic renewal and interfaith dialogue. Dekar offers a manifesto for the future of the Christian community, which he envisages as being renewed by contemplative communities that have the ability to connect monastic wisdom with the challenges we are facing in today's society. According to Dekar, the answer lies in the creation of *communities of love* in which the balance of our inner and outer lives can be restored.

Dekar begins with a concise introduction focusing on Merton, and then swiftly moves on to monastic renewal. Merton was part of the Cistercian Religious Order.²⁹ For twenty of Merton's twenty-seven years as a monk at Gethsemani, James Fox was abbot of the monastery. Shortly after Fox was elected in 1948, Merton began to correspond with him. During the time that Fox was in Citaux, France, attending the annual meeting of representatives of Cistercian houses from around the world, Merton wrote a letter containing three proposals regarding monastic life that he hoped Gethsemani would adopt (Dekar 2011:36). In the first proposal, Merton highlighted the need to strengthen theological training at the monastery. Merton desired Gethsemani to be a '...center of really first-class studies in spiritual theology, especially Cistercian Fathers and mystical theology...' (2011: 36). Secondly, Merton wanted to create a place for the specific purpose of enabling monks (and nuns) to get away for retreats, solitude and silence. 'He suggested that it would be especially valuable for those with heavy jobs, guest masters, cellarers, cooks, priors and even abbots' (2011:37). Finally, Merton recommended the appointment of a retreat master.

²⁹ The Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (also known as "Trappists") is a Roman Catholic contemplative religious order, consisting of monasteries of monks and monasteries of nuns. It is part of the larger Cistercian family which traces its origin to 1098. Cistercians follow the Rule of St Benedict, and so are part of the Benedictine family as well. Cistercians dedicate their lives to seeking union with God, through Jesus Christ, in a community of sisters or brothers.

Available at: http://www.ocso.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=47&Itemid=57&lang=en.

After being appointed to the position of master of novices, Merton introduced a new educational approach that was experiential and participatory rather than catechetical. Dekar comments as follows on Merton's educational contribution: 'He covered a staggering breadth of subjects including the rich heritage of monasticism, literature, music, philosophy, science and the world's religions' (2011:39). Merton himself wrote: 'The monastery should by no means be merely an enclave of eccentric and apparently archaic human beings who have rebelled against the world of science ... We need to form monks of the twentieth century who are capable of embracing in their contemplative awareness not only theology ...[but also] the modern world of science and revolution' (Merton 1979:217).

Merton argued that the goal of monastic formation is to acquire a heart that knows God, not just a heart that loves God or communes with God but one that knows God. Merton's basic understanding was that monastic living should enable people to ground themselves in God's love. He saw his own destiny in life as living toward a final integration. This would be a total, complete and unconditional yes to God. For Merton, the most important means to enter into the full mystery of life in God was prayer (Dekar 2011:47).

Besides a well-conceived and informative chapter on monastic renewal, Dekar also includes a highly insightful chapter on Merton's thought on technology. Regarding the responsibility of the monk in contemporary society, Merton wrote in 1966: 'It is the peculiar office of the monk in the modern world to keep alive the contemplative experience and to keep the way open for modern technological people to recover the integrity of their own inner depths' (Merton 1966:284). Merton frequently focused on the topic of technology; and his writings in this regard proved to be prophetic. He insisted that there is something profoundly wrong with anything that could lead to the destruction of millions of people. Dekar addresses the question: 'What specifically concerned Merton about technology?' by referring to three hypothetical *baskets*. The first basket represents Merton's belief that technology threatened human survival. The second basket pertains to Merton's warning that an uncritical embrace of engineering and technology distorts our true humanity. 'Merton believed that, by regarding engineers and technologists as arbiters of the future, humankind had ceased fully to love God, self and neighbor' (Dekar 2011:98). Merton wrestled with the extent to which technology distorts our true humanity. He was concerned that technology would prevent individuals from discovering their own true selfhood. In his own

words: ‘Our real journey in life is interior: it is a matter of growth, deepening and of an ever greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts’ (Merton 1993, cited in Dekar 2011:99). Merton did not think that a technological society would be able to produce faith. According to him, prayer and contemplation would be required for that. As a third basket of concern, Merton thought that technology had become ‘...for many a distraction, or divertissement, the function of which is to stoke our false self through acquiring money, satisfying our appetite for status or justifying society’ (2011:100). Merton was, however, not entirely against all forms of technology. He had a high appreciation for technologies that contributed to his life and added joy to the lives of others. He valued the appropriate use of technology, a position he shared with Gandhi.³⁰ Merton was comfortable with simple technology and even used the technology at his disposal to distribute his written vision of a better world. His message to society was an exhortation to be alert and to beware of the misuse of technology. Merton invites us to ‘...consider carefully the choices before us, to use technology mindfully to meet basic human needs...’ (2011:113). Dekar believes that ‘Merton was prescient in calling for the creation of communities of love’ in order to overcome the many potentially disastrous effects that technology holds in store for communities (2011:191). He proposes that Merton held the solution for overcoming many of the challenges faced by society, namely the formation of *communities of love* that would share in the earth’s abundance, care for one another and enjoy the simple things in life.

Dekar seeks to ‘...amplify Merton’s voice in relation to several values essential to the future of life on earth’ (2011:198). Dekar selects certain themes from Merton’s writings, such as monastic renewal, the use of technology, care of the earth, war and the building of communities of love. Dekar explores many of the themes that Merton was addressing, and suggests that Merton’s overall aim was to lay the foundations for a new monastic vision – one that would enable the building of communities of love. A large portion of Dekar’s book is devoted to monastic renewal

³⁰ To look at Gandhi in the context of technology is to understand that he was a man who had his doubts on modernism, yet managed to look beyond that. Gandhi was not against modernization. He was against worshipping technology as a lord of salvation. As he thought salvation can never be brought from outside but attained internally. When one’s soul is intoxicated by greed, Gandhi thought technology inevitably represents it. For more information on Gandhi’s position, see: <http://ajithanmotherearth.blogspot.com/2012/07/gandhi-on-technology.html>.

and technology. Certain other important themes from Merton's life and writings hardly receive any attention. To mention just one example, Dekar has very little to say about contemplation, a very important aspect of Merton's spirituality.

2.2.11 *The Making of a Saint: A Psychological Study of the Life of Thomas Merton (Bragan 2011)*

It is well-known that during his developmental years, Merton had little in the way of nurture, stability or security. His mother died when he was still very young; and Merton and his younger brother were left in the hands of their painter father, who moved around a great deal and often did not know how to take proper care of his two sons. When the boys' father passed away during Merton's adolescent years, Merton fell victim to a sense of extreme alienation and despair. This despair would take him years to overcome.

In his analysis and reflections concerning Merton, Bragan poses a number of questions, such as: 'How could someone who had been given so little by life gain the strength [to] give and do so much?' (2011:xiv). This question is asked in the light of the popular psychological view that a stable, emotionally nourishing childhood is the basis of personal strength. The question therefore pertains to the source of Merton's ultimate strength, which made him want to explore the spiritual side of his life to see if answers could be found there. Merton's 'healing' process directed Bragan to focus on the difference between the self and spirit, thereby ultimately leading him to an enhanced understanding of the interplay that is often found between psychology and spirituality.

Bragan's knowledge of developmental psychology greatly assists him in arriving at a deeper understanding of Merton and the circumstances that caused him to withdraw from society and close himself off in solitary confinement. According to Bragan, what saved Merton from a definite nervous breakdown during his late adolescence, was the relationships he formed during his years at Columbia University, especially his friendship with the poet Robert Lax. While re-reading *The Seven Storey Mountain*, with a view to determining whether Merton's increased strength could be understood in terms of psychological processes alone, Bragan remembered an idea introduced by a group of psychoanalysts. 'These analysts', explained Bragan, 'had started to

concentrate on the self in their work and, in doing so, came to the realization that the essential self cannot exist in a vacuum; that the self needs a special medium in which to grow' (2011:xviii). An in-depth analysis had subsequently enabled the analysts to arrive at a sense of the nature of this special medium, and they termed it the 'selfobject' experience – which, in basic terms, refers to the soil in which the self germinates and grows. Although this 'selfobject' experience is completely subjective, it does relate to an object in the external world, although it is only the inner reflection of that object. It is the experience of the object that matters, not its objectivity; and this inner reflection of special objects provides the soil in which the self comes to life and grows. According to Bragan, '...parents are the most important "selfobjects," and they fulfill that role and function not by being attachment figures or caretakers, but simply by their special presence' (2011:xviii).

In terms of this perspective, the self first comes to life in the light of the mother's eyes. Her empathic reflection awakens and supports the emerging self. The important function of all selfobjects is to provide a mirror in which the child sees her-/himself reflected, thereby enabling the child, in time, to come to know her-/himself. 'Sustained empathic connection with others creates the internal images that are the medium in which the self grows.' Bragan demonstrates how particular experiences were crucial in the life of Merton, in that they helped him to find the inner strength to start the path to self-discovery. In such experiences, the empathic echo from others confirms the self, in the same way that maternal mirroring does; and such experiences can support and strengthen a fragile self. This is why relationships tend to play an important part in the developmental years. Experiences of this type are what fortified Merton during his years at Columbia University. These experiences '....started to firm up his fragile sense of self', ultimately giving him 'the inner strength to be able to enter a monastery' (2011:xix).

Apart from his coverage of aspects of Merton's psychological growth, Bragan also suggests that Merton experienced spiritual growth in that he withdrew from the world to find himself, using religious symbols and 'selfobject' experiences to do so:

...these are merely religious symbols and images, which in themselves have some power, but it is only as they become inner presences – two subjects in one affective union – that their healing power is fully realized. This takes us beyond what can be

understood psychologically and I think this is what happened to Thomas Merton. He transformed the symbols and images that had become so important to him into a living reality in his inner world, into spiritualized “selfobjects,” into absorbing union with Christ, and it allowed the image of “Mother of God” to start to become a reality in the supporting ambiance of the monastery (Bragan 2011:47).

As a result of having gained the inner strength to embark on his spiritual journey, Merton moved back into the world, at first by writing books, but finally by undertaking a journey to Asia, where he felt his spiritual journey reached its culmination. It is in this ‘moving back’ into the world that Merton’s ‘spiritual dimension of his life came to the fore...’ (2011:119). It seems Merton needed to leave the world and embark on an inner journey, in order to find the world again. Bragan writes as follows about this journey:

When we first met him, as a boy, so empty was his inner world that there was no safe place for him there; the external world had to be his home...As his self-disgust spilled over into that world, it added to the evil he saw there, and soon he had nowhere he could safely lay his head. But by removing himself from the world to the safe confines of a monastery, he provided himself with both space and time to cultivate inwardness. Slowly and laboriously and painfully, he did this, needing the idealizations the monastery provided, especially the idealization of God and of Love. As inner strength was gradually gained, the idealization could be relinquished, until, in the end, the idealization of self could go too... Now he could simply ‘be’...in his honest and loving gift of himself to life (2011:119-120).

Bragan, on the relationship between self psychology³¹ and Merton’s understanding of faith and contemplation, points out that ‘...it is right to remark that the ideas of self psychology are entirely congruent with Merton’s understanding of both faith and the process of contemplation, as well as with the understanding of the wholeness of the psyche and the part that language can play and cannot play in the process’ (2011:87).

³¹Self psychology is a school of psychoanalytic theory and therapy created by Heinz Kohut and developed in the United States at the Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis. Self psychology explains psychopathology as being the result of disrupted or unmet developmental needs. Essential to understanding self psychology are the concepts of empathy, self-object, mirroring, idealizing, alter ego/twinship and the tripolar self. Though self psychology also recognizes certain drives, conflicts and complexes present in Freudian psychodynamic theory, these are understood within a different framework. Self psychology - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. 2014. *Self psychology - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*. [ONLINE] Available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self_psychology. Self psychology will be dealt with more comprehensively in Chapter 4, which focuses on Merton’s psycho-spiritual development.

How could a man who had an emotionally deprived and traumatic childhood find the strength later in life to enter a monastery and become a spiritual master? By late adolescence, Merton felt completely alienated and empty inside, and was in a state of spiritual abjection. Yet somehow he managed to find the courage and inner strength that was needed to become a spiritual master. Bragan's psychological study of the life of Thomas Merton gives a psychoanalytic explanation for the increase in strength that Merton experienced during his early manhood; but more than psychology is required to understand his subsequent spiritual growth. Merton's journals display the healing power of Christ, religious symbols, as well as the healing power of writing. Bragan asserts that it was an arduous process for Merton, but also suggests that it was only finally completed when Merton became engaged in a passionate love affair. Only then could his heart be opened to the lost mother of his childhood, and only after that happened could he go out into the world and complete his mission. It is on this point, of Merton's love affair, that Bragan receives the most criticism. In his review on books and articles published on Merton during 2011, Joseph Raab (Belcastro and Raab 2012:206) states the following:

...Bragan's central thesis, that Merton's falling in love with the nurse marked the pinnacle of his spiritual journey, is ultimately reductive and not effectively tied to his broader theme of writing as a means to spiritual maturity. Undoubtedly, Merton's affair is a significant piece of his overall story, but to emphasize it to the extent that Bragan does requires a forced reading. Bragan would certainly arrive at a more substantive understanding of Merton's embrace of the anima if he were to contextualize that embrace in a theological rather than a Jungian and Freudian paradigm.

One could argue that this level of negative criticism is unwarranted since Bragan merely speculates that Merton's relationship with Margie Smith³² was the pinnacle of his psycho-spiritual development. Furthermore, right from the outset Bragan (2011: xxiv, xxv) clearly states his intention in the elaboration of his thesis, namely to '...use psychological understanding to follow what happens in Merton's inner world as he moves towards becoming a monk' (2011:xxiv). Bragan elaborates on the significance of the unfortunate demise of Merton's parents at crucial points in his early life, the impact of certain key relationships on his life, and the importance that Merton attached to Christ and religious symbols. Although Bragan focuses on

³²Margie Smith is the young nurse who treated Merton whilst he was in hospital recovering from a back operation, and with whom he eventually fell in love. She is only referred to as 'M.' in Merton's journals.

these aspects through the lens of self psychology, he makes a strong case for the psychological impact that various life experiences and key relationships (including his relationship with M.) had on Merton's inner growth, both psychologically and spiritually. In general, Bragan contributes to the overall understanding of Merton's life and inner growth.

2.3. Conclusion

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, a vast number of works by and about Merton have already been published. Narrowing these works down to the few that were finally included in this Review was no easy task, owing to the fact that as many aspects of Merton's spirituality as possible had to be included. The focus of the selection leaned slightly towards the more recent works – although some of the 'classics' and even commentary on Merton's poetry were also included. The works that were finally selected cover the salient aspects of Merton's spirituality, namely: *contemplation, spiritual growth, the self versus the Self-concept*, as well as Merton's *interfaith dialogue* (especially with Zen Buddhism). Each of the concerned authors contributed in his own way to the study and understanding of Merton, each using his own point of reference on the basis of which Merton was introduced to the reader.

Chapter 3

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THOMAS MERTON

3.1 Introduction

Through the years, many notable biographies of Thomas Merton have been released, including works such as *Merton: A Biography* (Furlong 1980) and *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Mott 1984). William Shannon also included a well-structured, though short, biography of Merton in *Thomas Merton: An Introduction* (Shannon 2005:5-45). As pointed out in the introduction to the present study, the purpose of this chapter is not to offer a *comprehensive biography* of Merton, nor to present a *psychobiography*,³³ although the latter might well prove to be an intriguing project in itself. Rather, the aim of this study is merely to highlight some of the most significant events that took place in Merton's life, events that shaped the course of his life, contributed to his vocation as a contemplative and spiritual writer, and ultimately influenced his journey through life – and therefore also his spirituality. If a spirituality is very much a 'subjective experience' (uniquely one's own), then biographical details are of considerable importance in the assessment of an individual's spirituality. The historical context of the world within which the individual lives, however, is just as important in the context of his/her spirituality. Materialism, racism and Vietnam characterised America of the 1960s and created the ethos of protest in which the Church found itself. The spirituality of Thomas Merton stands as a Christian response to that world. The socio-political situation in a way formed Merton's inner being. One cannot help but wonder whether Merton, had he not been faced with the above-mentioned world conditions, would have become the political critic he did. Contemplation and all it implies about reality, leads to a perceptive critique when it turns to face the foundational

³³Psychobiography is a field within the realms of psychology/biography that analyzes the lives of historically significant individuals through the use of psychological theory and research. The goal of this particular field is to develop a better understanding of some notable individuals by applying psychological theories to his or her biography, in order to further explain the motives behind some of his or her actions and decisions. Psychobiography - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. 2014. *Psychobiography - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*. [ONLINE] Available at: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychobiography>. [Accessed 09 May 2014]. The field of *psychobiography* is vast, with quite a number of theoretical and analytical approaches that can be applied by scholars. One such theory is the 'Attachment' theory, which could be fruitfully applied in an analysis of the key events in Merton's life, as well as of the reasons why these events influenced him in the way they did. However, an investigation of this nature falls outside of the scope of this dissertation.

illusions of the world one lives in. The wider context within which Merton lived in will become quite evident from the biographical sections of this study.

A number of sources have been used as a background to the investigation of the major events that took place in Thomas Merton's life – each work with its own point of view and framework. In this regard, Furlong points out that somehow, 'through all these points of view, the biographer has to maintain an equilibrium, like the tightrope walker, discovering balance and a kind of truth between all the extremes' (Furlong 1980:xiv). During the 1950s, Merton went through immense psychological development. In the 1960s, this growth seems to have subsided somewhat, without ceasing completely. In this study, I have concentrated mainly on the events that gave shape to Merton's life and therefore contributed to his growth, whether on the emotional, psychological or spiritual level. Many of Merton's struggles in life, especially his striving in the process of becoming a contemplative, were related to the problem of his identity. The life story of Thomas Merton can easily be divided into two almost equal parts: (1) the years before he entered the monastery – from January 31, 1915 to December 9, 1941; and (2) the years in the monastery – from December 10, 1941 to December 10, 1968 (Shannon 2005:5).

3.2 Years before the monastery

3.2.1 The early years

On the last day of January 1915, under the sign of the Water Bearer, in the year of the great war, and down in the shadow of some French mountains on the borders of Spain, I came into the world. Free by nature, in the image of God, I was nevertheless the prisoner of my own violence and my own selfishness, in the image of the world into which I was born (Merton 1948:3).

As Merton wrote these words for the opening paragraph of his autobiography, he possibly had some recollection of Prades in France, the town where he was born. Soon after Merton's birth, the Merton family moved to New York. Merton's brother, John Paul, was born in America on 2 November 1918. Two years later Ruth, Merton's mother, fell terminally ill with stomach cancer and eventually passed away on October 3, 1921. Ruth had brought stability into the Merton household, and her untimely demise left Tom devastated. Furlong, summarising the impact of Ruth's death on Merton's life, states that the 'tragic early death of his mother was, in a sense, the beginning of his travels, since from then on Owen Merton, Thomas's father, began a long search

for a place in which to settle, very often taking Tom with him' (Furlong 1980:14-15). Regarding Merton himself, it also '...in a deeper sense symbolized a loss of a center, of roots, that was to shape the rest of his life' (1980:15). This significant loss in Merton's early life also contributed to his distrust of other people, with the result that he did not allow them to come too close, and therefore missed out on the opportunity to love and be loved (cf: Mott 1984:317-318). It is possible that, owing to the nature of Merton's relationship with Ruth and her passing away when he was so very young, he longed for a quiet, gentle woman in his life; and that this longing reflected an incompleteness within him that would last for many years.³⁴

3.2.2 The European years

Although Owen tried to be a good father to Tom and John Paul, he also desperately wanted to be a distinguished artist and therefore often would take precedence over fatherhood, leaving Tom and John Paul to cope with the after-effects of an absent father while they were left in the care of others, such as their maternal grandparents, Sam ('Pop') and Martha ('Bonnamaman') Jenkins – or even at boarding schools. Merton would later write: 'I realised today after mass what a desperate, despairing childhood I had around the ages of seven – nine, ten when mother was dead and father was in France and Algeria. How much it meant when he came and took me to France. It really saved me' (2005:12).³⁵ The Merton family settled in St Antonin and Owen began making plans to build a house where he hoped to eventually live with his two sons. In the meanwhile, Tom was sent to a French boarding school, the Lycée Ingres in Montauban, about twenty miles southwest of Antonin. The years at the Lycée Ingres were difficult ones for Merton. He often begged his father to take him out of the school. He would later write to Etta Gullick: 'I shall never forget the Lycée: its grimness is in my bones' (Merton 1985:345).³⁶ Shannon (2005:12) points out that young Merton was forced to adapt to difficult circumstances early in life, having to cope with 'tough' and difficult schoolmates, and with the bullying that was a common occurrence at the school. Merton eventually joined the school's literary club, a club for students who wrote novels and critiqued one another's writing. It was a joyous day indeed when, in May of 1928, Merton's father arrived and announced that they were moving to England.

³⁴ Merton refers to this incompleteness in *Vow of Conversation*, an unpublished journal dated 1964-1965.

³⁵ They sailed for France on August 25, 1925 (Shannon 2005:12).

³⁶ Etta Gullick was an English correspondent of Merton.

On his arrival in England, Tom was enrolled at another boarding school: Ripley Court, a school for young boys in Surrey. Tom's aunt Maud Mary (Grierson) Pearce and her husband, Benjamin Pearce, lived close enough for Tom to visit them on weekends. It was during one of these weekends that Tom and Aunt Maud discussed his future. When Tom announced that he wanted to become a novelist, his Aunt responded doubtfully that it was unlikely that he would be able to make a living in that way. Tom replied that possibly he could be a journalist and write for the newspapers. Tom would also spend some weekends with his father's younger sister, his Aunt Gwyn (Gwynedd Merton Trier), who lived in West Horsley. In contrast to Tom's school career in France, the years that he spent at Ripley Court were mostly happy years, with a broader sense of community. It was during this period that formal religious practice became part of his life for the first time.³⁷ It would not be long before Merton was to learn that his father had a malignant tumour on the brain, a fatal situation that would linger on for another year and a half. At age fourteen, Tom began what was to be a three-year stay as a boarder at Oakham, a Public school in Rutland, England, where Merton excelled in many school activities, especially debating, where Merton often found himself on the losing team due to the fact that he often chose the unpopular side of an issue.³⁸ During most of his time at Oakham, Merton was involved in the publication of the school paper, *The Oakhamian*, initially as a writer, but later also as the editor. Thomas frequently wrote poems and articles for this paper and undersigned them with the initials 'T.F.M.' (Shannon 2005:17). It seems that Merton's vocation as a writer was already taking shape. The experience and skill that he acquired at Oakham, through both the debating team and the school paper, would stand him in good stead later on in his writing career. On 18 January 1931 the schoolmaster summoned Merton and informed him of the sad news that his father had passed away. Merton was left an orphan. In the years to come, in an effort to distance himself from the painful emotions pertaining to his loss, he took comfort in his newly-found freedom and became more and more rebellious. Even his Sunday practice was affected: he preferred to remain silent during the recitation of the creed. He lost his faith – he no longer believed in God, and only had one desire in life, namely to be his own person, free from all control and restraints.

³⁷It was there that Tom saw, for the first time, schoolboys kneeling publicly by their beds to recite their night prayers (Shannon 2005:14).

³⁸To cite but one example, Merton argued for co-education at Oakham, at a time when the very thought of such a course of action was anathema in English Public Schools (Shannon 2005:16).

3.2.3 The Columbia days

Columbia, in many ways, was the place where Merton ‘would at last find himself’ (Shannon 2005:23). In January 1935, Merton enrolled as a sophomore at Columbia University in Manhattan. He lived with the Jenkins family in Douglaston and took a train to the Columbia campus each day. Merton’s years at Columbia matured him; and it was here that he discovered Catholicism in a real sense. These years also marked a time in his life when he realised that others were more accepting of him as an individual. Merton also began to develop an interest in Communism, and he briefly joined the Young Communist League. However, the first meeting he attended failed to interest him any further; and he never went back. During the summer break, John Paul returned home from Gettysburg Academy in Pennsylvania. The two brothers spent their summer breaks bonding. When the fall semester arrived, John Paul left to enroll at Cornell University, while Tom returned to Columbia. Tom began working for two school papers, a humorous magazine called *The Jester*, and the *Columbia Review*. Also on the *Jester*’s staff were the poet Robert Lax and the journalist Ed Rice. Lax and Merton became best friends and kept up a lively correspondence until Merton’s death; Rice later founded the Catholic magazine, *Jubilee*, to which Merton frequently contributed essays. In addition, Merton became a member of Alpha Delta Phi that semester, and also joined the campus literary and debating group, known as the Philolexian Society. In October 1935, in protest against Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia, Merton joined a picket of the Casa Italiana. Merton also joined the local peace movement, having taken ‘the Oxford Pledge’ not to support any government in any war that it might undertake. In 1936 both Merton’s grandfather, Samuel Jenkins, and his grandmother, Martha Baldwin Jenkins, passed away. In January 1938, Merton graduated from Columbia with a B.A. in English. After graduation, Merton enrolled for his Masters at the same University and started graduate work in English.

3.2.4 Influences in his life

If one considers the vast amount of literature that Merton produced, one tends to forget that he most probably read even more than what he wrote. Books and other writers’ opinions had a strong influence in Merton’s life and contributed greatly to his journey. ‘It may have been his reading of Etienne Gilson’s *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* that started him on his way’ (Shannon 2005:8). As Shannon (2005:8) further points out, it gave Merton something that no-

one had given him before, an insight into the meaning of God. Through the reading of Gilson, Merton learned that it was even possible to retain one's intellectual integrity while having a belief in God. 'Aldous Huxley's *Ways and Means* may be said to have opened his heart to the possibility of a higher way of life lived at a deeper level of consciousness' (Shannon 2005:8). Merton was still not quite ready for Huxley's suggestion that this higher level of consciousness could be reached through a life of strict discipline; but it was only a matter of time before Merton would become immersed in such discipline. Perhaps even more important than the books that Merton read were the personal influences that came into his life, after he had left England in January 1934. Shannon (2005:8) mentions two teachers at Columbia who both had a significant impact on Merton's life: Mark Van Doren, a distinguished professor of English literature with whom Merton took an 18th-century English literature course, and Daniel Walsh, a part-time teacher of philosophy. Through his contact with these two men, Merton realised the shallowness of the life that he had been living until then.³⁹ There were also other factors that contributed to Merton's decision to become a Catholic. Merton came into contact with, and was influenced by the people at Friendship House in Harlem, a small charity organisation founded by the Baroness de Hueck with the aim of looking after the poor, as well as the Catholic Worker organisation that operated on the Lower East Side of New York City, under the leadership of Dorothy Day. In a letter written almost thirty years after his reception into the church, Merton wrote to Dorothy Day: 'If there was no Catholic Worker and such forms of witness, I would never have joined the Catholic Church' (letter of December 29, 1965, cited in Shannon (2005:9)). During his time at Columbia, a friend of Merton arranged a meeting with Mahanambhrata Brahmachari, a Hindu monk from the University of Chicago who was visiting New York. Merton was very impressed by the man. Seeing that the monk was profoundly centred in God, Merton expected him to recommend his beliefs and religion to him in some manner. Instead, Brahmachari recommended that he reconnect with his own spiritual roots and traditions. He suggested that Merton read *The Confessions of St Augustine* and *The Imitation of Christ*. Although Merton was surprised at the monk's recommendation of Catholic books, he read them both. He also started to pray again regularly.

³⁹Merton kept in touch with both Daniel Walsh and Mark Van Doren, even after he had entered the monastery.

3.2.5 Road to Gethsemani

In August of 1938, Merton went to Corpus Christi Church, which was located near to the Columbia campus on West 121st Street in Morningside Heights. The Mass was foreign to Merton, but he listened attentively. Following this experience, Merton's reading list became increasingly geared toward Catholicism. One evening in September, Merton was reading a book about Gerard Manley Hopkins's conversion to Catholicism and how he became a priest. Suddenly, he was filled with an unshakeable conviction that he, too, should follow such a path. Merton immediately set up a meeting with Fr George Barry Ford to express his desire to become a Catholic. During the next few weeks, Merton studied the catechism, learning the basics of his new faith. On November 16, 1938, Thomas Merton was baptised at Corpus Christi Church and received Holy Communion. Just short of a year later, Merton met with Daniel Walsh to discuss his future. Merton mentioned that he wanted to become a priest. In a way, Merton received the confirmation that he was seeking. They talked about the Benedictines, the Jesuits and the Trappists (Shannon 2005:24). Walsh was especially interested in the Trappists,⁴⁰ or (to use the full title of the order: The Cistercians of the Strict Observance). However, he told Merton that the Trappist life seemed too severe. He suggested that Merton should rather consider joining the Franciscans (Merton 1948:284-289). Shannon remarks that 'Merton, who had a fondness for Saint Francis, decided this was a good idea' (Shannon 2005:24). Walsh gave him a letter of introduction to a friend, Father Edmund Murphy, O.F.M., the director of vocations at the Church of St Francis of Assisi on Thirty-First Street. Merton's interview with Father Edmund went smoothly; and Merton was invited to enter the Franciscan novitiate in August of the following year (1940). However, Merton's sinful past was haunting him, causing him to wonder whether it was actually appropriate for him to join the priesthood at all. He decided that he had to 'come clean' with Father Edmund and tell him everything about his past.⁴¹ As a result Merton was told that he would no longer be able to join the Franciscans. Merton had to send a letter to the provincial in which he withdrew his application.

⁴⁰ The Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (O.C.S.O.: Ordo Cisterciensis Stricterioris Observantiae) is a Roman Catholic religious order of cloistered contemplative monastics who follow the Rule of St Benedict. They have communities of both monks and nuns, commonly referred to as Trappists and Trappistines respectively. Trappists - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. 2014. *Trappists - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*. [ONLINE] Available at: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trappists>. [Accessed 09 May 2014].

⁴¹ Also the fact that Merton fathered a child out of wedlock.

In early August 1940, the month during which he would have entered the Franciscan novitiate, Merton went to Olean, New York, to stay with friends, including Robert Lax and Ed Rice, at a cottage where they had vacationed the summer before. This was a difficult time for Merton, and he wanted to be in the company of friends. Moreover, he now needed a job. In the vicinity was St Bonaventure University, a Franciscan institution that Fr Edmund had told him about. The day after arriving in Olean, Merton went to St Bonaventure for an interview with then-president Fr Thomas Plassman. Fortuitously, there was an opening in the English department; and Merton was hired on the spot. Merton chose St Bonaventure because he still harboured a desire to be a friar. He decided that he could at least live among the monks, even if he could not be one of them. In September 1940, Merton moved into a dormitory on campus. While teaching there, his spiritual life blossomed. In his own way, he was engaging in a kind of lay renunciation of worldly pleasures. In April 1941, Merton went to a retreat which was held during Holy Week at the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani near Bardstown, Kentucky. At once he felt drawn to the place, and he could feel his spirits rising during his stay. Returning to St Bonaventure with Gethsemani on his mind, Merton resumed his teaching. On one occasion, during May 1941, he used his old Vulgate bible, purchased in Italy back in 1933, as a kind of oracle. He resolved that he would randomly select a page and blindly point his finger somewhere, to see whether the text thus selected would yield some sort of sign. On his second attempt, Merton laid his finger on a section of the Gospel of Luke, which states, 'Behold, thou shalt be silent'. Immediately Merton thought of the Cistercians. Although he was still unsure of his qualifications for a religious vocation, he felt that he was being drawn more and more to a specific calling – priesthood.

3.3 Years in the monastery

3.3.1 A new identity

This calling materialised for Merton when, late on the 10th of December 1941, he arrived at the gatehouse of Our Lady of Gethsemani. Brother Matthew (whom he had met during his previous retreat) came down to meet with Merton. He entered the monastic enclosure, filled with mixed emotions, just a few days short of his twenty-seventh birthday. Merton would be a monk of Our Lady of Gethsemani for twenty-seven years, to the day – his accidental death occurring on December 10th, 1968. After spending the first few days in the guesthouse, Merton was accepted as a postulant by Abbot Frederick Dunne on the 13th of December 1941 (the day on which

Hungary and Romania declared war on the United States), and entered into the life of the monastery.

‘It was like walking into the middle ages’ (Shannon 2005:30). The monastery followed the Rule of Saint Benedict,⁴² which the monks of La Trappe applied rigorously. Instead of speaking, the monks communicated via a complex sign language. Merton must have felt like a fish out of water in this new, almost unworldly environment, especially in view of the fact that he was accustomed to talking his way through the world – in fact, he had done so for a living. One can only imagine how challenging such an austere environment must have been to a young man who treasured his individuality so much. Perhaps it was precisely this strictness and order that was needed in Merton’s life in order to ‘ground’ him. In fact, he seems to have enjoyed every minute of it. ‘He embraced the monastic discipline with the same enthusiasm as he had earlier thrown himself into the disordered, aimless pseudo-freedom of his youth’ (Shannon 2005:30). In a way, the monastic environment liberated Merton. In 1966, writing to Robert Menchin on the topic of one’s vocation and changing one’s career, Merton had the following to say:

In religious terms, that is expressed by saying that one believes oneself ‘called’ by God to live a monastic life. Translated into ordinary language, this refers to a deep implosion which may even go against the grain of one’s conscious inclinations. It entails a fight. There is a considerable amount of doubt and resistance, a great deal of questioning, and at times the whole thing seems absurd. Yet you have to push on with it. There is a sense of one’s destiny and identity involved in the struggle (Merton 1994:255).

In Merton’s mind, there was no doubt about his vocation to be a monk, at least not towards the latter part of his life. What was indeed difficult for him, however, was to accept the fact that being a monk might mean that he could no longer write. Writing was part of who Merton was. He needed it as a mechanism to structure his thoughts and express himself. Fortunately, the Father Abbot realised this, and allowed Merton to continue with his ‘other’ vocation in life.

⁴² The Rule of Saint Benedict (Regula Benedicti) is a book of precepts written by St Benedict of Nursia (c.480–547) for monks living communally under the authority of an abbot. Since about the 7th century, it has also been adopted by communities of women. During the 1500 years of its existence, it has become the leading model in Western Christianity for monastic living in community.
Rule of Saint Benedict - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. 2015. *Rule of Saint Benedict - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*. [ONLINE] Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rule_of_Saint_Benedict. [Accessed 15 December 2015].

3.3.2 Rigidity of daily schedule

The rigid daily schedule followed by the monks was in stark contrast to the schedule that the three friends had followed at the cottage in Olean. The monks' daily activities started at 2:00 a.m. At 2:30 a.m., half-an-hour was allocated to personal prayer, followed by Vigils (songs made up of twenty psalms, some canticles and some readings) (Shannon 2005:32). At 4:00 a.m., the priest-monks would say their personal Masses, each assisted by one of the other monks (Shannon 2005:32). The rest would attend a communal Mass. Then came fifteen minutes of thanksgiving. Next, the monks had time for personal prayer until 5:30 a.m., when they would return to the chapel for the canonical hour of prime.⁴³ After prime, the monks gathered for chapter, where the abbot would speak to them, generally on issues pertaining to the monks or the monastery as a whole. The monks would then go to the dormitory to make their beds, after which they would enjoy a cup of coffee and two slices of dry bread in the refectory.

After breakfast, there was an hour for reading. Being such a passionate reader, Merton treasured this time, which he spent reading the works of the early Fathers of the Church, as well as the Cistercian Fathers of the eleventh century. At 7:45 a.m., the monks returned to the chapel for the office of terce, followed by the high Mass. This was followed by the office of sext and then two hours of manual labour. Although this was also Merton's schedule in the beginning, he was soon granted permission to perform his writing during this allocated two-hour period. After their morning work, the monks returned to the chapel for the examen of conscience. Lunch followed – the one meal during which the monks could eat as much as they wanted, although the choice of food was limited.⁴⁴ After lunch, the office of none was conducted, followed by a period of rest. After siesta, there would be two more hours of manual work in the afternoon, followed by vespers at 4:30. After a short period of quiet prayer, a small meal was served, after which the monks would assemble for compline, the final office of the day. Compline (usually conducted at around 7:30 p.m.) was concluded with the singing of the *Salve Regina*.⁴⁵ The monks then

⁴³The daily prayer of the monks comprised a number of hours: matins, lauds, prime, terce, sext, none, vespers and compline. 'Hour' in this usage does not mean a sixty-minute period of time. Prime, terce, sext, none and compline lasted for about ten minutes each. Lauds (morning prayer) and vespers (evening prayer) continued for about half-an-hour. Matins was a bit longer (Shannon 2005:178).

⁴⁴Potatoes and bread were the staples. Soup and vegetables were usually also served (Shannon 2005:33).

⁴⁵ The *Salve Regina*, also known as the *Hail Holy Queen*, is a Marian hymn and one of four Marian antiphons sung at different seasons within the Christian liturgical calendar of the Roman Catholic Church. The *Salve Regina* is

received the abbot's blessing and retired for the evening. Merton, during a discussion with Father Robert McGann, novice-master at the time, was advised to write a letter to the abbot, Dom Frederic Dunne, explaining his life and conversion experiences. 'The letter was written on January 22 1942' (Shannon 2005:33). Much of what Merton mentioned in his letter to the abbot would later form part of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. On March 19, 1944, Merton was allowed to make a temporary profession of vows, and was given the white cowl, black scapular and leather belt, marking the start of a three-year period that would precede his final vows. Merton immediately started his studies to become a priest. The texts that Merton was required to study had a notable influence on his later writing (Shannon 2005:34).

Merton's autobiography was published on October 4, 1948, just over six months before his ordination to the priesthood on May 26, 1949. The publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain* was another key moment in Merton's life, and changed the future of his monastic career, as it became a bestseller overnight.⁴⁶ It is quite ironical that the young man who entered the monastery to live in solitary confinement, hidden from the world, found himself in the midst of fame, owing to the success of his book. Fan-mail flooded the monastery's postbox; and Merton became quite busy, initially sending letters of acknowledgement, but later on, as the substance of the letters changed, corresponding with his many followers in more complex discussions. What is rather surprising, especially in the light of the tight daily schedule at Gethsemani, is the staggering number of books, essays, letters, journal entries and poems Merton wrote during the twenty-seven years he spent in the monastery. Merton's deep love for writing also held certain challenges for him, however. He entered the monastery with the notion that he was not to write again. 'After all, he had come to the monastery to be a contemplative' (Shannon 2005:35). As Merton (1949:71) would later write: 'A contemplative enters into God in order to be created, whereas the writer enters into himself in order to create' Shannon (2005:25) observes that it took Merton a long time to realise that his writing was a 'help' to him with respect to being a contemplative, rather than being a 'rival' vocation. During the long years at Gethsemani, and through extensive writing, Merton was transformed from the passionately inward-looking young

traditionally sung at compline in the time from the Saturday before Trinity Sunday until the Friday before the first Sunday of Advent. *Salve Regina* - *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*. [ONLINE] Available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salve_Regina. [Accessed 09 May 2014].

⁴⁶More than 600 000 copies were sold during the first year and literally millions of copies in various languages have continued to sell since then (Shannon 2005:34).

monk of *The Seven Storey Mountain* to a more contemplative writer and poet. By the 1960s, Merton had arrived at a broadly human perspective, one deeply concerned with the world and issues such as peace, racial tolerance and social equality. He had developed a personal radicalism that had political implications but was not based on ideology, and which was rooted above all in non-violence. Credit is due to Merton's superiors for noticing Merton's passion and skill, and allowing him to continue writing as a monk. In fact, as Shannon (2005:35) points out, had Merton not been instructed to continue writing, his belief that a contemplative cannot also be a writer might have marked the end of his writing, with the result that his important message to the contemporary world would have been muted.

For if one cannot be both a contemplative and a writer, it would follow that one could not be both a contemplative and a housewife, a contemplative and a truck driver, a contemplative and a teacher, a contemplative and a worker on the assembly line (Shannon 2005:35).

I concur with Shannon (2005:35), who points out that the fact that Merton 'finally came to see that contemplation could be for anyone...is what made him and continues to make him one of the most important spiritual influences of our time and perhaps for centuries to come'.

3.3.3 A deep desire for solitude

To a certain degree, Merton had a craving for solitude which grew during the course of his life and came to full fruition during his years in the monastery. Perhaps he wanted more solitude in order to have a closer experience of God. The story of his early struggle for a greater amount of solitude in the monastery is detailed in the journal that he called *The Sign of Jonas*. 'Like Jonas, he heard God calling him in one direction, while he wanted to go in another' (Shannon 2005:36). Shannon (2005:36) elaborates by explaining that the reader should take cognisance of the fact that Gethsemani was actually Merton's second choice. If it had been possible, he would have preferred to join the Carthusians,⁴⁷ who lived as hermits, each with his own separate hermitage.

⁴⁷ The Carthusian Order, also called the 'Order of Saint Bruno,' is a Roman Catholic religious order of enclosed monastics. The order was founded by Saint Bruno of Cologne in 1084 and includes both monks and nuns. The order has its own Rule, called the Statutes, rather than the Rule of Saint Benedict, and combines eremitical and cenobitic life. The word 'Carthusian' is derived from the Chartreuse Mountains; Saint Bruno built his first hermitage in the valley of these mountains in the French Alps. The word 'charterhouse', which is the English name for a Carthusian monastery, is derived from the same source. The motto of the Carthusians is *Stat crux dum volvitur orbis*, Latin for 'The Cross is steady while the world is turning'. *Carthusians - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*. [ONLINE] Available at: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carthusians>. [Accessed 09 May 2014].

Merton's determined advocacy of solitude reached a pinnacle after Dom James Fox, a Harvard graduate, became abbot of Gethsemani. Dom James considerably modernised the Abbey, much to the frustration of Merton, who battled to find an adequate level of solitude, owing to all the noise from the machinery. Merton, at some point, even asked the abbot to transfer him to a monastery where there was more peace and quiet. His request was denied, as the abbot was convinced that Merton's future was with Gethsemani. The matter was settled (at least for the time being) when the abbot gave Merton the use of an old toolshed out in the woods, where Thomas was allowed to spend time every day. Merton was ecstatic. At last he had what he had been wanting all his life. He called the shed 'St Anne's' (Shannon 2005:36). It was in the toolshed, in the year 1953, that Merton wrote *Thoughts in Solitude*. It would not be until 1965, after a great deal of change had occurred within the monastery, that he would be granted permission to live as a full-time hermit on the grounds of Gethsemani.

3.3.4 Master of Novices: in service of humanity

In 1955, Merton was appointed as Master of Novices, a position that was very important to him, and which he held for ten years. During his years at Gethsemani, Merton realised that it is not possible to leave the world behind (which had been one of his goals when he entered Gethsemani). There is really nowhere else to go. This realisation was born of contemplation, and it changed Merton's thought as well as his behaviour. His 'rebel streak' (Shannon 2005:37) began to surface again. Merton realised that the world, in actual fact, is on both sides of the monastic walls; that 'Monks face the same fundamental human problems that all men and women have to deal with. They also have responsibilities to the world' (2005:37). Regarding this realisation, Shannon recounts the following:

This dawning intuition was given classical expression in what has come to be known as 'the Vision of Louisville'. On March 18, 1958, Merton was in Louisville on an errand for the monastery. Standing at the corner of Fourth and Walnut Streets, he had an experience that may well be described as 'mystical.' He saw people hurrying in and out of stores in a shopping district. Suddenly he was overwhelmed with a realisation that he loved all these people and that they were neither alien to nor separate from him. The experience challenged the concept of a separate 'holy' existence lived in a monastery (Shannon 2005:37).

This experience of Merton's could only have originated from his connectedness with people, and not from being separated from them. Of this experience and the resulting responsibility that Merton felt he had, he had the following to say: '[B]ecause I am one with them... I owe it to them to be alone and when I am alone they are not "they," but my own self' (Merton 1966:158). I concur with Shannon that the above occurrence, although it happened outside the monastery, took place because of what had been going on inside Merton during the seventeen years he had spent in the monastery. Merton had indeed become a contemplative. 'Contemplation told him, as it must teach any true contemplative, that in finding God he had found God's people and he had found them in God' (Shannon 2005:38). From this moment forward, Merton was to be even more in touch with people outside the monastery, offering advice where it was required, especially regarding issues of civil rights and the struggle for peace. During his years in the monastery, Merton often asked himself the question: 'How best can I serve humanity from within the monastery?' Although he had no doubt that his vocation was to be a monk, Merton never avoided his responsibility in addressing – as far as it lay within his power – the problems (war, racism, poverty) that plagued the contemporary world. In Merton's case, as in that of so many other mystics, contemplation sparked compassion. As Shannon (2005:39) states:

The monastic choice is not God or the world. Rather, it is both. It is all-in-one. It is an acceptance of the unity of all reality in the ground of love in which all things find their identity and their uniqueness. We are distinct from one another and God, but we are not separate from God or from one another.

3.3.5 Merton and monastic renewal

One of the important aspects of Merton's life, which is not covered in any detail in this dissertation, lies in the significant contribution that he made to *monastic renewal*. Merton constantly found himself entangled in arguments with his superiors, advocating change and renewal in their traditions and thought. Against all tradition (and rules), in the fiftieth year of his life, Merton was allowed to move into the hermitage located on the monastery grounds and, from then on, to live the life of a true hermit. Merton fought, and waited, for this approval from Father Abbot for a very long time and looked forward to the enhanced contemplative experience that this opportunity would offer him. On August 20,th 1965, after giving a talk to the novitiate, he walked through the dense woods to his new dwelling. In his message to the young monks,

Merton spelled out, in a thoughtful manner, the precise meaning of the life of a hermit, as a ‘life without care’:

...a life free from worry and anxiety, because life is in God’s hands. If God takes care of the birds and the flowers, surely then God will take care of us also. To be free of care becomes a participation in God’s care for all the creatures God made (cited in Shannon 2005:4).

Thomas Merton had finally attained what he had been longing for ever since he entered through the gates of Gethsemani! Merton spent some of his happiest years in this tiny little hermitage, feeling at one with nature and with himself, but more importantly, also with God. The opportunity that the hermitage afforded to Merton went beyond the mere provision of perfect conditions for living the life of a contemplative; it also offered an environment where he could truly seek God in earnest. Although Merton dedicated most of his spare time to writing, he also had frequent visitors at the hermitage. Shannon (2005:41) lists some of the more well-known visitors, including French philosopher Jacques Maritain, Chilean poet Nicanor Parra, Nicaraguan priest Ernesto Cardenal, the lifelong advocate of non-violence Hildegard Goss Mayr, the popular folksinger Joan Baez, and the Vietnamese poet in exile, Thich Nhat Hanh.

3.3.6 Merton falls in love

Another key moment in Merton’s life worth noting, is his visit to the St Joseph’s Hospital in Louisville, in order to undergo spinal surgery. The reason this visit is so noteworthy is that it was during his stay at St Joseph’s Hospital that Merton met the young student nurse, Margie Smith. Initially, he resented her for interrupting his reading; but his attitude soon changed, and he started looking forward to her visits. It was not long before Merton and Margie fell in love, and a relationship that would last several months (Shannon 2005:42) began to develop. It was a time of joy and happiness, but also of fear and anxiety for Merton, which was marked by an exchange of letters, poems, and telephone calls, as well as cleverly orchestrated private meetings. This relationship between Merton and Margie, more than anything else, shows Merton’s vulnerability and humanity. Shannon (2005:42) points out that Merton, in his relationship with God, had learned to trust his experiences. Now, perhaps more than ever before, Merton was ready (and needed) to trust his experience in a genuine relationship with another human being. There is no doubt that Merton needed such a relationship, in order to be healed of many of the wounds of the past: ‘As an orphan I went through the business of being passed around from family to family,

and being a “ward,” and an “object” of charitable concern... I know how inhuman and frustrating that can be – being treated as a thing and not as a person’ (Merton 1985:605). The relationship with Margie taught Merton how to ‘love’, but equally importantly, also how to ‘be loved’. Merton struggled to honour his vows while being deeply in love. He remained chaste, however; and the relationship was never consummated. At the end of the summer of 1966, after ending the relationship, Merton recommitted himself to his vows.

3.3.7 Relationship with other religions

Merton was unquestionably one of the greatest popularisers of what, in the 21st Century, is called ‘interspirituality’. The open spirit of Vatican II opened the door, so to speak and created a forum in which dialogue can take place between East and West. Merton acknowledged this, when he wrote:

I need not add that I think we have now reached a stage of (long-overdue) religious maturity at which it may be possible for someone to remain perfectly faithful to a Christian and Western monastic commitment, and yet to learn in depth from, say, a Buddhist or Hindu discipline and experience. I believe that some of us need to do this in order to improve the quality of our own monastic life and even to help in the task of monastic renewal which has been undertaken within the Western Church (1968b:313).

Merton’s rootedness in his own faith and his openness, to humanity’s spiritual horizons led him to explore, experience and interpret the affinities and differences between religions in the light of his own religion, Christianity. Merton’s interest in the Eastern religions, whether it be Buddhism, Taoism or Hinduism, was not in terms of what these traditions had to offer as doctrines, and institutions, but what each said of the depth of human experience. This is not to say that Merton believed that these religions did not have valuable rituals or practices for him or other Christians. Merton, fully committed to Christianity, and realising that practitioners of other faiths were equally committed to their own doctrines realised that any discussion of doctrine would be useless for all involved. His monastic life of arduous discipline produced a deep religious maturity and regarding his encounters with other religions and religious cultures, Merton was always responsive, yet responsible in his own commitment. One of the most important aspects and striking features of the last decade of Merton’s life was, indeed, his interest in Asian religions. Although his interest in religions of the East can be traced to his college days at

Cambridge and Columbia, Merton really only started studying it seriously in the late fifties. This comes as a surprise, especially in the light of Merton having written about thirty years earlier that though Oriental mysticism is not “...evil, per se...it is simply more or less useless’ (Merton 1968d:188). Merton later regretted this statement and realised the importance of experience over verbal formulations. According to Shannon (2005:115), the dawning of Merton’s realisation ‘...enabled him to appreciate the writings of one of the foremost contemporary figures in Zen, D.T. Suzuki’. Merton also came to the realisation that the greatest religions do not only have a lot in common, but are, in fact, very simple. They all retain very important essential differences, no doubt, but in their inner reality they are extremely simple and they all end with the simplest and most baffling thing of all: direct confrontation with Absolute Being, Absolute Love, Absolute Mercy or Absolute Void, by an immediate and fully awakened engagement in the living of everyday life.

3.3.8 Dialogue with the East

Discontent with his own, modern, western society, Merton sought a more perfect society either in the past, the European Middle Ages, or in the non-western world, Asia (Lipski 1983:1). Merton blamed many of the ailments of his time on human greed, selfishness, capitalism and technology. Merton’s attraction to Asia developed gradually, possibly dating back to as early as November 1937 when he had come under the influence of Aldous Huxley.⁴⁸ Merton, like Huxley, was drawn to the mystical emphasis of Asian religions, the importance placed on contemplation and withdrawal from the world. Almost as an immediate consequence of reading Huxley’s *End and Means* (1937) Merton threw himself into the study of Oriental religious thought and it was not long before he started corresponding with religious leaders of the East. Merton recognised the need to dialogue with representatives of Asian spirituality in the conviction that Asian wisdom could enrich his own Catholic tradition and perhaps even contribute to a renewal of Christianity (Lipski 1983:iii). It was primarily the ancient monastic and contemplative tradition of the East which intrigued Merton. Studying the spiritual treasures of Asia, Merton discovered striking similarities with the teachings of Christianity. Merton’s monastic discipline, especially the practice of silence, asceticism and contemplation paved the way for an exploration in greater depth of Oriental monasticism and mysticism. Asia became a

⁴⁸ It is Aldous Huxley’s *Ends and Means* (1937) that sparked further interest in mysticism in Merton and drew his attention to resemblances in eastern and western mystics.

major concern of Merton to the end of his life, as is apparent from some of his magnificent publications: *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (1965), *Mystics and Zen Masters* (1967), *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (1968) and finally, the posthumously published *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (1973).

Merton believed, that if practised widely, contemplation could overcome racial, social, religious and national strife and thus make possible world peace (Merton 1961a: 64-69). In his analysis of Chinese classical society Merton concentrated on the two complementary traditions of China: Confucianism and Taoism. Merton agreed with the Jesuits of the sixteenth century that Confucianism should be viewed as a 'sacred philosophy' which in many ways, is comparable with Christianity (Lipski 1983:13). Among all aspects of Asian wisdom 'Zen' made the greatest impact on Merton. The impact Zen had on Merton was so profound that the night before his fatal accident, Merton told the poet John Moffit: 'Zen and Christianity are the future' (Moffit 1972:275). In *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* Merton wrote: 'I believe that Zen has much to say not only to a Christian but also to a modern man (sic). It is nondoctrinal, concrete, direct, existential, and seeks above all to come to grips with life itself, not with ideas about life...' (1968d:32). Merton was of the opinion that Zen could contribute to answering four major needs of modern women and men: (1) the need for harmony among nations and within individual societies; (2) the need for meaning in the ordinary daily activities of life; (3) the need for integrating one's individual, intellectual and spiritual nature; and (4) the need for finding one's true self as well as for self-transcendence (1968d:32). Merton was afforded an opportunity, in December 1964, to meet in person with Dr. Suzuki at the Butler Hall, on the campus of Columbia University. For Merton, meeting Dr. Suzuki was a momentous occasion, because, for him Dr. Suzuki represented Zen. Merton preferred Zen to Hinduism because it is non-speculative and a non-systematic way of direct vision of the *ground of being*. Although Merton considered Hinduism too speculative, he did have a great appreciation for it – he was also aware that Zen pointed towards India, for the very word is derived from the Sanskrit term '*dhyana*' which means 'meditation'. Merton's exposure to Hinduism in 1937 also came through his reading of Aldous Huxley's *Ends and Means*. It is through Huxley that Merton was exposed to concepts such as: non-attachment, delusion, *atman* (true self, soul) and the use of negation and paradox for expressing ultimate reality (Lipski 1983:38). In general, Merton had no objection learning from

the Hindus and adopted their techniques for breath control, bodily postures and methods of concentration, as long as the focus was on attaining a more authentic Christ-centeredness. Among those who impressed Merton were Kabir (1440-1518) and Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950). Merton was particularly interested in the Hindu fellowship of the guru. Indians yearn to be in the presence of a guru, to walk with them, meditate close to them and to observe their daily behaviour. Considering the guru a living embodiment of the divine, the disciples are expected to submit to the guru. Merton realised that a similar submission is found in the monastery between the monks and their abbot and novice master (Merton 1951:147). Merton emphasised, however, that Christians had no need for a guru in the flesh, because they had Christ, a living master. Merton considered venerating the Blessed Sacrament equivalent to sitting at the feet of the guru. One question that deserves some attention is how Merton viewed Christian missionary activity among Hindus. In a talk to the monks of Gethsemani in 1963 he expressed a point of view that Hinduism ought to be respected but should be viewed as a stepping stone to Christianity. Merton firmly believed that Hindu teachings would find their fulfilment in Christianity and was by no means satisfied with Hindu willingness to accommodate Christianity by merely placing statues of Christ in their temples side by side with Hindu deities (Lipski 1983:49). Merton affirmed a basic difference between Hinduism and Christianity: while Hindus believe man to be essentially, ontologically divine, the Catholic church taught that man was divine by grace alone (Lipski 1983:50). Merton regarded Mahatma Gandhi as the ideal example of a non-Christian practicing Christian principles (Lipski 1983:51). Just as Gandhi had accepted Christian thought that seemed relevant to him as a Hindu, similarly, through his dialogue with the East, Merton accepted those values of the East that seemed relevant to him as a Catholic. In each case exposure to another culture had resulted in a deepened understanding of his own tradition, accompanied by an increased respect for the other's culture.

3.3.9 Journey to the East

Although Merton, during his two months in Asia, spent most of his time and effort gaining a better understanding of Buddhism and Yoga, he did get to experience Hinduism 'in the flesh' by coming into close contact with the various aspects thereof. While in India, Merton also studied the life of the eleventh century qualified monist, Ramanuja. In contrast to the (ninth century) absolute monist, Sankara, Ramanuja rejected the view that God and man were one. Instead he

maintained that even though man could attain close union with God, the two remained distinct; God as well as man retained his individuality (Basham 1954:304-305). Although Merton knew that the bridal mysticism of Radha (and Krishna) and the qualified monism of Ramanuja were closer than absolute monism to Christian tradition, which makes allowance for a personal deity – he seems to have been more attracted to Sankara. *The Asian Journal* contains copious quotations from Sankara's *Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*. Perhaps it was Sankara's bold denial of attributing ultimate reality to the phenomenal universe that intrigued Merton. The many passages Merton quoted focus on the need to rise above name, race and form by means of discrimination and to realise that 'One' only exists and 'That is Thou'. Merton fell in love with Asia long before he had an opportunity to visit it in person. The first potential opportunity to visit Asia presented itself in 1964, when Heinrich Dumoulin invited Merton to spend some time in a Trappist monastery, Our Lady of the Lighthouse, in Hokkaido. Dumoulin shared Merton's opinion that Christian monasticism could benefit from such an exposure to Far Eastern spirituality. Naturally, Merton was all too eager to go to Hokkaido. He was particularly intent upon participating in Zen retreats with a view to deepening his contemplative experience and at the same time engage in dialogue with the Zen monks. Although Dumoulin, at Merton's request, wrote to Dom Ignace Gillet, Abbot General of the Trappist Order in Rome, to intervene on behalf of Merton, his request was rejected by his abbot, Dom James Fox, who considered it completely inconsistent with the contemplative life. Merton was deeply disappointed.

Four years later Merton's dream of visiting Asia materialised. *Aide à l'Implantation Monastique*, a Benedictine group that strove to implement monastic renewal throughout the world had made arrangements for convening a conference of Asian monastic leaders in the middle of December 1968, in Bangkok, Thailand. Dom Jean Leclerq, a Benedictine scholar with whom Merton had corresponded for several years, saw to it that Merton was scheduled to give one of the major addresses at the conference (Lipski 1983:57). This invitation came shortly after the resignation of Abbot James Fox. Gethsemani's new abbot, Flavian Burns, not only allowed Merton to go to Bangkok, but also allowed him to visit various Christian and Buddhist monasteries in different Asian countries and to also participate in a *Spiritual Summit Conference* organised by the Temple of Understanding in Calcutta. After more than twenty-six years of Monastic life and *journeying inward*, Merton was ready and looking forward to an *outward journey*. It is evident

from Merton's observation that there was still a level of 'incompleteness' within him: 'may I not come back without having settled the great affair' and found also the great compassion, *makhakaruna*' (1968b:4). Merton's use of *makhakaruna* signifies Absolute Reality, literally 'oneness with the other in Christ' (1968d:86). One could interpret this to mean that he hoped to find in Asia a more intimate union with God than he had experienced so far.

One would not do justice to Merton's Asian journey, without mentioning something about the encounters he had with Asian people. The first significant Asian Merton met upon arrival in Thailand was the monk Phra Kantipalo who spoke to Merton about 'mindfulness'. More important though than his encounters with Thai monastics were Merton's encounters with Tibetans whom he met in Northern India. About these people, Merton wrote the following: '...they have a peculiar intentness, energy, silence, and also humor' (1968b:65). At Ghoom, near Darjeeling, Merton dialogued with Chatral Rinpoche, a renowned monk who had meditated in seclusion for nearly thirty years. They discussed the goals of Christianity and Buddhism, which, in both cases, led to a focus on *dzogchen*: ultimate perfect emptiness 'beyond God' (1968b:143). Merton felt in total harmony with Chatral: '...we were somehow on the edge of great realization and we know it...' (1968b:143). During Merton's interviews with the Dalai Lama they exchanged views on the nature of ultimate truth. It is said that the Dalai Lama called Merton a 'Catholic *geshe*' (a learned Lama, equivalent to a Doctor of Divinity) (1968b:125). Merton also met with the Dalai Lama's private chaplain, the Khempo of Namgyal Tra-Tsang. The Khempo evaded the discussion of metaphysics and instead emphasised the prior need to experience absolute compassion for all things before seeking enlightenment (Lipski 1983:61).

Merton, commenting on the Tibetan spiritual life, concluded that some Tibetans had attained greater heights than Catholic contemplatives. Yet, from a practical point of view, Merton did not consider Tibetan meditation suitable for the West. He continued to favour Zen as a more appropriate way for Christian contemplatives and voiced his hope that he would encounter Zen monks later during his Asian journey (1968b:179, 274). During his journey to the East, Merton further immersed himself in Buddhist studies. He spent some time examining Giuseppe Tucci's *Theory and Practice of the Mandala* (1961). Merton eventually gained an intellectual understanding of the mandala, a symbolic representation of the cosmos upon which one is to

focus to attain an integrated view of the outer and inner universe. But centering upon mandalas, Merton thought, was not for him: 'I have a sense that all this mandala business is, for me at least, useless...' (1968b:59). In contrast Merton was enthusiastic about Madhyamika philosophy, which he studied on the basis of Murti's (1955) *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism: A Study of the Madhyamika System*. Copious quotes from Murti's work throughout *The Asian Journal* reveal why Madhyamika appealed to Merton. The Madhyamika philosophy, similar to Zen, aims at liberating an individual from conventional ways of thinking and emphasises the need to transcend all points of view – all 'concepts'.⁴⁹ The abandoned temple city south of Madras, Mahabali puram, impressed Merton most favourably. This was the Asia of Merton's dreams! (Lipski 1983:63). Another ruined temple city Polonnaruwa, in Sri Lanka, produced the peak experience of Merton's Asian journey. Contemplating the mighty Buddha statues apparently brought Merton to the goal of his pilgrimage - of his quest for meaningfulness:

...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 of not emotional resignation but of Madhyamika, of sunyata, that has seen through every question without trying to discredit anyone or anything...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...The rock, all matter, all life, is charged with dharmakaya [the ultimate body of the Buddha]...everything is emptiness and everything is compassion (Merton 1968b:233-236).

Merton had the above mystical experience on December 3rd 1968, one week before his death. It seems Merton found the great compassion *makhakaruna*, which prompted him to proclaim the interdependence of all *being* during his talk in Bangkok, two hours before his 'earthly exit'. The one thing, as Lipski (1983:65) states, that Merton could never bring himself to admit is that an individual awareness of *makhakaruna* could never guarantee socio-economic and political harmony; that there was no 'golden age' in the ancient world of Asia or of Europe.

⁴⁹ The underlying assumption is that reality would surface once all points of view had been rejected. This highest reality, referred to as *Prajnaparamita* (beyond wisdom) is 'transcendent to thought, non-relative, non-determinate, non-discursive, non-dual (Murti 1955:228).

3.3.10 Eastern influence on Merton and his spirituality

What general insights had Merton attained during his Asian journey? This is a legitimate question. For Merton had not only wanted to benefit personally from exposure to Asia, but had also hoped to contribute to the renewal of Christian monasticism and Western society. Merton became convinced that compassion had to be combined with detachment and wisdom. Only through wisdom could selfishness be destroyed and only thereafter was unconditional, selfless love feasible (1968b:310). Likewise, wisdom could only be attained following the practice of contemplation in solitude. Merton's Asian experience reinforced his belief that monastic dialogue was imperative. One of the aspects of Merton's thought that was deeply influenced by the East and worth noting, is his view on 'consciousness'. Merton (1968d:22) suggested that in our evaluation of the 'modern' consciousness, we have to take into account the still overwhelming importance of the "Cartesian '*cogito*'". Modern-man, in as far as he is still Cartesian (although Merton realised that modern-man, in his thinking and reasoning, is far beyond Descartes in many aspects), is a subject for whom his own self-awareness as a thinking, observing, measuring and estimating 'self' is absolutely primary. It is for modern-man the one indubitable 'reality' and the place where all truth starts (1968d:22). Merton suggested that men and women should develop their consciousness as a *subject* over against *objects* for their own interest. The risk exists, however, that one can fall prey to isolating oneself in one's subjective prison and become a detached observer, cut off from everything else in a kind of '...impenetrable alienated and transparent bubble which contains all reality in the form of purely subjective experience' (1968d:22). Modern consciousness then tends to create a 'solipsistic bubble of awareness', and ego-self that is imprisoned in its own consciousness, isolated and out of touch with other persons. 'It is this kind of consciousness,' states Merton (1968d:23), '...which has made inevitable the so called "death of God"'. It is, of course Cartesian thought in itself that attempted to reach God as object by starting from the thinking 'self'. But when God becomes an object, God, sooner or later, 'dies', because God as object is ultimately unthinkable. Along this line of thinking Merton states:

God as object is not only a mere abstract concept, but one which contains so many internal contradictions that it becomes entirely nonnegotiable except when it is hardened into an idol that is maintained in existence by a sheer act of will (1968d:23).

Although the intent of this dissertation is not to analyse the ‘Cartesian dilemma’ of modern man (the question whether an I-Thou relationship is possible at all to a purely ‘Cartesian subject’), it may be of value to touch on another metaphysical consciousness, which Merton realised is still available to ‘modern man’. This alternative consciousness starts, not from ‘thinking’, but rather from ‘Being’ – ontologically seen to be beyond and prior to subject-object division. Underlying the subjective experience of the individual self there is an immediate experience of Being. As Merton (1968d:23) states, this is totally different from an experience of self-consciousness, but is indeed completely nonobjective. This consciousness of Being (whether considered positively or negatively and apophatically as in Buddhism) is an experience that goes beyond reflexive awareness. It is not ‘consciousness of’ but ‘pure consciousness’, in which the subject as such ‘disappears’ (1968d:24). This form of consciousness assumes a different kind of self-awareness from that of the Cartesian thinking-self which is its own justification and its own center. Here the individual is aware of himself as a ‘self-to-be-dissolved’ in self-giving, in love, in ‘letting-go’, in ecstasy, in God – there are many ways of phrasing the same concept. The self is not its own center and does not orbit around itself; it is centered on God. Merton realised, that in order to successfully initiate dialogue with the East, a contemplative approach is required in which the dialogue is centered around ‘pure consciousness’. Merton considers this ‘pure’ consciousness’ to be *existential* and *ontological*, as far as Zen Buddhism goes and *theological* and *personal* as far as Christianity is concerned (Haynie 1977:4). Interpersonal dialogue, for Merton is therefore based on an existential level of personal contact, a level of spiritual maturity, openness, human and love.

Comparing Christianity with Buddhism, as we know even today, is no easy task. Finding common ground between the two seems to be impossible. In an attempt to overcome this challenge Merton (1968d:80) proposed that the best way to open a serious dialogue between Christian and Buddhist thought would be to discuss something of the nature of Buddhist enlightenment and to see if whether some analogy can be found in Christian thought. Merton mentions three possible approaches: The first is ‘...on the plane of mysticism and mystical experience’. The challenge with this approach is that it is filled with theological problems on the Christian side and a complete absence of theological content which would offer material for

comparison on the Buddhist side. The second is the ethical level where Buddhist compassion is compared with Christian charity. Since Christian charity is also a ‘theological virtue’, the same problem arises again – the discussion takes place on two levels that fail to meet. The third and final level is the ‘plane’ of metaphysics where discussion seems to be possible and we are able to ‘...look a little further and envisage other possibilities of correspondence in the religious understanding of human existence and the practical conduct of life’ (1968d:80). The Buddhist idea of ‘*Dharma*’ (a word almost untranslatable, somewhat akin to ‘logos’) and of “*Tathata*” (‘suchness’) imply a realisation of presence and *nirvana* is a matter of ‘pure presence’ rather than of absence and negation. This speaks to the notion of ‘life, found in openness to Being’ and ‘being present’ in full awareness. Buddhist enlightenment (Nirvana), the highest goal of an individual, has been mostly misunderstood in the West as the extinction of desire and many of the religions of the East have been seen as world (life)-denying religions, in which the ideal seems to be to spend one’s earthly existence in a trance in order that after death one may pass away into pure consciousness. According to this view, all positive value in earthly existence is merely negated. ‘In reality’, says Merton (1968d:81), ‘this distortion is rather similar to the distortion suffered by Christian mystics like St. John of the Cross, who is regarded as a life-denying and world-hating ascetic when in reality his mysticism superabounds in love, vitality and joy.’ The alternative, and a life centered on ‘things’, is that such a life closes the ego upon itself, which throws it into a hopeless struggle with other perverse and hostile selves competing together for possessions which will give them power and satisfaction. Instead of being open to the world, such minds are in fact closed to it and their efforts to build the world according to their own desires are doomed in the end by the ambiguity and destructiveness that are in them. Buddhism and Biblical Christianity agree in their view of man’s ‘present’ condition. Both are well aware that man is not in right relation to the world and things in it, or rather, as Merton (1968d:82) puts it: ‘...man bears in himself a mysterious tendency to *falsify*⁵⁰ that relation, and to spend a great deal of energy in justifying the false view he takes of the world and of his place in it.’ In *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (1968d:82-84) Merton discusses the root of our dilemma, namely ‘desire’. Merton argues that we are in a state of discontent, faced with a ‘determined willfulness’ in trying to make things be other than they are in order that we may be able to make

⁵⁰ The falsification is what Buddhists refer to as: ‘*avidya*’, which translates to ‘ignorance’ which leads to suffering in life because it places a person in an equivocal position.

them subserve, at any moment, to our individual desire for pleasure or for power. But since things do not obey our arbitrary impulses and since we cannot make the world correspond to and confirm the image of it dictated by our needs and illusions, our will-fullness is inseparable from error and from suffering. For this reason Buddhism teaches, that deluded life itself is in a state of *dukkha* and every moment of desire tends to bear ultimate fruit in pain rather than in lasting joy, in hate rather than love, in destruction rather than creation. The dilemma that we are faced with is that *desire* itself cannot stop itself from desiring. The ultimate Christian answer, according to Merton (1968d:84), to this dilemma is typified by St. Paul:

I desire to do what is right and yet what I do is wrong. I cordially agree with the Law of God in my inner self, but I find another law in my members which contradicts the law of my mind and makes me a prisoner to sin (untruth, brokenness, wilful delusion, culpable distortion of values)...Unfortunate wretch that I am, who will liberate me from this living death? God by His grace, in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 7:21-25).

The solution for Merton, therefore, is the Cross – death and resurrection in Christ – a life of love ‘in the spirit’. The Buddhist answer to the same dilemma lies in the four noble truths by which, following the teaching of the Buddha, one seeks to apprehend the real nature of existence and to rediscover one’s real roots in the true ground of all being. Once grounded in authentic truth and love, the roots of desire themselves wither. This ‘groundedness’ refers to being grounded in ‘nothingness’ or as Buddhism prefers to call it: ‘emptiness’.⁵¹ Nirvana is therefore not an apprehended ‘content of consciousness’. Hence the metaphysical concepts of *pure being* in Christian and Buddhist philosophy tend to be much closer than has hitherto been realised (Merton 1968d:85). When the purity of this Buddhist metaphysic has been duly appreciated, according to Merton, there may indeed be ground for discussion between Buddhism of the East and Christianity of the West.

3.4 Choreography of Merton’s mind

The Geography of Lograire, without a doubt, is Merton’s most ambitious long work and quite a poetic achievement. Merton completed the work, just a few months before he set out on his

⁵¹ It has to be emphasised that Buddhism when referring to this ‘emptiness’, does so not because it conceives the ultimate as mere nothingness and therefore ‘void’, but because it is aware of the non-limitation and non-definition of the infinite.

Asian journey. *The Geography of Lograire* is firstly a country that Merton fabricated in his imagination, but it is also a person – Merton himself – for its geography is the map, the choreography of his mind. The plot of the poem is Merton's search for self-identity. Merton overlay personal experiences against the backdrop of anthropological and historical events. A poet, Merton (1968c:1) wrote in the prefatory note to Lograire, '...spends his life attempting to build or dream the world in which he lives. But more than that he realises that this world is at once his and everybody's...' The questions struggled with and the important message conveyed in *The Geography of Lograire* are just as relevant to the contemporary person as they were in the late nineteen-sixties.

The poem exists of four cantos, representative of the four cardinal directions, South, North, East and West, literally forming a cross which spans the entire globe. Merton's journey begins in the South with a captivating scene in which a slave captain guides his boat through the waterways of southern America, searching for a runaway slave. The description is highly evocative (Merton 1968c:3). The scene ends in Wales, the country where Merton's paternal relatives lived. Merton recalls images from the New Testament as the hunt for the slave continues. The river is crimson with the blood of Abel. It is this blood that makes the river run, so that the white captain can pursue the black slave. The blood of Abel connotes the blood of Christ. The prologue abounds with images of water and of blood. Padovano (1982:138) captures the essence of this imagery as follows:

Merton refers to the opposites in his blood, to the Celtic blood that runs in his veins, to the blood of Abel, of Christ...who calls down the judgment against the human race whose members failed their creator by destroying one another.

The prologue closes with images from the Hebrew Bible: the snake; Abraham, as the mythical symbol of fatherhood; Isaac, whose father almost lost him; the blood of the ram becoming the blood of the Lamb (1982:138). The prologue sets the theme of the poem as an epic about universal brotherhood and human endeavour. Merton satirises the *false* Christianity of the South – false, in the sense that slavery was justified with hymns⁵² and biblical texts. He also deals with the notion of the false self; the '...source of fratricide and all forms of dehumanization', as

⁵²The poem is filled with lyrics from 'Nearer My God to Thee,' 'Rock of Ages,' 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,' and 'Down by the Old Mill Stream.'

Kilcourse (1993:186) puts it. In the African poems, Merton shows great sensitivity towards the native religious values of the Africans (Padovano 1982:141). His respect for, and openness to other religions led him to favourably regard the instinctive religious sensibilities of the human race. Padovano summarises this aspect as follows:

His outrage at the Roman suppression of missionary efforts to accommodate Confucianism with Catholicism made him all the more determined to look carefully at the values of a culture before seeking to change them (1982:141).

In the North canto ‘Merton fuses the memories of his own life with that of the age. He becomes a symbol of the century in which he lives’ (1982:144). In the last few lines of the prologue, Merton indicates that his entire life is encompassed in this work of his. He declares:

Geography
I am all (here)
There!

The North canto is representative of the years during which Merton lived in New York City and its environs as a boy and as a young man. Death imagery is prominent in this poem, with underground tunnels symbolising the journey into death and the afterlife (1982:144). The tunnel, paradoxically, is also a symbol of birth, as it takes visitors out of the darkness, into the light of day. The tunnel is a ‘tomb’ and a ‘womb.’ Love is the evasion of death. The poem ultimately reflects a confused search for love – a search with which Merton was indeed familiar. Merton recalls the memory of a bare room in Great Britain where he saw ‘my baby’ and recalls the child’s mother ‘laid out on a long white table’ (Merton 1968c:59). This may well be an allusion to the child Merton fathered as a young man. The psychological impact that this event had on Merton, although outside of the scope of this study, must have been severe, with feelings of guilt plaguing Merton for most of his life. Throughout the poem Merton searches for his mother. Padovano (1982:147) rightfully remarks that *The Geography of Lograire*, in many ways, is more revealing than *The Seven Storey Mountain*, because it speaks in the symbols of poetry and in the free association that the subconscious allows. ‘Sing a song to Mamma...’ Merton (1968c) chants, as he thinks back and remembers the deathbed letter that Ruth wrote to him when he was still a small child. The poem takes us on a journey through Merton’s psyche. It seems that he is in search of the feminine dimension of his inner self, with images of the vanished nurse, the lost

nun, the missing mother, the Queen of Heaven. In the poem Merton also covers aspects such as his sexual awakening as a youngster in England and the obsession of the authorities to control and suppress unconventional behaviour. The poem quotes from contemporary seventeenth-century tracts, court trials, Acts of Parliament and pamphlets distributed at the time.

Whereas the North and South cantos centre on racial antagonism, the East (and the West) canto focuses on cultural conflicts. Padovano (1982:152) explains:

In these latter poems, people are violent with one another not because of their skin color but because of different traditions and values.

One cannot help but reflect on the immense inner growth that Merton underwent over the years, and the openness that he developed towards the customs and religious practices of other cultures, particularly those of the East, towards the end of his life. The West canto, which refers to a more modern way of travelling, namely: aircraft, is concerned with illusion, with the world looking like ‘a lake of cotton, a milky mist’ (Padovano 1982:160) from the plane’s window. On the way to its destination, the plane is about to fly over Mount Rushmore, with the stone images of the American presidents enshrined on its side. Merton uses this image as an emblem of an illusionary solidity, in which the American nation puts its trust. Of course, Merton is well aware of the fact that there is no ‘permanence’ in life. Things made by machine (aeroplanes, telephones, etc.) do not put people in touch with one another or improve human wisdom (1982:160).⁵³ The anonymous Buddhist, in the poem, reminds us that we are Brahman or God, and all is one:

Having finally recognized that the Self is Brahman and that existence and non-existence are imagine (*sic*)...

This unity is masked by machines; and it is unity that the Western world believes to be an illusion. Day six, for Merton, was not only the day on which the fall took place, giving way to a memory of lost unity; it also ultimately becomes a herald of hope for future re-unification. Western science and oriental wisdom can make the world and the human race whole once again.

⁵³ Communication problems, in Merton’s view, began on day six of the creation, with a breakdown in dialogue between Adam and Eve, humans and God, Cain and Abel. We fail in communicating with one another, ‘because we think we are different from one another’ (1982:160).

The life of Merton is a story of a continual movement away from inner and outer idols and towards union with the desert God of his Christian faith. In his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948:409), Merton says that:

In one sense we are always travelling; and travelling as if we did not know where we were going. In another sense we have already arrived.

This geography, for Merton, was constantly re-evaluated and remapped. From his birth in France in 1915 until his death in Asia in 1968, Merton was surrounded and shaped by the complexities of the twentieth century. Through his writings, especially his journals and poetry, he left us a personal map of his search for his true identity – for the sacred – for union with God. *The Geography of Lograire* is the most difficult, but perhaps the most important of Merton's works. It shows him on the eve of his death, ready to enter into a comprehensive stage of his development (Padovano 1982:165). His vision is now global; and his insight pertaining to universality, human dignity, equality and eschatological hope, is refined and dynamic (Padovano 1982:165, Kilcourse 1993:194). Padovano (1982:165) concludes that in *The Geography of Lograire*, we read 'the history of a human family tragically torn asunder but pathetically persistent in the claim for harmony'. He adds:

From the pain of his own relationship with his brother, Merton forges an epic that traces the roots of our despair to the way we fail one another. From the loss of his own father he has fashioned a poem in which all are children in search of a living parent. It is a poem that hopes for a home we will dream of until the last dance is done.

3.5 Conclusion

Monica Furlong, in her biography: *Merton: A Biography* (1980), comments on some of the key moments (and particularly on love) in Merton's life:

No one could look very deeply into Thomas Merton's life without discovering that he inspired enormous love. He attracted warm friendships, was attractive to women, was respected by his brothers at Gethsemani, even when they disagreed profoundly with his ideas, and was admired and loved by the students and novices he trained. Yet at the center of all this love was a deep loneliness that only a handful of close friends penetrated, and perhaps nobody fully comprehended.

Furlong goes on to speculate about the possible causes of Merton's loneliness in life. Was this loneliness linked to the fact that his mother died when he was so very young? Or perhaps it arose from his belief that she found him unsatisfactory? Did the death of Owen, Merton's father, during Merton's teenage years contribute to this loneliness? Or possibly the mere fact that he had no place to call home, and lived the life of an orphan, being sent from pillar to post, triggered his deep sense of isolation. Any reader of Merton would agree that Merton clearly struggled with loneliness and had a deep longing for love in his life. The warm male friendships of his Columbia days, his excessive flirting with girls, frantic drinking, smoking and even his relationship with Margie years later, are all indications of how desperately Merton was searching for and in need of love: 'Looking back many years later, Merton could see how desperately he had longed for love and how difficult he had found accepting it, even from girls who truly loved him, perhaps particularly from them' (Furlong 1980:333-334). With Merton's conversion to Catholicism, a new source of love was opened to him, a love that is a mere reflection of the true love of God. Merton had a deep desire to love, to be lovable and to be loved. He also needed stability – a place to call home. These all comprise aspects that Gethsemani offered him at a time when he most needed them. As Furlong states: '[H]e needed structure of a fairly rigorous kind, quite simply to prevent his own vigorous appetites and questing mind from destroying him' (1980:334). Finally, it would seem from his autobiography and some of his subsequent writings that Merton needed to punish himself, most likely for unintentionally fathering a child and then abandoning both mother and child.

One receives the impression that Merton inherently believed that he had to punish himself in order to make amends for his former way of living and many mistakes. In terms of his earlier understanding of the concept, 'making amends' included abstinence from worldly pleasures, being secluded – but also from having a worldly career. In fact, this was one of the most significant areas of conflict in his life, which involved a painful struggle for Merton – wanting to be a writer, but believing that God had called him to be a monk. Merton was annoyed, initially, that his vocation as a writer followed him into the monastery. However, his dual vocation (writer and contemplative monk) has a very strong message for contemporary society. It opens the door for any human being to be a contemplative while also pursuing his or her own worldly career and/or interests.

The growth that Merton experienced though the course of his life is vividly discernible. The relaxed Merton whom we meet in the sixties is very different from the Merton of the forties. Through the years, he became a more winsome, mature, understanding, humorous and light-hearted individual. Perhaps some of this lightness arose from Merton's involvement with Zen, with its method of using jokes to shock the disciple into an awareness of truth. As Furlong (1980) states:

[W]hat this change of perspective removed was the old need for self-punishment, and, as that disappeared, Merton again began to enjoy many things he had formerly renounced, trivial things such as beer, and pleasure in eating, and a wry amusement at advertising, and more important things such as literature, politics and human company, more particularly the company of women and children.

Merton discovered a way of taking the perspective, wisdom and insight he had gained from his *inner journey*, turning it outward and using it to see the world from a different angle and to connect with his fellow human beings at a much deeper level and with much more compassion. In a way, this inner journey opened Merton up to the world and created the necessary space for him to zealously plunge into everything he became involved in, whether in the form of politics, ecumenism, contemplation or Bob Dylan.⁵⁴

⁵⁴Merton was a great fan of Bob Dylan in the sixties.

Chapter 4

UNDERSTANDING AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE ‘SELF’

4.1 Introduction

Spirituality, in an important sense, is about ‘wholeness’. The human species is so used to ‘beginnings’ and ‘endings’ in life that individual life is often experienced as being fragmented, often resulting in an intense search for self-identity. Merton also experienced this search for identity – at a deep existential level. He spent much time thinking and writing about it. Development of the ‘self’ (spiritual development) is the discovery and release of one’s true self.⁵⁵ It is important to note, from the outset, that the ‘true self’ is a spiritual concept, and not an identifiable object as such. The true self, for Merton, was the psychological, anthropological, sociological, ontological and spiritual experience of the sacred in terms of everyday life. This chapter sets out not only to investigate the concepts of *true self* versus *false self*, but also to investigate the mystery of the awakening of the true self, within a framework of *psycho-spiritual development*. But before embarking on such an ambitious endeavour, it is necessary to define a structure with which to work, and to examine a few definitions.

4.2 Spiritual development theories

There are varying opinions as to whether distinct phases of spiritual development actually exist. Many theorists, including Scott Peck (2003), Ken Wilber (2007), and Lawrence Kohlberg (1981, 1984), amongst others, have all contributed in one way or another to the body of material on the subject of *spiritual development*. Although there is no general consensus among the theorists regarding the different stages of spiritual development, there does seem to be some degree of overlap in the understanding of the concept. Although the purpose of the present research is not to embark on an in-depth study of spiritual development and related theories, it is nevertheless useful to have some ‘guidelines’ in terms of which to map Merton’s spiritual growth as he matured and aged. I have chosen Margaret Placentra Johnston’s (2012) spiritual growth model as a departure point for this. Johnston, a teacher, optometrist and author, spent close to eighteen years studying the various spiritual development theorists, before proceeding to simplify and

⁵⁵ According to most of the Spiritual Development theorists, we begin life spiritually immature and grow towards maturity in stages (Culliford 2011:25).

summarise the stages of spiritual development in her book, *Faith beyond belief: Stories of good people who left the church behind*. The stages presented in her model are: (1) the ‘lawless’ stage; (2) the ‘faithful’ stage; (3) the ‘rational’ stage and (4) the ‘mystic’ stage.

The starting point of spiritual development, comprising stage one of Johnston’s four-stage model, is the ‘lawless’ stage. In general, the lawless individual does not concern him/herself with matters relating to the Divine, inspired scripture or organised religion. Such an individual typically has no locus of authority, is totally under the control of his/her own ego, and has very little, if any, concern for other people. Merton probably operated at this level in his younger years, before becoming a Catholic and being baptised. He mainly sought his own pleasure and pursued his own ends during this period. He was selfish, perhaps even somewhat manipulative and (typical of individuals in this stage) viewed the world from an egocentric perspective – it existed only to serve him; and others did not count for much. During these troubled years, Merton was very much a victim of his own will, as a result of this egocentric approach to life.

The next stage, comprising stage two of Johnston’s model, is the ‘faithful’ stage. People in this stage, including most church-goers, typically believe that *their* church is the only church that is right and just. They believe that others are following the wrong ‘path’ and/or are even condemned to hell. Owing to this belief, people in this stage of spiritual development are often prone to evangelising. The ‘faithful’ tend to interpret the sacred writings of their religion in a very literal sense. They also view God as a ‘being’ completely separate from themselves, who is eager to judge and reprimand. Merton spent many years in this stage of spiritual development with the church, and especially the strict Trappist discipline, acting as anchors in his life. Although Merton moved on to the next stage, his image of God did retain a ‘personal element’ that remained with him for the rest of his life.

Stage three is the ‘rational’ stage. When Merton started to question the Church, his faith and all the accompanying dogma, he began to show some signs of having moved on to Johnston’s third stage. He did not renounce his faith completely; but he began to voice his opinions on issues pertaining to the Church, monastic life, and other matters of concern in the world. Merton probably reached the ‘rational’ stage mid-way through his life, when his personal integrity

became more important to him than mere conformity to what is deemed ‘the norm’ in society. It was during this stage of Merton’s spiritual development that he became interested in matters of social concern.

Towards the end of Merton’s life, he reached the pinnacle of spiritual development, in what Johnston terms the ‘mystic’ stage. Merton remained faithful to Catholicism, not out of a sense of duty, but because he saw it as a way of achieving his objectives: finding a way of approaching God, and also having access to the experience of community. Merton’s image of God changed as he became more spiritually mature. He no longer viewed God as a judge who imposed rules and demanded worship and sacrifice. Merton understood, and lived, his Christian faith in a much less literal way in his later years. He respected, treasured and loved the mystery of God – and of life. He approached this mystery, not so much with a view to finding definite answers, but with courage, boldness and a sense of excitement. In order to live the life of a mystic, Merton could no longer simply adhere to the behests of the Church or any ‘outside’ authority; he needed to live according to the truth, and in alignment with his true self. It was necessary to become attentive to the voice of his inner self; and he felt that he could only do so in moments of contemplation. In a sense, any discussion on Merton and his spirituality should indeed be centred on his vocation as a contemplative.

4.3 Merton’s concept of ‘self’

4.3.1 The ‘*true*’ self and the ‘*false*’ self

One of the recurring themes consistently encountered in Merton’s writings is that of the human search for self-identity. For Merton, there is an undeniable difference between what we ‘appear to be’ (what he often referred to as one’s ‘ego’) and what we ‘are’; between our ‘exterior self’ and our ‘inner self’. The ordinary, everyday ego is the ‘self’ or the ‘I’ that we experience most of the time – the personal self that interacts with the world (Culliford 2011:26). It is through this ego that we form attachments and allegiances. In contrast to this ‘false’ self, the ‘higher’ self involves being a stranger to desire; or, as Culliford (2011:27) puts it: ‘It does not form attachments or diversions.’ The true self is an integrated way of relating to ourselves and others. It dwells in the moment, is content and desires nothing. In view of the foregoing, it can be said that what is required is to lose the exterior self and to find our inner self in God: ‘We come from

God and must return to God. And the return to God is a journey...’ (Shannon 2005:87). With regard to this journey, Shannon mentions two forces that are at work: (1) a *centrifugal force* that carries us away from our true identity (and therefore from God) and (2) a *centripetal force* which is God’s gift in returning us to that identity. The centrifugal force is ‘...what we name original sin: It is that in us that draws us *away from our center* into regions of unreality’ (2005:87). It is this force that builds an illusory ego. The centripetal force, on the other hand, is ‘...the power of the Spirit of God drawing us *to our center*, where we find God and in God we discover (or, rather, recover) our own selves’ (2005:87-88). Merton often wrote about these two concepts: the *exterior* or *false* self and the *inner* or *true* self. He uses a variety of terms to describe these entities. With a view to clarity, and for the purposes of further discussion, a short list of these equivalent terms is helpful at this point. Merton uses the following synonyms, *inter alia*, for the *exterior* or *false* self: the superficial self, empirical self, outward self, shadow self, smoke self, contingent self, imaginary self, private self, illusory self, false self and petty self.⁵⁶ On the other hand, he refers to the *true self* in terms of the following concepts: inner self, hidden self, creative mysterious inner self, real self and deepest most hidden self.⁵⁷

The external self is a human construct. As Shannon (2005:89) states: ‘...it exists at the surface level of reality, it is incapable of any transcendent experience, which is to say that it cannot know God.’ The true self, in contrast, is ‘...the self that sleeps silently in my depths, waiting to be awakened by the power of the spirit. It is the openness in us to the call of God to become one with God’ (2005:89). In order to grasp this elusive concept, one needs to bear in mind that the true self can never know itself as an object – it is not an entity that can be known at the level of ordinary human consciousness. It cannot be known, but it can be experienced. This true self is the insistent voice of God’s spirit, calling us to be reborn, awakening us to the ‘deepest ground of being’ (2005:90).

In 1946, Aldous Huxley published a book entitled *The Perennial Philosophy*, in which he proposes that *common elements* can be found in the various religions and cultures in the world.

⁵⁶ These terms (cited in Shannon 2005:88) are all encountered in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, with the exception of the concept, ‘petty self’.

⁵⁷ These concepts are also cited in Shannon (2005:89). The terms ‘inner self’, ‘hidden self’ and ‘inmost self’ are taken from *New Seeds of Contemplation*, while the concepts of the ‘real self’ and the ‘deepest, most hidden self’ are found in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.

Huxley refers to these common elements as the ‘Perennial Philosophy’.⁵⁸ A number of these elements, or tenets, are relevant to a study on Merton, since they had a substantial impact on his thought and writing (as did Huxley’s work in general): (1) there is an Ultimate Reality that is both universally immanent in creation, and also transcendent in relation to it; (2) this Ultimate Reality cannot be reached or described by means of the rational mind – it is therefore inherently incomprehensible and paradoxical; (3) there is something in the deeper eternal ‘self’ of a human being, distinct from the personal ego,⁵⁹ which is similar to, or even identical to this Ultimate Reality; (4) the Ultimate Reality is the *ground of all being* through which we are all interconnected; (5) through spiritual and moral practice, an individual can experience awareness and achieve union with this transcendent reality; and (6) once an individual reaches this point of union, it is usually accompanied by an increase in compassion and wisdom (Nataraja 2008:113-114).

Life in a monastery tends to strip away elements of the old self, thereby mortifying the flesh to such a degree that only the ‘bare bones’ remain exposed, as it were. Merton was prepared to undergo this dying of the ‘self’, in order to allow his ‘Self’ to arise. Therefore, he willingly and open-mindedly accepted the necessary ‘scourging’ of the monastic discipline. One cannot help but wonder what motivation or driving force lay behind such determination. Was Merton trying to make amends for some besetting sin of his past? It is common knowledge that guilt can contribute to the release of so much energy in the quest for a ‘course’ to follow with a view to atonement – often to the long-term detriment of one’s health. Merton’s health deteriorated to the

⁵⁸ The ‘Perennial Philosophy’ has been a cause of much debate and disagreement among theoreticians of mysticism. As stated by Kourie (1992:96), it is axiomatic that mysticism is culturally and ideologically grounded, and that no mystical experience can be understood without taking into consideration the philosophical, theological, social and historical contextualization of a particular mystical experience. Such aspects, argues Kourie, will undoubtedly influence not only the manner in which the experience is reported, but also the very experience itself. Katz (1978:26) a major proponent of this position, argues that there is no ‘pure’ mystical experience at the core of the various experiences. Recent scholars, in opposition to Katz, have argued strongly against the complex epistemological construction of the mystical experience (Forman 1988). Kourie (1992:99) warns against a doctrinaire application of the pluralist paradigm and, while not proposing equivalence between different religious experiences, argues for a ‘...wider ecumenism of mysticism which avoids both the claims of mystical autonomy or mystical sameness’. Such a model, according to Kourie would enable mystical traditions to acknowledge their complementarity and articulate their plurality and thus contribute to a variegated yet global mystical consciousness which is vital to this pluralist era.

⁵⁹The term ‘ego’ (‘I’) refers to the individual as a conscious subject with a developed sense of individuality. It includes the principle of selfhood in the sense of consolidating one’s self (oneself), of being in and for oneself. The ‘ego’ is strongly aware of the distinction – perhaps even the disjunction – between itself and surrounding reality (Kruger 2006:268).

point where he collapsed one day during morning prayers. Medical attention was required; and Merton was advised to take an extended period of rest. In order to effect such rest, Merton was exempted from any strenuous work. Instead, he was asked to translate some texts into English. Owing to his predilection for writing, Merton welcomed this opportunity; and he started seeking out other writing opportunities. One such opportunity came in the form of the devotional pamphlets that were sold at the gatehouse of the monastery. Merton was asked to write on the lives of several saintly Cistercians. King (1995:5) notes that Merton soon became involved in a project ‘...that could never be the work of an anonymous monk: an autobiography.’ This led to the publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948). There are two main reasons for referring to Merton’s literary work: Firstly, he believed that, upon entering the monastery, it was expected of him to renounce his desire for writing. He thought that God expected him to do so, in order to be a good monk. Merton’s literary vocation added to his inner conflict and contributed in no small measure to his troubled state of mind. Secondly, Merton’s literary work actually constituted the means of bringing his inner growth to fruition.

Merton found himself immersed in the anonymity of Trappist life,⁶⁰ on the one hand, whilst being a national celebrity outside the walls of the monastery, on the other. This precipitated an inner dissent between his self (ego) and his Self (true self). In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he refers to this deep-seated battle as follows: ‘...my vows should have divested me of the last shreds of any special identity. But then there was this shadow, this double, this writer that followed me into the cloister...’ (Merton 1948:448).

Since he was still of the opinion that the writer in him should die, Merton signed over the rights to his autobiography to the Trappists; and it would not be long before he would be fully engaged in penning his next book, *The Seeds of Contemplation* (1949). This remarkable work fails to conceal the inner conflict that its author was experiencing at the time that it was written. In joining the Trappists, Merton’s intention was to have an experience of God; but in order to write about losing himself he had to step back into the self he had lost in order to speak about it! This dilemma was one of the main sources of Merton’s immense inner conflict. In contemplation, the self is said to be ‘absorbed and immersed’ so that ‘selfhood no longer has any part’; one is

⁶⁰ Thomas King once spoke to a monk who had entered Gethsemani in the early 1950s, after being influenced by Merton’s writing. The monk told King that almost two years elapsed before he knew which monk was Thomas Merton! (King 1995:6).

‘annihilated’ (King 1995:8). But creating a text requires something very different. With every judgment one makes – and every judgment one publishes – one is affirming an individual perspective. Merton’s journal tells endlessly of the ongoing inner conflict between the writer and the monk.⁶¹ It was only after the episode that occurred during the latter part of 1950, when he collapsed and had to spend time in hospital, that Merton came to a very different sense of himself. Thereafter, he would not write again about the conflict between writer and monk. He writes as follows about this awakening: ‘It seems to me that I have been asleep for nine years – and that before that I was dead’ (Merton 1961c:315). From this point on, Merton would have a stronger sense of identity and would no longer be afraid to speak his mind on matters regarding which he had strong convictions. He also began to make peace with the fact that God wills different things for different people, and that God can lead one in a way that is less ‘perfect’ (King 1995:17). Merton continued to recognise the opposition between the mystic and the author; but he accepted that he was called to be a writer. As King (1995:17) points out, one could indeed ask the question as to whether there was not a degree of narcissism, or ‘ego-pleasure’ in the emergence of this ‘new-found’ Merton; but Merton had discovered a new way of losing himself apart from immersion in a group. He called it ‘Zen’. As he was walking in the vicinity of his monastery, one day in December 1949, he came to a new and vivid awareness:

These clouds low on the horizon, the outcrops of hard yellow rock on the road, the open gate, the perspective of fence posts leading up the rise to the sky, and the big cedars tumbled and tousled by the wind. Standing on rock. Present. The reality of the present and of solitude divorced from past and future... My love for everybody is equal, neutral and clean. No exclusiveness. Simple and free as the sky, because I love everybody and am possessed by nobody, not held, not bound. In order to be remembered or even wanted I have to be a person that nobody knows. They can have Thomas Merton. He’s dead. Father Louis – he’s half dead too. For my part my name is that sky, those fence posts, and those cedar trees (1961c:246).

The above passage provides a good illustration of what Merton means by the term ‘Zen’. In his view, Zen is not a foreign religion; rather, Buddhism is merely the culture in which Zen happens to have developed (King 1995:17). In itself, Zen is a simple and direct awareness of the immediate present – apart from judgment, interpretation and meaning.

⁶¹ Merton, Thomas. 1961c. *The Sign of Jonas*: 39, 43, 48, 61, 78, 95, 96, 124, 129, 153, 156.

Merton linked this duality with St Paul's opposition of the 'old man' and the 'new man' and with St Bernard's duality of the 'false self' and the 'true self'. As noted above, Merton developed many new names for the two 'selves': the 'worldly self' as against the 'true inner self'; the 'destructive ego' as opposed to the mysterious 'inner self'; and the 'contingent ego', in contrast to 'one's inviolate and eternal reality' (Merton 1961a:38). Most of the time, however, Merton used the terminology of Maritain,⁶² referring to the 'individual' and the 'person':

We must remember that the superficial 'I' is not our real self. It is our 'individuality' and our 'empirical self' but it is not truly the hidden and mysterious person in which we subsist before the eyes of God. The 'I' that works in the world, thinks about itself, observes its own reactions and talks about itself is not the true 'I' that has been united to God in Christ (1961a:7).

The second 'I' (the person) is mostly hidden, unnamed and unrecognised in society as we know it today (King 1995:25). Merton often contrasted the 'individual' with the 'person'; the individual being part of the material universe and its determinism, while the person is the image of God, creative and free (1995:25). He also associated the 'individual' with the 'I' that Descartes (1596-1650) found in reflective consciousness, and which led Descartes to make his famous declaration: *Cogito ergo sum* ('I think, therefore I am'). Merton believed that Descartes' claim situated our identity within the act of reflection, and this left us alienated from our inner depths (1995:26). The Cartesian was thus trying to know the self objectively. Merton insisted that the true self cannot reflect on itself; that it is apart from all subject-object dichotomies. For Merton, the *cogito* is not the starting point of philosophy – the starting point is *contemplation* (1995:26). Merton believed that in contemplation, we come to a simple and direct awareness: SUM, I am. Contemplation, therefore, does not leave us fixated upon ourselves, for it does not start with the thinking, self-aware subject implied in the *cogito* of Descartes, where one becomes aware of one's self as an object of sorts (1995:26). Contemplation is not '*consciousness of*' but pure consciousness, in which the subject as such disappears.

⁶²Jacques Maritain (1882-1973) was a French Catholic philosopher. Raised as a Protestant, he became an agnostic before converting to Catholicism in 1906. An author of more than 60 books, he helped to reawaken interest in St Thomas Aquinas during modern times; and played a prominent role in the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Pope Paul VI dedicated his 'Message to Men of Thought and of Science' at the close of Vatican II to Maritain, his long-time friend and mentor. Maritain's interests and works spanned many aspects of philosophy, including aesthetics, political theory, philosophy of science, metaphysics, the nature of education, liturgy and ecclesiology (Jacques Maritain – Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. 2014).

Here one is aware of one's self as 'a self-to-be-dissolved in self-giving, in love, in "letting-go," in ecstasy, in God.' One has come to the place that God has commanded to be left empty: 'the center, the existential altar which simply "IS"' (Merton 1968c:24).

Here there is 'no division between the subject and object... He IS and this reality absorbs everything else' (Merton 1961a:267). King (1995:26) agrees with Merton that one cannot speak of awareness with objective clarity, for it is the 'immediate experience of a ground which transcends experience' (Merton 1968c:24). The starting point is important. And the 'basic reality is being itself through them.' Thus the starting point should be the 'splendor of being and unity – a splendor in which (one) is one with all that is' (Merton 1968a:221). For Merton, the true Christian image of humanity begins with a 'mystical consciousness' of God and the human being together, in a state of union; and the fact that God has created us in God's own image. Non-reflective consciousness should thus be the basis of our understanding of humanity. In contrast, the notion that the reflective individual is the basis of everything else is more prevalent today (King 1995:28).⁶³ In terms thereof, the underlying principle is that 'I define myself by negating others.' Merton saw this individualism as radically opposed to the Bible and Christian tradition.⁶⁴

We are not individuals, we are persons and 'a person is defined by a relationship with others.' Our personal identity comes to light 'only when it fully confronts the 'other' (Merton 1961b:46).

As human beings, our existence lies in relationship. This truth, Merton believed, is discovered in contemplation. But the ego implied in the 'cogito' is unable to contemplate (King 1995:29). During his final years, Merton spoke of finding ourselves in the 'hidden ground of Love' in which we are all united (Merton 1985:115; 1989:112; 1970:133). For Merton, God as the ultimate self is the Self of every self. Merton spoke of the coming into the world with a false self, of being born with a 'mask that was selfish and self-centered' (King 1995:29). In other words, we are born in sin. Merton writes:

⁶³ This idea is in line with Cartesian thought, in terms of which the world is divided into three areas: matter (where the body lives), mind and God.

⁶⁴ Merton used the analogy of people moving around and bumping into one another, like billiard balls, with no real mutual relationship existing between them.

As long as I am no longer anybody else than the thing that was born of my mother, I am so far short of being the person I ought to be that I might as well not exist at all. In fact, it were better for me that I had not been born (1961a:34).

This illusion, this false self, is the self that sinful nature wants it to be – in an existence apart from God’s love. We find that our individuality must compete with everyone else’s individuality.

We are helplessly at odds:

I have what you have not. I am what you are not. I have taken what you have failed to take and I have seized what you could never get... and thus I spend my life admiring the distance between you and me; at times this even helps me to forget the other men who have what I have not and who have taken what I was too slow to take and who have seized what was beyond my reach... (1961a:28).

The ‘I’ that makes such demands is an illusion; it is not the true self, and it is incapable of loving truly (King 1995:30). In order to find the true self, one has to shed this illusory self. To think of one’s self as ‘nothing’ can be disconcerting, for, as King (1995:31) states, ‘one seems to disappear altogether. One is left with freedom indistinguishable from infinite Freedom. Whilst the exterior ego had centered itself on pride, the inner person can only be found in humility. Then the outer individual vanishes like smoke’. Of such a one, it can be said that:

Here is a man who is dead and buried and gone and his memory has vanished from the world of men and he no longer exists among the living who wander about in time: and will you call him proud because the sunlight fills the huge arc of sky over the country where he lived and died and was buried, back in the days when he existed? So it is with one who has vanished into God by pure contemplation (Merton 1961a:286).

For his ordination card, Merton selected an appropriate scriptural text: ‘He walked with God and was seen no more’ (Gen 5:24). Merton speculated that if one could ‘vanish’ into God, even just for a minute, one would not be the same thereafter. Only those who have known such a moment are ‘capable of appreciating the world and the things in it, for they know the world is centered on God and not on themselves’ (King1995:31). This ‘moment’, Merton emphasises, is not what he calls ‘psychological regression’, where there is an experience of certain loss of identity as one

slides into a warm, oceanic-like swoon.⁶⁵ Merton conceded that ‘in a transitional and early phase of mystical development’, there might be some regressive features. However, those who identify regression with mysticism are unlikely to reach maturity, since they would be ‘bogged down in this “peace” and “sweetness” and refuse to make the leap into a “new being”’ (1995:32). Mystic union, according to Merton, is not just a ‘cosmic’ or ‘oceanic’ feeling, since such feelings are essentially narcissistic. Merton did not concur with Huxley’s proposal that one can come to know the ‘transcendent’ by taking drugs. Merton communicated with Huxley, highlighting this difference of opinion. He emphasised that the transcendent experience involved a direct spiritual contact of two liberties, namely the divine liberty and the human liberty – in a tightly knit personal relationship. Such an experience, according to Merton, cannot be obtained from drugs. In his letter to Huxley, he stated that:

God is known not as an ‘object’, or as ‘him up there’ or ‘him in everything’ nor as ‘the All’, but as the biblical expression: I AM, or simply, AM... (Merton 1985:438).

Merton believed that the transcendent experience is found in the Christian, Buddhist and Sufi traditions (King 1995:34).⁶⁶ However, he perceived a significant difference between a Buddhist and himself: the former has a transcendent ontological awareness, while the Christian has a transcendent awareness of a personal God. The ‘person’ ‘...is a value which seems to be totally missing from Buddhist thought’ (Merton 1968d:118). According to King (1995:34), Buddhists are ‘radical, austere and ruthless’ in denying any reality to the ego-self. Without this radical stripping away of the ego, there is no mysticism. Merton, therefore, saw some similarity between Christian and Buddhist approaches – although the Christian would come to a theistic conclusion, whereas the Buddhist would not. Only the religious traditions which advocated a radical self-emptying were accepted by Merton as authentic, since only these could be alluding to the transcendent experience.

In the years during which Merton was Master of Novices, he introduced culture (poetry, literature, etc.) into the training curriculum. He wanted the novices to have a basic self-

⁶⁵ This type of experience is encountered particularly often in Taoist mysticism (Merton 1992:32).

⁶⁶ Christians speak of ‘having the mind of Christ’. Other traditions call it ‘Being,’ ‘Atman,’ ‘Pneuma’ or simply ‘silence’ (1985:15).

confidence; a certain level of identity – together with a sense of having ‘no self’. But how does one make sense of this apparent paradox? Perhaps Merton believed, as King (1995:36) suggests, that one should have a social identity and be able to relate to others in an ordinary way. But this social self should also have an existential dread that radically undercuts all ego-illusions. ‘Perhaps even a measure of social identity is necessary before one comes to the great question of Being and one’s own Nothingness’ (King 1995:36).

4.3.2 Psycho-spiritual (transpersonal) psychology

Psycho-spiritual, or transpersonal psychology, represents the fourth major force in psychology, the first being the classic psychoanalytic approach, the second, behaviourism and the third, the humanistic approach.⁶⁷ ‘Trans’ in Latin means ‘beyond’, while ‘personal’ is taken from the Latin word for “mask”, meaning that transpersonal psychology is concerned with experiences which identify some deeper and more enduring sense of self that is beyond the persona or mask presented to the public – and which is also beyond, or more than, the conditioned ego (Milburn 2014). A major feature of transpersonal psychology is the premise that western and eastern varieties of psychology and spiritual frameworks can work together. This is accomplished by merging the emphasis on the ego, outer objectivity and pathology derived from the West, and the contemplative approach of the East, with its emphasis on the exploration and consciousness of the inner self. Transpersonal psychology is concerned with the nature of the mature personality; and the concept of psychological well-being and the techniques aimed at achieving it have become familiar aspects in the exploration of consciousness, stress management, self-understanding, self-acceptance, relaxation training, meditation, personal growth, self-awareness, spirituality, creativity, connecting with the ‘higher Self’, and the answering of the question: ‘Who am I?’. It propagates the belief that we experience our everyday, ordinary ego-self in a way that is parallel to, or in alignment with, our higher Self, which connects us to the transpersonal realms. Each person is led to a path that is uniquely his or her own – a path which, throughout one’s lifetime, takes one more deeply into one’s own nature and one’s own connection with the inner Divine. Merton had a progressive interest in psychology and applied many of the techniques today common in the field of transcendental psychology in his duties as

⁶⁷ The Transpersonal Psychology Association was established in 1966 by Abraham Maslow (who incidentally also established the Humanistic Psychology Association).

novice master, assisting the young monks to ‘break though barriers’ and to create the space required for their *inner self* to awaken.

4.3.3 The awakening of the inner self

In discussing the inner self and the awakening thereof, Merton (2003:6) starts off by saying that ‘...there is and can be no special planned technique for discovering and awakening one’s inner self, because the inner self is, first of all, a spontaneity that is nothing if not free’. This hints at the difficulty of defining the ‘inner self’. This inner self, according to Merton, is not a part of our being, like a motor in a car, but ‘...our entire reality itself, on its highest and most personal and most existential level. It is like life, and it is life: it is our spiritual life when it is most alive. It is the life by which everything else in us lives and moves...’ (2003:6). Merton draws a comparison between the inner self and God, as follows:

The inner self is as secret as God and, like Him, it evades every concept that tries to seize hold of it with full possession. It is a life that cannot be held and studied as an object, because it is not ‘a thing’. It is not reached and coaxed forth from hiding by any process under the sun, including meditation (2003:6).

In endeavouring to answer the question as to how we can awaken the inner self, Merton suggests that all we can do is to create within ourselves the silence, the humility, the detachment, the purity of heart which are required if the inner self is to make some shy, unpredictable manifestation of its presence (2003:7). It would certainly appear that ancient traditions, through the transmission of archetypal symbols, liturgical notes, art, philosophy and myth (which has so long been absent in the West), had the ability to nourish the inner self from the cradle to the grave. Since the inmost ‘I’ is the perfect image of God, according to Merton (2003:18), when that ‘I’ awakens, it finds within itself the Presence of Him whose image it is. At that point, by a paradox beyond all human expression, the ‘I’ and God seem to have but one single ‘I’; they breathe and live and act as one; but neither is seen as an object.⁶⁸ This ‘I’, the real self, is utterly simple, humble, poor and unassuming. It is simply ourselves and nothing more. Nothing more, nothing less (2003:11).

⁶⁸Merton suggests that all the ‘I’s, collectively, form one ‘mystical Person’ which is ‘Christ’ (2003:22).

One question that arises concerns the value of such an awakening of the true self for an individual, and how it would contribute to society as a whole. According to Merton (2003:23), when the 'I' is confronted with the 'Thou' and the two are one, communities are changed through love. For the Christian, this means that one is not merely 'alone with the Alone' in the Neoplatonic⁶⁹ sense, but that he/she is one with all the other brothers and sisters in Christ. This inner self is inseparable from Christ and hence, in a mysterious way, it is inseparable from all the other 'I's who live in Christ, so that they all form one 'mystical person'. It seems that Merton's message was in line with Jesus' teaching, as evident from His prayer:

That they all may be one; as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in Us: that the world may believe that Thou hast sent Me ... I in them, and Thou in Me, that they may become one *and* perfectly united ... (John 17:21, 23a).

James Finley's hypothesis in *Merton's Palace of Nowhere* is that Merton's spirituality, in one way or another, revolves around the theme of *human identity* (1978:21). Merton repeatedly draws us to the realisation that the deepest self is not so much our own self, as the self which is one with the 'Risen and Deathless Christ in Whom all are fulfilled in One' (Merton 1967:42). As Finley (1978:21) rightfully states: 'Merton leads us along the journey to God in which the self that begins the journey is not the self that arrives.' The crux of the discourse on the difference between the *true self* and the *false self* lies in the question: Who Am I? This question does not relate to this or that aspect of my being, but rather to who I am relatively before God. We all, to some extent at least, know ourselves in relation to other human beings. Our relationship with others, from our early infancy, helps to shape our 'empirical identity', though it does not create the core of our being (Merton 2003:23). At no point does Merton deny the importance of the empirical self that we call our personality. On the contrary, in the spiritual life, a deep respect must be accorded to our 'whole person', including the day-to-day realities of life and the self that is formed by them. Merton's advice in this regard is that our identity should not be grounded in

⁶⁹Neoplatonism is the modern term for a school of religious and mystical philosophy that took shape in the 3rd century CE. It was founded by Plotinus and based on the teachings of Plato and earlier Platonists. Neoplatonists would have simply considered themselves Platonists – but the modern distinction is based on the perception that their philosophy contained sufficiently unique interpretations of Plato to make it substantially different from what Plato actually wrote and believed. Neoplatonism attempted to reconcile Christian doctrine with the classical philosophies of Greek and Roman society (Neoplatonism 2014).

our ego, but rather in our true self (2003:22). The true self, states Finley (1978:22-33), is not some obscure and hidden identity that we are required to drag forth from the darkness, like a rabbit out of a hat. Rather, it is our ‘whole self’ before God: ‘...the self the Father created us to become!’ (1978:23). It is the self that simply exists; that IS. This true self can only be experienced in ‘simple awareness’. This highlights the close relationship between – and the importance of – *contemplative awareness* and the search for the true self. The spirituality advocated by Merton revolves around the fact that the whole of one’s spiritual life finds its fulfilment in bringing one’s life into a transforming, loving communion with the ‘ineffable God’ (1978:23). As Finley points out, this is both the ‘raison d’etre’ and fruition of our deepest self. In fact, this communion reveals that we ourselves are ineffable, being made in the likeness of God and called to union with Him forever. This union is impossible to grasp fully, let alone express in words. A close perusal of Merton’s writings pertaining to the understanding of the true self, however, brings us to the brink of the important insight that our own ultimate identity is one with Christ. In a way, knowing one’s true self can be equated to knowing God.

Clearly, the terms ‘true self’ and ‘false self’ were not coined by Merton (Finley 1978:27); nor did he claim to be the founder of a new spirituality. The value of Merton lies in his ability to bring important elements of various traditions together in new configurations that are meaningful to contemporary women and men.

4.3.4 Closing thoughts on the ‘false’ self

Merton found his concept of the *false self* in scripture. The book of Genesis makes it clear that, from the very beginning, humanity was created to live in a relationship with God. Likewise, Genesis reveals that the Fall brought about spiritual death by damaging this relationship with God. Merton draws a direct comparison between the false self and sin:

To say I was born in sin is to say I came into the world with a false self. I was born in a mask. I came into existence under a sign of contradiction, being someone that I was never intended to be and therefore a denial of what I am supposed to be. And thus I came into existence at the same time because from the very start I was something that I was not (1961a:33-34).

In the above passage, Merton shifts the focus of sin⁷⁰ from the realm of morality to that of ontology. For Merton, the matter of ‘who we are’ always precedes that of ‘what we do’. Regarding the false self, he has this to say:

Every one of us is shadowed by an illusory person: a false self...This is the man I want myself to be but who cannot exist, because God does not know anything about him. And to be unknown of God is altogether too much privacy...My false self and private self is the one who gets to exist outside the reach of God’s will and God’s love – outside of reality and outside of life. And such a self cannot help but be an illusion (1961a:35).

The false self stands between our true selves and God, and constructs ‘...its own dark universe of disoriented nothingness which it claims as its prized creation and crowning glory’ (Finley 1978:37). This self clothes itself with all kinds of activities that keep it preoccupied with tasks, in the hope that these will give reality to its existence. The false self knows that if it were to become silent within and without, it would discover itself to be ‘nothing’ (1978:39). Making such a discovery would mean ‘undoing’ itself.⁷¹

Although Merton never taught any specific technique to realise the true self, he did write about the path to follow in order to recover one’s true self and regain one’s true identity. Merton (1961b:111) describes this path as follows:

If we would return to God, and find ourselves in Him, we must reverse Adam’s journey,⁷² we must go back by the way he came. The path lies through the center of our own soul. Adam withdrew into himself from God and then passed through himself and went forth into creation. We must withdraw ourselves (in the right and Christian sense) from exterior things, and pass through the center of our souls to find God. We must recover possession of our true selves by liberation from anxiety and fear and inordinate desire.

In the text above, Merton touches briefly on the importance of silence and solitude in the quest for union and contentment. Henri Nouwen, who visited Merton once at Gethsemani, reflects that there were many influences that directed Merton to silence and contemplation. It was the

⁷⁰Merton views sin not essentially as an action, but rather as an identity (1978:31).

⁷¹As a result of this, most people cannot bear much misanthropic self-reflection.

⁷²Merton (2003:35) speaks of Adam’s fall in terms of Adam falling through the centre of himself, thus placing himself between himself and God.

influence of books, people and events, amongst other factors, that directed him to Gethsemani to become a monk. These influences, as Nouwen (1972:19) observes, can only be understood ‘...if we keep in mind his intense personality which registered with a maximum sensitivity everything that he read, saw and experienced, always posing the question as large as life itself: “what can I say ‘yes’ to, without reserve?”’

4.3.5 Closing thoughts on the ‘true’ self

Merton clearly teaches us that we are ‘in’ this world, and inextricably part of it. It is in our relationship to, and in, the world that we discover our true selves (Finley 1978:43-52). The key, ironically, to the discovery of our true self in the world lies in ‘detachment’ from the world through acceptance. Merton uses the cross as an analogy on how to embody this acceptance:

Once we have accepted the cross... then we become able to realise that the world is in ourselves and the world in ourselves is good and redeemed. And we can accept in ourselves both the evil and the good which are in us and in everybody else and which go to make up the world... We are the world... but we are it as redeemed. Then we see right away that the world is a question of interpenetration (Merton 1971:155-156).

How, then, do we give birth to the true self? And even more importantly, as Merton writes, who is asking the question? The mystic, according to Finley (1978:92), ‘...knows little or nothing about mysticism in the sense of concerning himself with experiences and techniques. Rather, the mystic is simply one who sees things as they are...’ It is within this freedom from any attachment that we find our true self in God. Merton writes:

The inner self is precisely that self that cannot be tricked or manipulated by anyone, even the devil. He (the true self) is like a very shy wild animal that never appears at all whenever an alien presence is at hand, and comes out only when all is peaceful, in silence, when he is untroubled and alone. He cannot be lured by anyone or anything, because he responds to no lure except that of divine freedom (Merton 2003:5).

The answer to the mystery of giving birth to the true self does not lie in ‘...some esoteric secret, some strenuous and bizarre technique that would force the inner self into the open’ (Finley

1978:92). In fact, Merton assures us that the opposite is true. Merton would have us realise that the true self is God's action and no action of our own can force God into revealing Himself to us. Nor can we force God to reveal God's most secret treasure, which is our own true self. Merton warns us that, in seeking the realisation of our true self:

We should not look for a 'method' or 'system' but cultivate an 'attitude,' an 'outlook': faith, openness, attention, reverence, expectation, supplication, trust, joy. All those finally permeate our being with love in so far as our living faith tells us we are in the presence of God, that we live in Christ, that in the Spirit of God we 'see' God our Father without 'seeing.' We know him in 'unknowing.' Faith is the bond that unites us to him in the Spirit who gives us light and love (cited in Finley 1978:93).

The emphasis, as seen in the above text, is on 'faith'. The birth of the inner realisation is one with the birth of faith. 'In faith the weight is shifted from our poor ego into the infinite abyss of God, in whom alone we find our ultimate self...' (1978:93). One more factor that is needed in realising the true self, in addition to faith (and the hope that accompanies it), is love. 'It is Christ's love for us that establishes the true self's reality' (1978:96). It is love that unites us with God and with our fellow human beings. Finley (1978:97) expresses this beautifully, as follows: 'By our love and our need for love we become for one another midwives of the true self.' It is this love that manifests our true self, for it does not spring from the ego but from God. One could even go as far as to say that for Merton, true love (the love of Christ) and our true selves are one and the same substance. Ultimately, it is genuine love for others that leads to the death of the false self and the emergence of the true self.

4.4 Conclusion

The true self can only come to fruition, once complete transformation has taken place, in a manner that is reminiscent of the complete transformation that takes place during the life-cycle of the Monarch butterfly: the tiny caterpillar hatches from an egg on a Milkweed leaf, and undergoes a metamorphosis to become a glorious butterfly.⁷³ The false self fears such a total transformation. The end result of this process is a *pure heart*, which is:

⁷³See YouTube video clip at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7AUeM8MbaIk>. David Benner, in *Spirituality and the Awakening Self*, also uses the transformational process of the butterfly in order to explain the process of the unfolding self. Benner defines 'transformation' as an 'enduring expansion of consciousness that expresses itself in

An unconditional and totally humble surrender to God, a total acceptance of ourselves and of our situation as willed by him. It means the renunciation of all deluded images of ourselves (1978:101-102).

One can, indeed, be so transformed that one existentially realise that ‘for me to live is Christ’. As Finley (1978:112) states, one realises obscurely in one’s being that simple, concrete acts are open to a transformation through which they are ‘not only Godlike, but they become God’s own acts’ (Merton 1950:14). This transformation takes place in God’s time. The responsibility on the part of the individual is simply to be patient. The true self is not realised by first having a clear understanding of the path of realisation and then following it. Rather, it is realised by walking in faith; and as one walks on, the path becomes clear. It is a process of transformation in which God transforms an individual into Himself; a process whereby the union that already exists is fully restored. Once the true self is discovered, the individual cannot help but see the world in a different light. To see life *as it is*. This chapter investigated Merton’s concept of *true self* versus *false self*, and explored the mystery of the awakening of the true self - from a psycho-spiritual development point of view. Merton teaches that it is within contemplation that the false self, dissolves, and the true self makes its shy appearance.

basically four ways: (1) increased awareness; (2) a broader, more inclusive identity; (3) a larger framework for meaning making and (4) a reorganisation of personality that results in a changed way of being in the world’ (Benner 2012:58-59). Benner states that the mystics (and he includes Merton amongst them) are the most helpful cartographers of the transformational journey of the awakening self (2012:58). The transformation of the caterpillar into a butterfly, metaphorically representing the journey of the human unfolding, differs from the latter in the sense that the human journey is not nearly as linear as the metamorphosis of the caterpillar/butterfly. Within human development, progress is usually interwoven with regression, expansion with contradiction and broadening and opening with retreat to narrower and safer places.

Chapter 5

MERTON AND CONTEMPLATION

5.1 Introduction

Judging from the alarming percentage of people suffering from mental illnesses today, teenage suicide rates on the rise, a general ‘hopelessness’, and the tendency of most individuals to constantly be active, the world in general seems to be in the throes of an ‘inward crisis’. Contemplation, involving the ‘whole man’, and proceeding ‘from the “center” of man’s being’ (Merton 1969:5), may conceivably offer a possible solution to these problems. Merton’s own need for solitude induced him to focus acutely on the benefits of contemplation; and this concept, in particular, is central to his thought. In his view, contemplation is the primary reason for human existence (Merton 1951:24,76). Merton’s understanding of contemplation is predominantly Christological. For this reason, in order to grasp the fundamental aspects of Merton’s view of contemplation, it is necessary to understand it in the light of Adam’s fall from Paradise (Merton 2003:35),⁷⁴ which was essentially a fall from unity.⁷⁵ Merton, in line with the thinking of St Augustine, albeit in a more cautious application of the narrative, argues that in the Fall, Adam (representing man’s interior and spiritual/contemplative self) was led astray by Eve (the embodiment of man’s exterior, material, practical/active self). Man fell from unity with God into the multiplicity, complication and distraction that comprise the fruits of an active, worldly existence. Since man was now entirely dependent on exterior things, he became ‘...an exile in a world of objects, each one capable of deluding and enslaving him’ (Merton 2003:35). In simple terms, man lost sight of his ‘true self’, thereby also losing his true identity.

Contemplation, as a phenomenon, engaged Merton for most of his adult years. Shannon aptly points out, in his foreword to *The Inner Experience* (Merton 2003:xv), that Merton ‘...did not intend, nor did he even believe in the possibility of, a once-and-for-all treatment of contemplation that would be complete and definitive’. Merton wrote copiously on contemplation

⁷⁴ Merton’s most important work on contemplation was entitled ‘Notes on Contemplation’. The implication is that it is by no means definitive and final, but rather a work-in-progress.

⁷⁵ The Platonizing Greek Fathers even taught that the division of humanity into male and female was a result of the Fall (Merton 2003:35).

and the contemplative life. In an endeavour to identify the essential, consistent factors that can be said to underlie his views on this theme, like a common thread or leitmotif, the following questions can be asked: Does Merton offer a distinct definition for contemplation? Does he define a structure and/or propose a process to be followed? Does he equate contemplation with meditation? The aim of this chapter is to deal with these and other challenging questions, with a view to attaining a deeper overall insight into Merton's understanding and application of contemplation. As a starting point for this investigation, it should be noted from the outset that as far as Merton is concerned, contemplation should simply comprise the experience of '...God in a luminous darkness which is the perfection of faith illuminating our inmost self' (Merton 2003:33-34). He adds that, although elements such as lingering enjoyment, timelessness and a kind of suave passivity form part of contemplation, the nature of contemplation does not reside primarily in enjoyment, pleasure, happiness, peace, etc.; rather, it is found in the 'transcendent experience of reality and truth within the safe environment of utter love'. Merton (2003:34) explains the importance of contemplation as part of one's spiritual life as follows:

Contemplation is man's highest and most essential spiritual activity. It is his most creative and dynamic affirmation of his divine sonship...it is the awakening of Christ within us (Merton 2003:34).

Apart from death, which brings one to the point of becoming one's 'true self', Merton believed contemplation to be the only other way to arrive at this point. It is in contemplation that the 'true self' awakens. This does not imply, however, that one should henceforth remain the same 'self' throughout one's life, simply retaining the same individual ego, with a new set of activities and a different or 'improved' system of religious practices. The contemplative must indeed be born of the Spirit, who is free, and who teaches the inmost depths of the heart by creating, invisibly, a new identity – an identity which is in union with the Divine and one with Christ (Shannon 2005:94).

5.2 What is contemplation?

5.2.1 Defining contemplation

The primary question which this chapter will address is twofold: an attempt will be made to determine, firstly, whether one, simple, clear definition exists for contemplation, and secondly, how Merton defines it.⁷⁶ With roots in the Latin *contemplatio*, the lexical range of the English word ‘contemplation’ can be quite broad, ranging from the connotation of ‘beholding, or looking at with attention and thought,’ to that of ‘religious musing’ or ‘devout meditation’ (with the latter reflecting the earliest English meaning of the word) (Sherman 2014:209). The word ‘contemplation’ is the Latin rendering of the Greek *theoria*, an attempt to translate the Hebrew *da’at*, which refers to a loving knowledge of God.⁷⁷ Merton himself defined contemplation more than a hundred times, but as King (1995:37) points out, the variety of his definitions, together with the difficulty of defining divine concepts, makes it impossible to state precisely what he meant.⁷⁸ In popular terms, to contemplate something is to think about it, considering it from a variety of angles. This does not tally with the classical authors’ understanding of spirituality at all – nor does it correspond to that of Merton. In classical terms, contemplation is a particular kind of experience, usually occurring in the context of prayer. It is a sheer experience of loving presence, which comes to the contemplative as a gift. The Latin roots of the word ‘contemplation’, namely *cum* (‘with’) and *templum* (‘temple’), connote the sacredness of this experience. In view of the above, a simple definition of contemplation could therefore be tentatively offered as follows: ‘a loving presence of what is’. For Merton, who believed that he had his being in God, this meant being present in God – finding God in all things, and all things in God.

One normally tends to associate contemplation with silence and withdrawal, even to the point of withdrawal from the world. In classical terms, however, contemplation refers to a complete openness to the immediate presence in the world; a perception of things directly as they are, not in order to judge them, but rather with a response of kindness and love. Thus, contemplation does not necessarily refer to a state of quietness and stillness. It may also occur in a highly active

⁷⁶ Merton rarely spoke of ‘mysticism’. He preferred to use the term ‘contemplation’.

⁷⁷ In Jewish mysticism, *da’at* is the location (the mystical state) where all ten sephirot in the Tree of Life are united as one.

⁷⁸ Merton explicitly warned against ‘pseudo-scientific’ attempts to define contemplation (1961a:6).

and ‘noisy’ context. In this sense, contemplation is an all-embracing quality of presence, including not only one’s own inner experience, but also a direct perception of and response to the situation and needs of the world around one. Rather than engaging in an attempt to balance contemplation and action, it is perhaps more useful to see contemplation *in action*, undergirding and embracing everything. In this way, all one’s thoughts and actions can be united in prayerful openness and loving responsiveness. It is contemplation, or at least a contemplative attitude, that grounds our presence in the real world. Without this grounding in things, *as they are*, the spiritual way that entails knowing may lose itself in intellectual abstraction; the way that entails action may succumb to blind missionary zeal or burnout; and the way that involves feeling may easily give way to self-absorbed sentimentality. In psychological terms, contemplation is understood as being *immediate*, grounded in the here-and-now. Plans for the future and remembrance of the past can take place during contemplation, but they do not distract one’s attention from one’s desire for God or from the needs of the situation at hand. Plans and memories, like thoughts, feelings and sense perceptions, simply comprise part of what is happening in the present moment. In contemplation, awareness is *open*, not focused on one thing to the exclusion of others. Most people have been taught to concentrate (focus attention) on one thing at a time. The contemplative experience, however, indicates that one functions more lovingly, and in a manner that is more in touch with one’s desire for God’s guidance, through an openness to *what is*. Thus, many contemplatively oriented practices involve an ‘unlearning’ of old habits of focusing attention. In place thereof, a contemplative attitude, involving a simple willingness to be open to God’s movements, leadings and invitations, is to be nurtured.

On the basis of the foregoing, the following questions arise: What exactly is contemplation? What are its characteristics? How can it best be described? Is it simply an experience that can be explained in psychological terms? Is it a technique that can be mastered with extensive practice? When Merton speaks of contemplation, he does so in line with the thinking of Meister Eckhart and St John of the Cross. Thus, instead of offering a technique as such, he focuses on some elementary aspects of contemplative prayer and offers some insights and guidance on how to avail oneself of the transforming effects of prayer and meditation. Merton’s writings in this regard are relevant precisely because he belongs to our own time, and thus shares the concerns of the current age. Instead of dwelling on techniques of contemplative prayer, Merton facilitates an

understanding of the nature of contemplation. This subject is dealt with in *New Seeds of Contemplation* (1961a:1), which comprises a cogent exposition of what should be understood as contemplation:

Contemplation is the highest expression of our intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is a spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is a gratitude for life, for awareness and for being. It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant source.

Merton goes on to remark that contemplation is, above all, ‘...awareness of the reality of that Source’ (1961a:1). In other words, it is an intimate knowledge of the transcendent source of life and being, surpassing reason and faith. It is a knowing through unknowing, as well as a knowing beyond knowing. The contemplative experience seems to have something in common with the appreciation of beautiful poetry, music or art. But it also goes beyond the aesthetic intuition that is involved in the appreciation of poetry, music and art (1961a:2). It even surpasses philosophy and exceeds the boundaries of human knowledge; it is beyond explanations and dialogue – and also beyond the ‘false self’. In order to enter into the realm of contemplation, one must, in a certain sense, ‘die to’ this false self, or allow it to die, in order to allow the ‘true self’ to awaken. Contemplation therefore supersedes every form of intuition and experience, whether in terms of art, philosophy, theology or liturgy, or whether in the context of ordinary levels of love and belief. In fact, contemplation is compatible with all these things, for it is their ‘highest fulfillment’ (1961a:2).

Contemplation reaches out towards the knowledge and experience of the transcendent and ineffable God. It entails a profound awareness of the existence of God, which cannot be expressed or explained. It is a gift of awareness of the Real within that which is real. According to Merton (1961a:4), contemplation is also a response to a call – a call from Him who has no voice, but who speaks in everything that is. A life of contemplation, therefore, implies two levels of awareness: firstly, an awareness of the questions being asked, and secondly, an awareness of the answers (1961a:4). The question turns out to be the answer itself. All this is summed up in one awareness, which is not a proposition, but an experience: ‘I am’ (1961a:4). Contemplation is much more than a mere consideration of abstract truths about God; more than meditation on the

things in which one believes. It entails being ‘awakened’, ‘enlightened’, and having a sense of belonging and of being loved. As Merton (1961a:243) states:

[It is a]...deep and simplified spiritual activity in which the mind and will rest in a unified and simple concentration upon God, turned to Him, intent upon Him and absorbed in His own light, with a simple gaze which is perfect adoration because it silently tells God that we have left everything else and desire even to leave our own selves for His sake, and that He alone is important to us.

It is the summit of the Christian’s life of prayer, ‘...for the Lord desires nothing of us so much as to become, himself, our “way”, our “truth and life”’ (Merton 1969:72). By dying to oneself and to all ‘ways’, one becomes one with the Father through Christ. Merton explained his own method of prayer to Abdul Aziz, with whom he was corresponding. The text is significant because it touches on many of the themes presented above and provides an indication of Merton’s own experience of these.

He writes:

Now you ask me about my own method of meditation. Strictly speaking I have a very simple way of prayer. It is centered entirely on attention to the presence of God and His will and His love...Yet it does not mean imagining anything or conceiving a precise image of God, for to my mind this would be a kind of idolatry. On the contrary, it is a matter of adoring Him as invisible and infinitely beyond our comprehension and realizing Him as all...If I am still present, myself, this I recognize as an obstacle about which I can do nothing unless He Himself removes the obstacle (1985:43-67).⁷⁹

5.2.2 What contemplation is *not*

Now that the question of what contemplation *is* has been touched upon, one can approach this question differently, with a view to arriving at a more comprehensive understanding of the concept, by asking: What does *not* comprise contemplation? Are certain elements excluded from contemplation? As already stated, the concept of ‘contemplation’ – like those of ‘spirituality’ and ‘mysticism’ – is almost impossible to explain. This is so, partly because contemplation does not

⁷⁹ This passage explains Merton’s ordinary way of prayer or meditation. It does not entail thinking about anything; rather, it is a direct seeking the face of the Invisible.

naturally constitute a part of the ‘false self’ and is therefore not easily understood or explained on an intellectual level. Merton states that ‘...there is an irreducible opposition between the deep transcendent self that awakens only in contemplation, and the superficial, external self which we commonly identify with the first person singular’ (1961a:7). Contemplation does not ‘arrive’ at reality after a process of deduction, but rather by means of an intuitive awakening in which one’s free and personal reality becomes alive to its own existential depths, which open out into the mystery of God (1961a:9). The contemplative is not merely one who chooses to devote most of his time to pondering, or who has a predilection for sitting around with a ‘vacant stare’ (1961a:9). Contemplation is also not mere prayerfulness, or a simple tendency to find peace and satisfaction in liturgical rites. Furthermore, contemplative intuition is not more commonly found in persons with a particular personality type or temperament. It can never be the object of calculated ambition, and is not an objective that one plans to attain by means of one’s practical reason. Rather, it is the ‘living water of the spirit that we thirst for, like a hunted deer thirsting after a river in the wilderness’ (1961a:10).

There are those who believe that contemplation refers to some form of trance or ecstasy, or to hearing voices or seeing visions. This, too, is a misconception. Contemplation does not denote the emotional ‘fire’ or sweetness that comes with religious exaltation. It is not ‘enthusiasm, the sense of being “seized” by an element of force and swept into liberation, by mystical frenzy’ (1961a:10-11). Nor is it the gift of prophecy. ‘In the end,’ says Merton, ‘the contemplative suffers the anguish of realizing that he *no longer knows what God is*. He may or may not mercifully realize that, after all, this is a great gain, because God is not a “*what*,” not a “*thing*”’ (1961a:13). One of the essential characteristics of the contemplative experience lies precisely in this factor – the realization that there is no ‘what’ that can be called God. There is ‘no such thing’ as God, because God is neither a ‘what’ nor a ‘thing’, but a pure ‘Who’. As Merton puts it: ‘He is the “They” before whom our inmost “I” springs into awareness’ (1961a:13). Merton emphasizes that contemplation is not a matter of simple quietism, where one simply sits passively and ceases to be active, with no thoughts and without doing anything at all. Merton (1969:70) states that on the contrary, this kind of quietism ‘...leads one into a mere void without any interior, spiritual life, in which distractions and emotional drives gradually assert themselves at the expense of all mature, balanced activity of the mind and heart’. He adds: ‘True

contemplation 'is not a psychological trick but a theological grace' (1969:70). It is nothing other than a gift. One cannot become a contemplative merely by 'blocking out' realities and remaining alone with oneself in darkness. One who does so, on the basis of practical reasoning on the subject and without an interior vocation, simply enters into an artificial darkness of one's own making. Such a person is not in the presence of the Transcendent One, but rather that of an idol, in the form of one's own complacent identity. His (or her) life is 'nothing' – not in the dynamic, mysterious sense in which the 'nothing', *nada*, of the mystic is paradoxically also the all, the *todo*, of God, but merely in a sense that reflects the nothingness of a finite being left to himself and absorbed in his own triviality.

Merton (1969:69-71) discusses the danger of quietism (also pseudo-quietism) as a form of false spirituality and warns those who have read books about mysticism without fully understanding them, against this danger. He explains that the problem with quietism (in its various guises) is that it often leads to a negative spiritual life in which the individual's practice amounts to nothing but a cessation of prayer. Such individuals imagine that by ceasing to pray, they enter into contemplation. This, according to Merton, merely leads one into a 'void without any interior', as pointed out above. To persist in this blank state may prove to be very harmful spiritually, morally and mentally. By simply following ordinary ways of prayer, without any preconceptions or complications, one will be far better able to dispose oneself to receive the contemplative 'gift' when the appropriate time arrives. The contemplative way is therefore in no sense a deliberate 'technique' of self-emptying in order to produce an esoteric experience. Contemplation is not a static awareness of metaphysical essences apprehended as spiritual objects, in an unchanging and eternal manner. It is not meditation on abstract ideas, but rather a religious apprehension of God. In simple terms, the gift of contemplation is not something strange and esoteric which is set aside for a select few. Rather, it is the deepest experience of the love that God has for all of His creation.⁸⁰ It is also not an end in itself, but a means to arrive at union with God.

⁸⁰ For Merton, 'love is both the starting point of contemplation and its fruition' (Merton 1951:13).

5.3 Contemplation: a process of listening

King (1995:38) draws an analogy between contemplation and listening to a speaker giving a talk. If the speaker is eloquent and the talk is interesting, the listener literally becomes absorbed in the process and “loses” himself for the moment. Similarly, Merton often refers to contemplation as a process of *listening in silence*. In contemplation, he explains, the listener becomes ‘absorbed in what is said’, and is not aware of himself as existing outside of what is being spoken (Merton 1985:571). In order to lose oneself in listening, one must have faith in the speaker (or at least in the process). If one is skeptical, one will hold back and the ‘I’ will not disappear. For this reason, Merton claimed, ‘...faith is the first step towards contemplation’ (Merton 1951:254, 1961a:126). In both intense listening and contemplation, the listener can forget the immediate surroundings, as he (or she) is separate from the world of the senses. Similarly, in contemplation there is a ‘darkening’ of the senses; God comes as ‘darkness to my experience’, (Merton 1949:29). In contemplation, the listener’s ‘activity of the faculties is at least to some extent impeded by the action of God’ (1951:230). In contemplation, as in the case of intense listening, the listener *appears* to be passive. Sometimes the listener (or contemplative) is so immersed in hearing that s/he not only identifies with the message, but even with the speaker himself. In such an event, the listener experiences the speaker as ‘being active’ within himself. The listener seems to know what the speaker knows, and desires what the speaker desires (King 1995:40). In a certain sense, it would be accurate to say that the speaker ‘lives in the listener’; or even that the listener lives in the speaker. Likewise, in contemplation, God lives in the contemplative and the contemplative lives in God. God is no longer perceived as an object; the contemplative is unified with God in the transcendent subjectivity of love. He is completely transformed into God, to the point that the contemplative himself (i.e., his false self) no longer exists (Merton 1949:74). God and the soul of the contemplative have ‘fused’ and become one – a single ‘I’. The Greek Fathers spoke of this ‘fusion’/‘union’ as ‘divinization’; and Merton adopted the term (Merton 1951:15-16).⁸¹ This notion of identification with the subjectivity of another provides a means of understanding the numerous references to love that abound in Merton’s accounts of contemplation. For Merton, love always involves passing out of oneself in order to identify with another. He writes:

⁸¹ The highest peak of contemplation, according to Merton (1951:13), is a mystical union with God, in which the soul and its faculties are “transformed” in God’.

All love tends to ecstasy, in the sense that it takes us out of ourselves and makes us live in the object of our love. In the case of human love, this ecstasy can never be more than a figure of speech, or a mere matter of moral and psychological agreement. But since our souls are spiritual substances and since God is pure Spirit, there is nothing to prevent a union between ourselves and Him... (1951:280).

The unitive knowledge of God in love is not a knowledge of an object by a subject, but a very different and transcendent kind of knowledge, in which the created 'self' seems to disappear in God and to know Him alone. In passive purification, the self undergoes a kind of emptying and an apparent destruction, until, reduced to emptiness, it no longer knows itself apart from God (Merton 1969:54). The contemplative is required to trust in God - have trust in His voice - and to have confidence in His mercy (1969:70). Therefore, the contemplative way is in no sense a deliberate technique of self-emptying in order to produce an esoteric experience. On the contrary, it is an almost incomprehensible call from God, which draws the contemplative into solitude and plunges him into darkness and silence, '...not to withdraw and to protect him from peril, but to bring him safely through untold dangers by a miracle of love and power' (1969:70-71). Contemplation, in Merton's view, is not 'a' way. For him, Christ is the *only* way. The 'desert' is therefore only a metaphor to explain the level of emptiness that the contemplative enters, having forgotten himself and taken the invisible Christ as his way. This being so, there are three possible ways, mainly speaking, for a person to enter (or be led into) contemplation. The first, in the words of Merton (1961a:275), is '...a sudden emptying of the Soul in which images vanish, concepts and words are silent, and freedom and clarity suddenly open out within you until your whole being embraces the wonder, the depth, the obviousness and yet the emptiness and unfathomable incomprehensibility of God'. The second, and most usual, entrance into contemplation is through a desert of aridity in which, although one can see nothing, feel nothing and apprehend nothing, being conscious only of a certain interior suffering and anxiety, yet is yet drawn into and held in this darkness and aridity because it is the only place in which one finds stability and peace. In time, the contemplative realises that this is actually God revealing Himself. In the third way God is hidden in a 'cloud', but the soul experiences His presence as love, as a 'terrific emptiness' (1961a:278). In reality, the contemplative is experiencing the emptiness and purity of his own faculties – an experience produced by the

effect of God's love. Nevertheless, since it is God Himself directly producing this effect, the experience is more than purely subjective – it reveals things to the contemplative about God that cannot be known in any other way (1961a:278).

Although Merton warns against trying to 'map' or 'measure' the progress of contemplation, there are some markers on the way. He describes one such marker as follows:

As long as there is an "I" that is the definite subject of a contemplative experience, an "I" that is aware of itself and of its contemplation, an "I" that can possess a certain "degree of spirituality", then we have not yet "passed over the Red Sea", we have not yet "gone out of Egypt" (1961a:279).

This analogy directly relates to the 'inner journey' referred to in this study, comprising a journey away from the outer 'I' to the inner 'I'.⁸² It is a journey to a foreign country, and the contemplative has to travel far in that region before reaching his own country – only to realize, paradoxically, that he has been there all along. The next 'step' in contemplation occurs when the contemplative is 'transported' from one degree to another. Merton (1961a:283) explains this as follows: '...what happens is that the separate identity that is *you* apparently disappears, indistinguishable from infinite Freedom, love identified with Love'. Although strictly speaking this is not an experience as such, the contemplative may recall it as an experience.: '...you do not have an experience, you become Experience' (1961a:283). This condition, he suggests, can be referred to as 'emptiness', 'freedom', 'perfect love', 'pure renunciation' – the 'fruition of God' (1961a:284). He adds, in further clarification: '...it is freedom living and circulating in God, Who is Freedom. It is love loving in Love. It is the purity of God rejoicing in His own liberty' (1961a:284). Ultimately, it is not something 'infused' by God into a created subject, but God living 'in God' and identifying His creation with Himself (1961a:284). Such a contemplative state is the perfection of humility, where only God is left and the contemplative has completely disappeared. In this state, the contemplative has found the 'cloud', the 'obscure sweetness of God'. Indeed, the contemplative in this condition has fulfilled the first commandment, namely to love God with one's whole heart and mind and with all one's strength. It is clear, therefore, that such a state should be an object of one's desire. It is through souls who have attained this state

⁸² Merton cautions that the inner self is not a *part* of us – it is *all* of us. It is our 'whole reality' (Merton 1961a:280).

that peace is established in the world. The inner journey enters a new phase when the soul of the contemplative has fused with God. Accordingly, the contemplative henceforth lives for 'God Alone' (Merton 2003:87).⁸³ This new life is a 'spiritual life', in which the inner, spiritual consciousness has been awakened. A deep inner transformation has occurred, which has shaken the contemplative to his very foundation. The process leads to the fading of the 'old man' and an awakening of the 'new man'. This, however, is a temporary phase, for when the mind of the person has been perfectly 'spiritualised', there is no failure on the part of the exterior consciousness, which eventually becomes subordinated to, and an aspect of, inner and contemplative awareness (2003:90). As mentioned earlier, Merton, in reference to Adam, argues that woman and man were originally created as contemplatives, and that the Fall was a fall from unity. He adds that '...man fell from the unity of contemplative vision into the multiplicity, complication, and distraction of an active, worldly existence' (2003:35). Since man and woman were now dependent entirely on exterior and contingent things, they became exiles in a world of objects, each of which was capable of deluding and enslaving them. As they were no longer centred in God in their inmost spiritual selves, woman and man now had to see and be aware of themselves alone (2003:35). In order to compensate for the labours and frustrations of this estrangement, they now had to admire, assert, and gratify themselves at the expense of others. The consequence of this condition is a complex and painful network of loves and hatreds, desires and fears, lies and excuses, in which humanity is held captive. In this condition, one's mind is enslaved by an inexorable concern with all that is exterior, transient, illusory, and trivial. In the process, the ability to see one's own true inner 'face' or recognise one's identity in the spirit and in God (2003:35-36), is lost. A person in this condition is therefore utterly exiled from God and from the true self – exiled from God and from oneself. The quest for happiness, therefore, effectively becomes a flight from God and from oneself – a flight which takes one '...further and further away from reality' (Merton 2003:36)

At this point, some pertinent questions arise: Is this condition of being separated permanent? Is it possible to revert back to the unity that once existed? How does one do this? Merton asserts – answering the questions in the process – that the condition is not permanent, and that it is indeed

⁸³ These are the words engraved in capital letters on the arch of the gate through which Merton entered when he arrived at Gethsemani.

possible to reinstate the union and thereby become whole again. ‘But man must recover himself, salvage his dignity, recollect his last wits, return to his true identity’ (2003:36). This leads to another question, namely: How can this unity be reestablished? Merton suggests that the Gospel of Christ offers the answer. God Himself must become Man, in order that, in the Man-God, humanity might be able to lose itself and find itself in God. God Himself must die on the cross, leaving a pattern and a proof of His infinite love. And humanity, communing with God in the death and resurrection of Christ, must die a spiritual death in which the exterior self is destroyed and the inner self rises from death by faith and lives again ‘unto God’. The Christian life, according to Merton, is a return to the Father, the Source, the Ground of all existence, through the Son, the Splendour and the Image of the Father, in the Holy Spirit, who is the love of the Father and the Son (2003:36). It is a return to the source of all meaning and all truth – a discovery of paradise within - through self-forgetfulness. And through this union with Christ, it is the recognition that, as sons and daughters of the Father, we are ‘other Christs’. It is an awareness of strength, and love imparted by the miraculous presence of the ‘Nameless and Hidden One Whom we call the Holy Spirit’ (2003:37).⁸⁴ Christian contemplation is therefore based on faith in the mystery of Jesus being one with the Father. As Jesus said: ‘I and the Father are One ... I am the Son of God...If I do not the works of my Father believe me not. But if I do the works of my Father believe the works: that you may know and believe that the Father is in me and I am in the Father’ (John 20:30, Merton 2003:36-38). The question asked earlier, as to how one can bridge the gap that exists between humanity and the transcendental remoteness of the Christ mystery, is answered by Merton (2003:44) as follows: ‘The answer is that the Word, in the Father, is not only transcendently removed at an infinite distance above us, but also and at the same time He is immanent in our world, first of all by nature as the Creator of the world, but then in a special dynamic and mystical presence as the Savior, Redeemer, and Lover of the world’. The question as to how union can be reinstated could perhaps be re-phrased as follows: How can one enter into contact with this special presence of the Lord in His cosmos and in one’s heart? Merton (2003:43-44) responds as follows:

⁸⁴ In his book, *The Inner Experience*, Merton discusses the Christian theology of contemplation at length. As the present study focuses mainly on the *broader* spirituality of Thomas Merton and its value to contemporary society, the theology of contemplation will not be discussed in detail. In summary, suffice it to say that in order to have a sound understanding of the theology of Christian contemplation, it is necessary to grasp the unity of God and man in Christ, and the equally crucial inner unity of the self. ‘It is sufficient to say categorically that this contemplation is a deep participation in the Christ-life, a spiritual sharing in the union of God and Man which is the hypostatic union’ (Merton 2003:42).

The answer is, by faith: and this means not simply by an intellectual assent to certain authoritative dogmatic propositions, but, more than that, by the commitment of our whole self and of our whole life to the reality of the presence of Christ in the world. This act of total surrender is not simply a fantastic intellectual and mystical gamble; it is something much more serious: it is an act of love for this unseen Person Who, in the very gift of love by which we surrender ourselves to His reality, also makes Himself present to us. The union of our mind, spirit, and life with the Word present within us is effected by the Holy Spirit.

It is this Holy Spirit, who lives within the Christian, who becomes the Christian's own spirit – his or her own self. By virtue of God's own presence, the Christian also – along with others – 'becomes Christ', and therefore also becomes sanctified.⁸⁵ The Holy Spirit is given to the Christian as a personal principle of love and activity in the supernatural order, which ultimately leads to transformation in Christ. The life spent in contemplation is therefore not simply a life of human technique and discipline; it is the life of the Holy Spirit in the inmost soul of the Christian. What is expected of the Christian is to stand aside and allow the Spirit to do Its work. This requires constant discipline, deep humility, obedience, prudence and above all, faith. It is thus through the Holy Spirit that the Christian is able to have an inner experience of the divine. The Holy Spirit is united to the inmost self of the Christian, and Its presence transforms the 'I' of the Christian into the 'I' of Christ and of God. What is required of the Christian in order to have such an experience, is a deep desire to 'know and be one with God'. 'Desire', says Merton (2003:49), 'is the most important thing in the contemplative life.' But, he adds, '...there could be no desire where there is not at least a little knowledge' (2003:49).⁸⁶ The 'journey within' therefore occurs when, through God's gift, the Christian discovers God within. Consequently, one's nothingness becomes transformed into the divine.

5.4 Types of contemplation

Thomas Merton discusses, inter alia, two kinds of contemplation: 'natural' and 'supernatural' contemplation. Natural contemplation, in general, is also referred to as 'active contemplation' (*theoria physika*), while supernatural contemplation is often termed 'passive' or 'infused'

⁸⁵ Contemplation, according to Merton, is 'closely allied to sanctity' (Merton 1951:8).

⁸⁶ One cannot desire union with God unless one knows that such a union exists, and has at least some idea of what it is.

contemplation (*theologia*). ‘Theologia’, according to Merton, can be regarded as contemplation in the strict sense of the word, and thus as ‘mysticism’. He explains that natural contemplation also has a sub-category, which he calls ‘metaphysical intuition’, and which occurs apart from any revealed text. In Merton’s view, this is the starting point of all philosophy, and does not correspond to the Cartesian *cogito*. In terms of this intuition, ‘...the basic reality is being itself, which is one in all concrete existents, which shares itself among them and manifests itself through them’ (Merton 1989:89). Thus, according to Merton, there are three types of Christian contemplation: two natural and one infused.⁸⁷ ‘Strictly speaking, however, any kind of contemplation is an immediate and in some sense passive intuition of the inmost reality, of our spiritual self and of God present within us’ (Merton 2003:57). In addition to this ‘passive’ meditation, however, there is also an active and mediate form of contemplation in which this perception is attained in some measure by our own efforts, although with the mysterious and invisible help of grace (2003:57). ‘Infused’ or ‘passive’ contemplation is, by nature, mostly theological. ‘That is to say...it refers to a reality which is not directly or empirically verifiable, but which is a datum of revelation’ (2003:57). In passive contemplation, it is God Himself who ‘does the work’, and there is nothing that the contemplative can do to bring about its manifestation through any kind of effort. In fact, says Merton, there is very little the contemplative can do to prevent this manifestation from happening. The classical expression used to describe this grace is that it is ‘effected in us and without us: *In nobis et sine nobis*’ (2003:57). Active or mediate contemplation, on the other hand, is effected in us, but with our active cooperation: *In nobis et non sine nobis*. Merton argues that a life of active contemplation prepares one for occasional passive contemplative experiences. The level of depth between ‘active’ and ‘passive’ contemplation varies, with ‘passive’ contemplation occurring at a level much deeper than ‘active’ contemplation. Active contemplation depends on a ‘systematic relaxation’ of the tensions of the exterior self. The main purpose of active contemplation is the

⁸⁷ There is only one single text in which Merton speaks of the three types of contemplation. In this text, he states that the contemplative life ‘...can be considered from three points of view...’ (Merton 1947:95). The first and second views belong to the philosopher and artist; the third is that of the Christian trying to dispose the ‘self’ for union with God. Merton considered ‘metaphysical intuition’ to be the fundamental awareness that we should have as human beings. But, he argues, we have become so taken up with appearances that we no longer see the world as it is. The average person today thinks only in terms of the concrete and particular. He/she sees signs and advertisements showing healthy folk consuming cold beer and driving shiny cars, and this rates as ‘Being’ or ‘Goodness’ (Merton 1951:196). However, when one frees oneself from this preoccupation with material things and one’s natural capacities are restored, one begins to taste what properly belongs to the human soul: the metaphysical intuition, natural contemplation.

discovery of the will of God, that is to say, the identification of the real direction which events are taking in one's life. Active contemplation rests on an extensive foundation of liturgical, historical, and cultural tradition. In this regard, Merton asserts that the real contemplative tends to stay clear of 'movements' (experiences that 'feel good'), not because these 'movements' confuse him, but because he does not need them and can go farther by himself (2003:58). In active contemplation, one learns to be comfortable in one's own skin – at ease with one's own thoughts and less dependent on exterior supports. In this kind of contemplation, the mind is pacified, not by passive dependence on things on the outside, such as diversions, entertainment, conversions, business, etc., but by its own constructive activity (2003:59). In other words, the mind derives inner satisfaction from spiritual creativity by thinking its own thoughts, reaching its own conclusions, considering its own life and directing it in accordance with its own 'inner truth', discovered in meditation. The secret of life is hereby discovered in the creative energy of love – not romantic love, but love as a profound and self-oblivious expression of freedom. Active contemplation is nourished by reading and meditating on what is read, but also by the sacramental and liturgical life of the Church. But before the above-mentioned (meditative) practices can be turned into *contemplation*, they must merge into a *unified and intuitive* vision of reality (2003:59). 'We meditate with our mind, which is "part of" our being, but we contemplate with our whole being and not just with one of its parts' (2003:59). Contemplation is not just a matter of observation, but also of realisation. 'It is,' says Merton, 'a personal grasp of the existential meaning and value of reality' (2003:60). Contemplative experience leads to an increase in the intensity and simplicity of one's love for God and for others (2003:60). According to Merton, this is the 'purpose' of contemplation. However, he goes on to qualify this by pointing out: '...but in reality contemplation has no purpose outside itself for, properly understood, it is inseparably joined to love and identified with love. The love that is essential to contemplation is its "purpose" as well as its source' (2003:60).

Merton further defines contemplation by drawing a distinction between religious and non-religious contemplation. 'Contemplation, in the Christian context, necessarily implies a sacred "dread" – a holy awe' (2003:61). The life of contemplation is one of great simplicity and inner liberty. The contemplative is not seeking anything 'special' or demanding any particular satisfaction, but is content with what is. Even the most basic of chores, such as sweeping the

floor or washing the car, can be enriched through contemplation, as long as the contemplative has a sense of the presence of God while doing it. During the 1920's and 1930's a heated debate was waged between theologians with respect to 'active' (natural) versus 'infused' (supernatural) contemplation. The theologians were trying to determine the phenomenological limits of mystical prayer, in order to answer the question: When does a state of prayer cease to be 'natural' or 'acquired' and become 'supernatural' or 'infused'? In other words, when does one cease to be the principal agent, and yield this primacy to the Spirit of God? (Merton 2003:66-67).⁸⁸

Natural contemplation, which beholds the divine in and through nature, is what Merton regarded as the prototype for what he calls 'active contemplation' – a type of contemplation that one seeks and prepares for through one's own initiative, but which, by a gift of God, is 'completed in mystical intuition' (2003:69). In natural contemplation, the soul of the contemplative is actively involved. It reasons, imagines, considers and makes sense of what it knows. It directs its 'gaze' upon God. In natural contemplation, the contemplative is still self-aware as a subject having an experience of the divine Presence. But the contemplative soul yearns for more; and in order to obtain it, the soul has to pass beyond the 'all' that is created, and reach out to God Himself. It must pass from the *what* to the *Who* (King 1995:46). With the foregoing in mind, it is now appropriate to list the essential elements of mystical contemplation according to Merton: (1) it is an intuition that transcends the senses; (2) it is characterised by a quality of light in darkness, and of 'knowing in unknowing'; (3) there must be activity on both sides. On the part of the contemplative, there must be a withdrawal from attachment to sensory objects. The contemplative must also go beyond the intellect. Contemplation presupposes a generous and total effort of ascetic self-denial; (4) contemplation is a work of love, and the contemplative proves this love by leaving all things – even the most spiritual – in order to find God in nothingness, detachment and 'night'; (5) this knowledge of God in unknowing is not intellectual. It is not the work of one faculty or another uniting the soul with an object outside itself. It is a work of interior union and of identification in divine charity. One knows God by becoming one with

⁸⁸ For the purposes of this study, and in line with Merton's thinking, I assume the existence of a supersensory intuition of the divine, which is a gift of grace for which one can to some extent prepare oneself through one's own efforts.

God; (6) contemplation is a supernatural love and knowledge of God, simple and obscure, infused into the summit of the soul, giving it direct and experiential contact with God; (7) pure love is required – a deep love for God and others; (8) the soul is passive and under the guidance of God as it passes through the states of contemplation; (9) contemplation is the light of God playing directly upon the soul; (10) infused contemplation, sooner or later, brings with it transformation; and (11) the contemplative is called into a ‘life in the Holy Spirit’ (Merton 2003: 72-76).

5.5 Contemplation versus meditation⁸⁹

As mentioned, in terms of its original meaning, contemplation is always a gift, and cannot be achieved by any method or practice. In a certain sense, it stands in contrast to meditation, which includes all the practices and disciplines that one may intentionally undertake in the course of one’s spiritual life. Put simply, one can ‘practice’ meditation, but one cannot ‘practice’ supernatural contemplation, because it only happens as a gift. John of the Cross (as cited in Merton 1969:21) writes extensively about the ‘night of the soul’ (sometimes referred to as ‘the dark night’) and the opportunities it creates for the spiritual growth of the individual through the Holy Spirit and God’s grace. According to John of the Cross, God brings such individuals into darkness,

⁸⁹ The contemporary use of the term ‘meditation’ differs slightly from its previous usage. Meditation, in the 21st century, is mostly seen as a practice whereby an individual’s mind is trained, often to induce an alternate mode of consciousness, either to realise some benefit or for the mind to simply acknowledge its content without becoming identified with that content, or as an end in itself. The meaning attached to the word ‘meditation’ has been influenced by Eastern cultures with a variety of practices and techniques designed to promote relaxation, build internal energy, and develop compassion. Merton’s understanding of ‘meditation’ is much closer to ‘contemplation’, in many cases both terms being used interchangeably. Centering Prayer, a form of Christian meditation that was developed and that gained momentum after Merton’s death, is a method of silent prayer that prepares the practitioner to receive the gift of contemplative prayer. It utilizes a key word (or short sentence – often taken from the Bible). The selected word or short phrase is used to bring the practitioner into a state of contemplative prayer and help diminish the distractions of the mind.

...wherein he weans them from the breasts of these sweetnesses and pleasures, gives them pure aridities and inward darkness, takes from them all these superficialities and puerilities, and by very different means causes them to win the virtue (Dark Night I, vii,5 - cited in Merton 1969:21).

Important to note is that, for John of the Cross, this 'night' can by no means be equated to pure negation. 'If it empties the mind and heart of the connatural satisfactions of knowledge and love on a simple human plane, it does so in order to fill them with a higher and purer light which is "darkness" to sense and to reason' (1969:21). The darkening, paradoxically, is therefore also an enlightenment. The reason that the light of faith is darkness to the soul, according to John of the Cross, is that this is in reality an exceedingly bright light. At the moment of direct exposure to supernatural light the individual is directed into the 'dark night of faith' and passes from meditation to contemplation. Along the same lines, Peter of Celles refers to the 'Sabbath of contemplation', in which the soul rests in God and God works in the soul; the quiet and transcendent activity in which purity of heart rewards the contemplative for the labour of asceticism.⁹⁰ Here, 'labour' refers to the active life, a life of discipline, penance and mortification. Without virtue, observes Merton, there can be no real and lasting contemplation (1969:37). Commenting on Peter of Celles' comparison of active and contemplative prayer, Merton (1969:38) points out that active and contemplative prayer are not so much in conflict as they are in harmony. The two are complementary. The *oratio laboriosa* of active prayer cleanses one of sin, while the *oratio devota* of contemplation is blessed by grace from heaven. In addition to being complementary, they are both also necessary.

According to the monastic fathers, all prayer, reading, meditation and all activities of the monastic life are aimed at 'purity of heart'. This involves an unconditional and humble surrender to God, a total acceptance of who one is and of one's own situation as willed by God (Merton 1969:46). It involves the renunciation of all delusional images of oneself, all exaggerated estimates of one's own individual capacities. Purity of heart is therefore correlative to a new spiritual identity – the 'true self', an enlightened awareness of the 'new man', as opposed to the complex and disreputable fantasies of the 'old man' (1969:46). In meditation, one does not seek to know God as an object, like other objects which are subject to scrutiny and can be defined and

⁹⁰ Peter of Celles, a Benedictine 'witness of the twelfth century', a 'charming' monastic writer of the Middle Ages (Merton 1969:36).

expressed in clear scientific ideas. One seeks to know Godself – beyond the level of all other created objects (Merton 1969:58). One has begun to know the meaning of contemplation when one intuitively and spontaneously seeks the dark and unknown path of aridity in preference to every other way. A contemplative is one who would rather *not know* than know; who does not seek proof of God's love (1969:67). The contemplative accepts the love of God on the basis of *faith*. Faith is necessary in order to experience the reality of God's presence and love. Merton (1969:67) states that '...only when we are able to "let go" of everything within us, all desire to see, to know, to taste and to experience the presence of God, do we truly become able to experience that presence with the overwhelming conviction and reality that revolutionize our inner life'. In contrast to meditation, which *investigates*, contemplation *wonders*. Meditation is about technique, whereas contemplation pertains to attitude. Meditation involves 'dwelling' or 'focusing upon something' – an object, a sensation, an utterance, an issue, a mental state or activity. Thus, an effort or 'work' on the part of the meditator is required. In comparison, the contemplative does no 'work' as such; rather, God does all the work. All meditation exercises are aids aimed at focusing awareness on a single process, continually repeating the same action that has a direct influence on the human nervous system. When this is achieved, a common experience seems to be produced: awareness of the external environment diminishes or 'shuts down' for a period of time. It is important to note that, as in the case of meditation, contemplation does not require a person to be a Christian, or even religious. There are also a-religious, temporal or secular contemplative traditions that offer methods and disciplines based on a particular kind of psychological knowledge (de Wit 1987:17). Merton's reference to contemplation, however, falls strictly within the Christian tradition.

In Merton's view, the contemplative way is a process of 'letting go' (especially of the 'false self' or ego). This leads to 'true wisdom' and, ultimately, compassion.

5.6 Dangers of contemplation

Merton warns against what he calls 'quietism', which, he maintains, is solipsistic. The problem with this kind of practice, is that it excludes not only other people, but even Godself. Quietism, therefore, stands in stark contrast to contemplation. Whereas the contemplative aims to be empty

of every 'created' love in order to be filled with the love of God alone, the quietist pursues a false ideal of absolute self 'annihilation'. Seeking to be empty of all love and knowledge, and remaining inert in a kind of spiritual vacuum. The 'quietist' is in a state in which there is no motion, no thought, no apprehension, no act of love, no passive receptivity, but a mere blankness without light or warmth or any breath of interior life (Merton 2003:101-102). In assessing the difference between the approach of the Christian contemplative and that of the quietist, Merton concludes that Christian contemplation is the perfection of love, while quietism is the exclusion of all love. In his assertion that quietism is an act of selfishness, Merton's thinking seems to be in line with that of John of the Cross. 'If your contemplation is a complete blank or a mere spiritual chaos, without any love or desire of God,' avows Merton (2003:102), 'then...you are not a contemplative'.

Another great danger of contemplation is 'Illuminism'. In this case, the problem is that of taking one's subjective experience so seriously that it becomes more important than truth – more important than God. The danger is that spiritual experience becomes objectified, and turns into an idol. To live for such spiritual experience, according to Merton, amounts to 'being enslaved' (2003:106). Another danger, which was pertinent and a topic of much discussion in the sixties, and is perhaps even more so in contemporary society, is also briefly discussed by Merton, namely the inducement of a spiritual experience through the use of 'drugs'. Merton points out that the inherent danger here is that such a '...spiritual experience would be sought for its own sake' (2003:107). He aptly summarises the danger of a 'misplaced focus' of contemplation as follows:

This is a very important observation, because it shows that what really matters in spiritual experience is not its interiority, or its natural purity, or the joy, light, exaltation, and transforming effect it may seem to have: these things are secondary and accidental. What matters is not what one feels, *but what really takes place* beyond the level of feeling or experience. In genuine contemplation, what takes place is a contact between the inmost reality of the created person and the infinite Reality of God (2003:108).

5.7 Contemplation in the 21st century

Solitude and silence, essential to the contemplative life, have become luxuries that are often accessible only to the rich. Although available locations that are suitable for solitude are diminishing at a rapid rate, there are still some mountains and deserts where one can retreat in order to spend time away from the hustle and bustle of life in the city. Peace, another element required for the contemplative life, seems to exist only in the dreams of those who are contemplatives at heart, and the desire for it ‘...haunts the waking hours of those whose life is a despairing struggle for security’ (Merton 2003:135). Not only is the world becoming more and more demanding, and people are becoming increasingly busy and preoccupied, but there also seems to be no escape from this situation. One of the great problems of contemplative life nowadays, in Merton’s view, is the necessity to adapt to an unsatisfactory situation and make the best of it. Most people today would probably love to be able to escape from the pressures, anguish, insecurities and perils of secular life; but almost no-one would be able (or willing) to do without the benefits that are inseparably connected with these pressures.

Merton lists two things that an individual wishing to live a contemplative life in today’s world should do. Firstly, it is imperative that the contemplative should be detached from the need for pleasure, comfort, recreation and especially prestige and success. Such an individual would be much better off embracing a life of ‘true spiritual poverty and detachment’ (2003:136). Secondly, the contemplative would have to find a way of dealing with the inevitable conflicts that remain – agitation, crowding, lack of time and above all, the constant contact with a purely secular mentality. Achieving success in this endeavour will be no easy task for the contemplative living in the world (and the same applies to those living in monasteries). In fact, the magnitude of the challenge of being a contemplative in the secular world is such that, for most people, it is utterly unattainable. Most people would simply give up.. Merton proposes some solutions to overcome these challenges, however. Firstly, he suggests the formation of small groups of lay people who are interested in the spiritual life and who desire to lead a contemplative life, while also being willing to support one another. Another possibility, although this is not always practically feasible, is for the contemplative to move to a small town where there is potentially more time to think. Capitalising on those hours of the day that are quiet, because the world does not value them, constitutes yet another option, with a view to facilitating a contemplative life –

for example, the early hours of the morning. The silence during these early hours will offer the contemplative a taste of the desired peace of solitude. Merton (2003:138) writes:

Besides, the dawn is by its very nature a peaceful, mysterious, and contemplative time of day – a time when one naturally pauses and looks with awe at the eastern sky. It is a time of new life...for the spiritual life is nothing else but a perpetual interior renewal.

Another possible avenue for reflection and solitude comprises the use of Sunday as a day of rest, restoration and contemplation. Honouring the ‘Lord’s day’ could assist the contemplative in realising, and remaining aware of, the relative meaninglessness of the secular business which fills the other six days of the week. In terms of this approach, Sunday is reminiscent of the peace that should filter through the whole week when one’s work is properly oriented (Merton 2003:138).

Merton warns that the discipline of living in the world as a ‘masked contemplative’ is, first of all, the discipline of fidelity to one’s duty – to one’s obligations as a parent, professional person and citizen. The contemplative life can indeed be deepened and also elevated by the depth of one’s understanding and by the fulfilment of one’s duties. Lastly, married life can also be lived and enjoyed in the spirit of a contemplative experience. Marriage should be a source of grace, overflowing into all other areas of life, such as work, leisure, etc. The conjugal life can be a kind of material and symbolic expression of ‘man’s desire for God’s desire for man’ (2003:140). Two lovers in a committed marriage relationship may indeed catch a glimpse of the ‘union with God’ to which the contemplative is aspiring.

5.8 Conclusion

It is clear from Merton’s writings that the ‘inner journey’ is often one of intense inner conflict. In order to embark on such a journey, it is of paramount importance that an individual should be ‘whole’. Contemplation requires the contemplative to see things ‘as they are’. But does this mean a rejection of all created things? The answer to this question is a resounding ‘no’. In fact, Merton argues that through the acceptance of things as they are, the contemplative is enabled to enjoy them in a ‘higher way’, rising above the kind of contact with them that is merely sensory and

superficial in nature (Merton 2003:111). Merton's main contribution to the body of contemplative literature is threefold: (1) he affirms that contemplation is a real phenomenon and not merely a psychological experience or disorder; (2) he stresses the simplicity of contemplation, describing it as a 'gift' – with no preliminary effort on the part of the contemplative – leading eventually to the realisation that no effort is needed; and (3) he highlights the sobriety and humility of such an experience (2003:116). Contemplation, as a phenomenon, occurs across most religions, including Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, etc. The fact that this phenomenon is experienced as 'real' is probably the one common denominator between the different religions; and, as Merton discovered, it is also an excellent point of departure for dialogue between different religions. Merton suggests that we should relinquish our preconceived ideas of what contemplation is, or is not. He argues that one often 'stares oneself blind' with respect to these concepts, thereby missing the 'gift'. For Merton, difficult though being a contemplative may sometimes be, it is a way of 'being in the world'. Housewives, farmers and city men alike can all remain in their current professions and yet still live contemplative lives (Merton 2003:145). 'The true contemplative is not less interested than others in normal life, not less concerned with what goes on in the world, but more interested, more concerned' (Merton 2003:147). 'Reality' and 'ultimate truth' are actually inherent in the contemplative's life. 'The contemplative', writes Merton, 'is not one who directs a magic spiritual intuition upon other objects, but one who, being perfectly unified in himself and recollected in the center of his own humility, enters into contact with reality by an immediacy that forgets the division between subject and object' (Merton 2003:151).

It is clear on the basis of the foregoing that Merton emphasises the importance of 'wholeness' – of being at peace with oneself and with the world.⁹¹ The contemplative, in losing the 'false self' (by forgetting the self as an object of reflection), finds the 'true self' in relation to the 'other' and to the Divine. In order to reach this state one needs wisdom so as not to seek to possess anything; but rather to have a deep realisation that nothing is needed, even to begin with. In summary, therefore, the contemplative is one who has cultivated the ability to be content with the moment, *as it is*.

⁹¹ Qualities Merton achieved later in life.

Chapter 6

THE VALUE OF MERTON FOR TODAY: A MAP FOR LIFE'S JOURNEY

6.1 Introduction

The current age is characterised by misunderstanding, fear, scepticism and violence – often in the name of religion. Despite the fact that human beings are more connected across space and time than ever before, they remain separated from one another as a result of isolating disparities in wealth, a lack of understanding, differences in culture, and a general ignorance and lack of respect with regard to the beliefs and personal commitments of others. The world leaders of 21st-century society are faced with the very issues that Merton highlighted so prophetically – and these issues are not merely theoretical; rather, they fall concretely within the realm of experience. It is this concrete experience of reality that gives Merton his universal appeal. Merton wrote for a diverse international audience. He did not only write about spirituality, contemplation, and monasticism; he also addressed a multitude of social topics, including race relations, the abolition of war and nuclear armaments, social justice, truth, integrity and love. The deep theological underpinnings of Merton's thought were often overshadowed by his controversial stands on such topics. As a result, he is more popularly known as a social critic, rather than as an orthodox contemplative who diagnosed the spiritual ills of his age.

After *The Seven Storey Mountain* became an international best-seller, Merton became the most famous monk in American history. Since then, his reputation has continued to grow – not only as a modern spokesman for monasticism, but also owing to his unique capacity to throw light on contemporary issues, as a spiritual master, political dissident, popular essayist, and avant-garde poet. Merton's works have spawned hundreds, if not thousands, of critical commentaries, study groups, retreat centres, scholarly associations, and political action committees. Yet, despite his popularity (or perhaps because of it), certain fundamental questions remain as to the significance of Merton's legacy: Since he was a monk for most of his life, did he not 'lose touch' with what life outside the monastery is all about? Has the world not changed too dramatically in most respects since Merton passed away for his wisdom and insights to still have any relevance? Is the world not faced with a different set of challenges from those that prevailed when Merton was

still alive? With the accelerating advancement of technology during the last few decades, has Merton not become obsolete? This chapter explores these and other questions in order to arrive at an understanding of the relevance of Merton for life in the 21st century.

6.2 The search for the ‘true self’

One reason for the enduring relevance of Thomas Merton is that the search for God still matters (Apel 2015:5). As in the case of other spiritual masters, Merton’s quest for the ‘true self’ is all-consuming and culminates in a journey that leads both inward and outward. It is also a journey that bridges the gap between the *self* and others. Merton’s search for his ‘true self’ (God) was contagious; and since his quest became known to the world through his writings, people from all walks of life have expressed the desire to join Merton on his journey. Mary Luke Tobin, a close friend and Kentucky neighbour of Merton’s, wrote this about her friend: ‘At the center of Merton’s thought was the search for God – the careful search for God’s will in the events of his life’ (Tobin 1981:72). In all his writings, from his first published work, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, to his last writings found in *The Asian Journal*, Merton shares with readers all the twists and turns, the false starts and unexpected trajectories of his relentless quest for the One with many names, and no names at all (Apel 2015:5). Merton’s lifelong quest, not only to know God but to experience God, may arguably be regarded as the leitmotif of his entire, massive collection of writings. There is little doubt that Merton’s search for his ‘true self’ has relevance for our times. His search for God left room for other people, their religions, and their own unique experiences. This deep openness to other people and other religions can be ascribed to Merton’s profound, abiding faith in the risen Christ. His own well-developed self-knowledge enabled him to remain deeply grounded within the life of a contemplative monk and a disciple of Christ, committed to the pursuit of peace and social justice. His faith liberated him to attain a high degree of spiritual freedom, which facilitated a genuine openness to other believers and seekers – both those within the faith and those outside of it. Merton’s search for his ‘true self’ may well comprise his greatest contribution to humanity’s contemporary quest for God.

Life in the 21st century tends to be largely characterised by anxiety, ambivalence, tension, discouragement and even despair. It has become a common phenomenon (especially among the

youth) to encounter individuals suffering from a sense of meaninglessness, who are in search of their true identity. As Merton explains, ‘...to fulfil certain obscure yet urgent potentialities in the ground of one’s being, to “become someone” that one already (potentially) is, the person one is truly meant to be’ – is to find one’s true self (Merton 1971: 202). Even today – perhaps especially today – it is essential to discover new ways in which individuals can make such a discovery. Merton, in his research on this topic, consulted with Dr Reza Arasteh (1927-1992),⁹² an Iranian psychotherapist who had studied Western and Eastern psychology. Dr Arasteh developed ideas derived from Erich Fromm’s humanistic approach to psychoanalysis, as well as from existential psychotherapy and the logotherapy of Victor Frankl.⁹³ In his book, *The Final Integration* (1965), which gives an exposition of his research, Arasteh points out that the solution to mankind’s dilemma does not lie merely in the ‘curing’ of neurosis through adaptation to society. On the contrary, any psychoanalytic theory that contents itself with this ‘solution’ is bound to be inadequate. Dr Arasteh and Merton were not only interested in the partial and limited health which results from contented acceptance of a useful role in society, but rather, in the final and complete maturing of the human psyche on a transcultural level (1971:203).⁹⁴ This new way of being is entirely personal, original, creative and unique in nature, and transcends the limits imposed by social convention and prejudice. Merton notes that, since Dr Arasteh’s research is purely psychological, and not theological, the question of sanctity or holiness is not really addressed in his investigation. Merton makes it clear, however, that ‘...ordinarily a full

⁹² Reza Arasteh (1927-1992) was an internationally known writer and speaker. He was born in Iran, but later moved to the United States. Arasteh complemented his Persian background and early education with Western psycho-cultural training, and founded the Institute for the Study of Alternative Social Systems in Bethesda, Maryland. He served as a senior consultant at the United Nations and taught at George Washington University, as well as Princeton University. Dr Arasteh’s works have been published in English, Spanish and Persian.

⁹³ Arasteh also incorporated material from the mystical tradition of Persian Sufism into his theories.

⁹⁴ Contrary to the accepted theory and practice of psychotherapy, as originally conceived by Freud, which was popular in America in the 1960s, Dr Arasteh held that adaptation to society at best helps a man to live with his illness rather than cure it, particularly if the general atmosphere of the society in which he lives is unhealthy because of its overemphasis on cerebral, competitive, acquisitive forms of ego-affirmation. Such an atmosphere may favour an apparently very active and productive mode of life, but in reality it stifles true growth, leaving people lost, alienated, frustrated and bored, without any way of knowing what is wrong with them. In fact, in many cases, psychotherapy has become a technique that induces people to ‘conform’ to society, preventing them from growing and developing as they should. Merton, in studying the work of Dr Arasteh, discovered an important distinction between mere neurotic anxiety, which arises from a commitment to defeat, and existential anxiety, which is the healthy pain caused by the blocking of vital energies that still remain available for radical change. This is one of the main points made by Dr Arasteh, in his emphasis on the importance of viewing existential anxiety, not as a symptom indicating that something is amiss, but as a summons to growth and development.

spiritual development and a supernatural, even charismatic, maturity, evidenced in the “saint,” normally includes the idea of complete psychological integration’ (1971:206).

The realisation of the true self (attainment of final integration), in Merton’s thinking, reflects a state of transcultural maturity far beyond mere social adjustment. One who has been ‘fully born’ has an entirely inner experience of life – a life fully apprehended and whole, lived from the vantage point of an inner ground that is at once more personal and more universal than the empirical ego. Such a person, in a sense, is ‘cosmic’ and ‘universal’, and has attained a deeper, fuller identity than that of the limited ego-self, which is only a fragment of one’s being. Such an individual has the capacity to be deeply compassionate, and to experience the joys and sorrows of others as his own – without, however, becoming dominated by them. Merton himself reached this state towards the end of his life. He attained a deep inner freedom, and was guided, not only by his will and reason, but also by spontaneous behaviour that was subject to dynamic insight. Operating from within the true self implies a certain level of openness; an emptiness, and even poverty. One who has attained final integration is no longer limited by the culture of one’s upbringing. The integrated individual has embraced all of life, and ‘has experienced qualities of every type of life: ordinary human existence, intellectual life, artistic creation, human love, religious life’ (Merton 1971:207).⁹⁵ Moreover, the integrated individual passes beyond all of these limiting forms, while retaining all that is best and most universal in each, finally giving birth to a fully comprehensive self. Such a person accepts not only his/her own community, and own circle of friends, but all of humanity. The integrated individual does not remain bound to one limited set of values, viewing them, either aggressively or defensively, as being opposed to other values. Such a person, Merton (1971:207) says, ‘...does not set these partial views up in opposition to each other but unifies them in a dialectic or an insight of complementarity’. In this way, the individual is able to bring perspective, liberty and spontaneity into the lives of others. One who lives and functions from within the true self is a peacemaker; and this is why there is such a desperate need for members of 21st-century society (especially its leaders) to become women and men of insight – people who are fully integrated. Merton was well aware that if the majority of people developed in this way – if entire communities were to simultaneously reach final integration and realise their true selves – the effect would be of such a nature that the entire

⁹⁵ All of these qualities were experienced by Merton in his life.

community structure might well be revolutionised. But Merton was also aware of, and outspoken about, the fact that organisations, institutions, and governments often put a handbrake on development, in their attempt to control the ‘energies of the Spirit’. Merton refers to this as ‘institutional straitjacketing’, which prevents individuals from ‘breaking through’ in their own way and achieving an integration that may perhaps be warped and singular, but is nevertheless authentic (1971:208). Whereas ‘final psychological integration’ in the past was the privilege of only a few, it has now become a need and aspiration of humanity as a whole. Merton not only highlights the importance of realising one’s true self, but literally accompanies individuals on the journey, by means of his writings.

6.3 Love thy neighbour

6.3.1 Calling for a charter of compassion

One does not need to look far to realise that there is a tremendous lack of compassion in the world today. The media – newspapers and newspaper feeds, radio, and television, *inter alia* – abound with endless reports regarding the tyranny encompassing 21st-century society. What is required is not only sources of compassion, but activators, and active dispensers, of compassion – thus, both ‘speakers’ of compassion and ‘practitioners’ of compassion (Rauf 2015). The problems that beset the world today tend to stem from the fact that the majority of people adhere to a philosophy that is based on the fundamental questions: ‘What is in it for me?’ and: ‘What can ‘I’ get out of this?’ This focus on the ‘I’, the selfish ego, is creating havoc on a global scale. The alternative path suggested by Merton is one that entails getting past the small ‘I’, taking on Christ and becoming one with the real ‘I’ – God. All of humanity has this calling, which involves moving the ego from its prominent position. The method or technique that Merton proposes for achieving this difficult task is the process of contemplation. This process, while being a gift, rather than the result of self-effort, leads to the experience of being one with the Divine.⁹⁶ This oneness is the common platform on which all of humanity should stand; and it would be from this platform that the problems of war, racism, social injustices, etc., could be obliterated.

⁹⁶ We are reminded of Merton’s experience on the corner of 4th and Walnut, where he was overcome with a sense of being one with the all the people around him.

For most of Merton's life, he struggled with egotism. The following prayer appears in a strikingly honest passage in *New Seeds of Contemplation*: 'Give me humility in which alone is rest, and deliver me from pride which is the heaviest of burdens. And possess my whole heart and soul with the simplicity of love' (Merton 1961a:45). Merton discovered freedom from the ego through contemplation; he saw it as a process for divesting oneself of one's ego, and of self-centeredness and sinfulness, culminating in the realisation that it is in true poverty that one is free to more perfectly follow Christ. This process of mortification prompts an awareness of the poverty and need of society (Horan 2014:192). In turn, such a process of conversion, namely contemplation, leads one upward to God and outward towards the rest of humanity. Horan (2014:193) reminds us that this process often requires the voluntary subordination of one's self for the sake of solidarity and communion with the other. Reaching the state of 'minority' is a process of ongoing conversion. The end result of this ongoing process is the discovery of one's true identity. This, as Horan (2014:193) accurately points out, is important, as it is only possible to hear the 'voice of the stranger', and authentically encounter the other, once one knows oneself. For Merton, as pointed out previously, to find oneself is to find God. 'In order to know and love God as He is, we must have God dwelling in us in a new way, not only in His creative power but in His littleness, by which He empties Himself and comes down to us to be empty in our emptiness, and so fill us in His fullness' (Merton 1961a:45). The act of God's *kenosis* that Merton describes serves as a model, not only for his own life, but for the life of any person living in the world today. By discovering and following this example, one is able to live as one's true self. Through contemplation and openness to a process of ongoing conversion from the false self, one discovers who one is in God. Merton's call is an exhortation to a life of self-emptying service and of finding God in emptiness and poverty. From that position of 'minority', one is able to authentically encounter and hear the voice of the 'stranger'.. But it is not only the individual ego that one needs to contend with. Family egos and even national egos will need to be abolished, if we are really in earnest about effecting the change that we long to see in the world (Rauf 2015). Merton's message to contemporary society is largely a call for a 'charter' for the abolishment of egos and for the recognition of our oneness in Christ – and therefore, a call for compassion.

6.3.2 Instruments of peace

One tends to forget that Merton was not always particularly interested in, or convinced of, the need for engagement with the emerging peace movements of his day. There was a distinct shift in this regard during the final decade of his life, which has been frequently characterised as his ‘return toward the world’. Through his correspondence with individuals involved in the anti-war, civil rights, and peace movements, Merton came to a clearer sense of his obligation as a Christian to speak out against the injustices of his time. While there had always been an element of social consciousness and revulsion towards violent action in Merton’s world-view, something about the mood surrounding the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, as well as the growing ecumenical and interreligious awareness, led to a break from his singular focus on the interior spiritual life towards an emphasis on the praxis of Christian living (Horan 2014:205). Right from the outset, Merton made his vision for the whole of the Christian community clear: ‘Christians must become active in every possible way, mobilizing all their resources for the fight against war...’ (cited in Horan 2014:206). This ‘fight’ includes refraining from putting up barriers between the self and others. As Horan (2014:206) observes, violence and injustices always comprise instances of breaking relationships with others. For Merton, non-violence was an integrative dimension of Christian discipleship which, as Shannon (2005:111) points out, ‘...is an all-or-nothing reality. It embraces all of one’s life and all of the responsibility flowing from one’s particular way of life’.

Being a peacemaker was a factor that resonated within Thomas Merton’s vision of what it means to be a human being. His perspective on *vocation* is helpful in acquiring a better understanding of what he deemed to be a constitutive dimension of the human person. In *No Man Is an Island* (2002:131), Merton sheds some light on what he means by ‘vocation’:

Each one of us has some kind of vocation. We are all called by God to share in His life and His Kingdom. Each one of us is called to a special place in the Kingdom...for each one of us, there is only one thing necessary: to fulfill our own destiny, according to God’s will, to be what God wants us to be.

Merton thus posits vocation as an *a priori* condition of human existence. Important to note here, as discussed in chapter four, is that one’s vocation and identity (one’s true self) is located in God,

and not in arbitrary goals, however noble these might be. Robert Imperato (1987:125) has similarly identified a connection between Merton's intrinsic and *a priori* condition of human identity and vocation, on the one hand, and Merton's work and peacemaking, on the other. Imperato writes: 'Throughout Merton's writings on social issues, one feels – behind the particulars of the issue – his commitment to the person. Turning from the journals of Merton to his treatises on topics relating to peace, the reader detects in Merton a more self-consciously rigorous foundation...Merton uses principles that are linked to his intuition of the person'. This intuition of the human person resides in Merton's theological conviction that all people are created in the image and likeness of God, with inherent value and dignity. Yet Merton believes that – since so much of our identity appears hidden – we must discover this vocation deep within our hearts; and then, simultaneously, we find God (Merton 1961a:37-46).

Merton had an expansive sense of the human being as a peacemaker, which went beyond the confines of Christian discipleship or membership of the Christian Church. If peacemaking is a constitutive part of the human vocation as the image and likeness of God, intrinsically oriented toward the Divine, then violence is, in effect, a denial of humanity's true identity, a distortion of our vocation. Merton's admonition to 21st-century society is that peacemaking, as an intrinsic part of the human vocation to be authentically human, cannot be overlooked.

6.3.3 Interreligious dialogue

For the purposes of any discussion on interreligious dialogue, it has to be noted that such dialogue is rooted in a particular historical setting. The ecclesiastical world and the global socio-political environment serve as a backdrop to interreligious experience. Horan (2014:173-198) suggests that Merton's views in this regard have much in common with the Franciscan worldview, especially as far as interreligious dialogue is concerned. The frequent references to Francis of Assisi throughout Merton's writings suggest that this may indeed be the case. Although Merton and St Francis were historically separated by centuries, their core principles are strikingly similar. Reading Francis of Assisi had at least some influence on Merton in terms of the way he viewed people of other cultures and faiths.⁹⁷ Merton strongly believed that God dwells in each person; and on the basis of this principle, he found it possible to engage in fruitful

⁹⁷ Merton's own spiritual maturation led to his identification with the rest of humanity.

dialogue. His relationship with D.T. Suzuki illustrates this well. In a journal entry dated April 11, 1959, Merton reflects on the experience of a spiritual encounter with Suzuki:

Thus if I tried baldly and bluntly to ‘convert’ Suzuki, that is, make him ‘accept’ formulas regarding the faith that are accepted by the average American Catholic, I would, in fact, not ‘convert’ him at all, but simply confuse and (in a cultural sense) degrade him...if we can meet on a common ground of spiritual Truth, where we share a real and deep experience of God, and where we know in humility our deepest selves...then I certainly think Christ would be present and glorified in both of us and this would lead to a *conversion of us both* (cited in Horan 2014:189-190).

John Wu, Jr, who devoted a great deal of time and energy to ecumenism, was also inspired by Merton. In *Thomas Merton’s Inclusivity and Ecumenism: Silencing the Gongs and Cymbals* (2009:28), Wu describes Merton as one who was ‘unwittingly committed...to the search for truth in a life of dialogue’, and whose ‘secret’ lay in the fact that ‘he did not regard other traditions as alien but integral to what he recognized as a unified human legacy that we all – without exception – rightfully share’. Wu questions whether there has ever been another writer who has taken the oneness of humanity as seriously as Merton. Paradoxically, Merton accomplished this, Wu argues, by taking his own faith exclusively seriously, which naturally thrust him into ‘the waiting arms of other traditions’ (Wu 2009:29). Merton valued and emphasised experience as being just as important as theology, and believed ‘that no matter what differences lay between traditions, there are universal links that will make dialogue not only possible but necessary and inevitable’ (2009:30). Merton’s appeal, writes Wu, lies in the fact that he challenged others to see things through a universal prism, to adopt a universal consciousness. Wu argues that ecumenism, for Merton, comprised an ongoing process of learning how to live. Pondering on Merton’s philosophy, Wu reflects that ‘...the fundamental question that haunts us is: What exactly constitutes wisdom in an age of unprecedented technological innovations and fashions that find their demise the moment they hit the market?’ (2009:43). According to Wu, the lesson that 21st-century society needs to learn from Merton entails a radical re-education so as to regain an understanding of the roots of life. ‘How wondrous in such an ordinary way, he shows – *without showing* – how to live close to the flesh, to bridge that wounded brokenness that separates us from ourselves and the rest of creation in a niche – his hermitage, the only earthly

home he could claim [as] his own – which, because given by the Creator, has a manifestly universal *feel* to it’ (Wu 2009:46).

6.4 Merton’s spirituality: a way of being in the world

6.4.1 Merton as a prophet

Another reason that Merton’s legacy continues to live on pertains to his prophetic qualities. Merton was not a prophet in the sense that he possessed certain magical abilities, or could see into, or predict the future; rather, he served as the ‘voice’ that called others to adopt ‘...the sense that we are so one with the Holy Spirit that we are already going in the direction the Spirit is going’ (Merton 1992:49). As Merton himself wrote in an essay that he addressed to poets: ‘To prophesy is not to predict, but to seize upon reality in its moments of highest expectation and tension toward the new’ (Merton 1966:159). Merton knew that prophets have the unique ability to see the world *as it is*. As pointed out in previous discussions, there were many influences that shaped Merton’s life and writing, and also, ultimately, the way he reflected on life. Prominent among these influential forces, as mentioned before, was the Franciscan tradition, particularly as it was developed in the thought of Bonaventure, the thirteenth-century Franciscan friar, saint, and Doctor of the Church (Horan 2014:160).

Merton’s use of the word ‘vocation’ was broader and more comprehensive than the more general concept that merely denotes a trade, a career path, or a state of life (e.g. marriage, single life, etc.). Merton recognised that each person was individually created into existence with a particular identity known fully to God, and partially known to the individual as his or her ‘true self’. In this sense, everyone has a ‘calling’ (derived from the Latin *vocare*, meaning ‘to call’ – the root of the English term ‘vocation’) from God to be the person that he or she was created to be, comprising an entirely unique, unrepeatable, and wholly loved identity (Horan 2014:161). Merton’s notion of ‘vocation’, however, also included a more universal understanding of the word. In this more universal sense, the term refers to what is shared among the baptised – what each Christian was called to do, and be, in the light of communal commitments to follow the Gospel. Prophetic vocation, in this broader understanding of the term, pertains much more strongly to the characteristic of the collective Christian identity. As Horan (2014:161) comments: ‘Its manifestation will necessarily appear differently in the lives of various people by virtue of

the differences in lifestyle, social location, familial commitments, religious profession, and so on. But a general call for all Christians to be prophets in the world, is universal'. Living out such a calling sets one apart, which is clear from the stories in the Bible, but also in the life of Merton. Although the calling is there for every person to be a prophet, most people reject the possibility immediately. This rejection is not done consciously or with malice, but, as is seen from the life of Merton, in order to live a prophetic vocation, one's story must be God's story – a narrative of faith and not of the many other competing narratives of the world. Merton, in agreement with Bonaventure, insists that a prophet is one who focuses her/his life on scripture and, over time and by way of divine inspiration, comes to arrive at its spiritual and fuller sense. For Merton, being a prophet could never be regarded separately from reading scripture and being inspired by the Holy Spirit to see things *as they really are*. But this, of course, is only part of the story, as prophets do not simply see things differently from the way others see them, and then remain silent:

As if unable to contain the pain of seeing the incongruity recognized in the way people live in the world contrasted with the way God intends the human family to live in this life, the prophet speaks out against the increasingly more recognizable instances of injustice, pain, suffering, abuse, and other troubles in the world (Horan 2014:164).

The true prophet tends to become marginalised, because this way of seeing reality pushes him to the edges of the socially acceptable, and of the *status quo*. Merton made this point well when he said that 'the prophetic struggle with the world is the struggle of the Cross against worldly power' (Merton 1992:81). This inevitably leads to friction between those who have responded to the call to a prophetic vocation, and others who are leading a more 'worldly life'. The prophetic vocation entails suffering because of the contradictions in society. This is a real cross in the lives of many Christians (and non-Christians) in the world today.

The prophetic legacy that Merton left behind is one that highlights God's vision for the world, but also underscores the contradiction inherent in the myriad ways in which humanity exercises its collective freedom to move far afield from the divine intention. Horan (2014:165-166) reminds us that Merton's prophetic legacy did not come about overnight. It arose from a life of conversion, a life committed – in imperfect, finite ways – to following the call of the Holy Spirit.

In their writings, many scholars of Merton have highlighted the significance of this legacy. Scholars such as Twomey (1978), Dekar (2011) and Aguilar (2011) have all identified the threads of prophetic intuition and proclamation that continue to address the pressing concerns and unsettling circumstances of our day. Merton's ability to cut through to the heart of a matter is illustrative of this. Although it could possibly be argued that he lived in the ideal setting (daily recitation of the psalms, hearing of scripture, celebration of the Church's liturgies) for the making of a prophet, it is quite evident that Merton did respond to the calling of the Holy Spirit, and that he lived his life in accordance with his calling, in a manner that was congruent with his 'true self'. The years of monastic life, and being part of a secluded community on the margin of society, enabled Merton to perceive the disconnection between what God intended and the way most people were living their lives. Having the vision of what God intended for the human family, in contrast to his perception of the reality of the human condition, Merton could not help but cry out in order to draw attention to the ills of society. He did this in the way he knew best: through his writing. It is through his written corpus that Merton's prophetic vision is being passed on, as it will probably continue to do from generation to generation, for centuries to come. As Horan (2014:168-16) states:

Merton's prophetic legacy transcends the sectarian or ideological structures that generally limit other well-meaning peoples' concerns; God's concerns are not limited to partisan interests but touch on the well-being of all people and the entirety of creation.

Shortly before his death, Merton gave an informal talk on monasticism to some monks in Calcutta, India.⁹⁸ During this talk, it became clear that Merton was deeply moved by the fundamental unity that connected all human beings together, beyond the superficial distinctions, cultural variation, perceived differences, and other factors that separate people from one another. Merton concluded his talk with the affirmation that '...we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. What we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are' (Merton 1968b:308, cited in Horan 2014:169). This realisation that there is an intrinsic feature of our existence that binds us together in an inseparable way is, in part, an articulation of the scriptural vision of humanity that reflects reality as it is. It comprises a true prophetic expression

⁹⁸ This talk was given in October, 1968, just two months before Merton's death.

of who we are as human beings. As Merton realised, all the exterior differences between people, and the endeavours and struggles aimed at dividing and separating them, are iterations of worldly narratives that are not aligned with God's vision of reality. Merton's call to humanity is an exhortation to follow the divine impulse to be prophets – also in contemporary society – and to listen to the voice of God. It is a call to be bold, to stand tall, and to be faithful to one's 'true self' and one's vocation. Merton is calling humanity to follow in his footsteps and to embark on a journey with him – a journey that is not without inherent risks, but one that is well worth undertaking.

6.4.2 Spirituality in a world of technology

During the past few decades, technology has undergone explosive exponential growth. It has been predicted that humanity will soon be producing five exabytes of digital information every ten minutes. Soon, the amount of information produced in an hour will be the equivalent of all the information in all the books ever written (Shermer 2012:13). The effects of this staggering growth are only now beginning to surface. As a result, what seemed like science fiction even just a few years ago is rapidly becoming reality. Thompson (2012:xiv) defines technology as: '...instruments or processes that control, shape, and modify our environments and to an increasing degree, in our own time, our selves'. Technology enables us to manage (and interfere with) the natural world in order to meet our needs. Merton was well aware that technology could not be ignored, but that it was necessary to be acutely aware of the inherent risks it posed. As a result, he also has an important message for our technology-saturated society. It is commonly known that the driving force behind technology is enhanced control, efficiency and productivity. For Merton's spirituality, this raised a difficult question: 'could a person be a contemplative in such a world of relentless change?' (Thompson 2012:xv). Merton believed that what is required is a level of discernment to determine how technology affirms or demeans life. The gift of discernment is necessary, in order to have the wisdom to know how to accept the undeniable utility of technology without violating the requirements for a fully human life; a life that edifies the self and other people, and nurtures creativity and freedom.

Technology during Merton's lifetime was not limited to life outside the monastery. Apart from the massive building equipment used during the expansion of Gethsemani in the 1940s and

1950s (which annoyed Merton, as it disturbed his solitude), a ‘spirit of technology’ also infiltrated the monastery itself (Thompson 2012:xvi). Even the abbot at the time, Dom James Fox, was determined to raise productivity, in order to ensure that the monastery would be profitable. The monks, like cogs in a machine, were expected to efficiently produce their cheese and fruitcake. Merton was not completely adverse to technology. He admitted that he appreciated having a refrigerator and running water when he needed them at his hermitage. Over time, he developed a prophetic and contemplative critique of technology. He addressed a wide and complex array of issues connected to the technological world: materialism, Marxism, capitalism, alienation, technological warfare, and mass society. Merton was quite outspoken against DDT, the Vietnam war, computers and, especially, television. He advocated a renewal of culture in Christ. This, as Thompson (2012:xix) explains, refers to a culture in which the technological society would be moved beyond its rational and sub-rational levels to engage a transcendent level of experience, a reality that would ‘humanise’ life. In order to successfully effect the necessary balancing act that this would entail, the path of wisdom would have to be mapped out, not only in terms of theology, but also with respect to philosophy, literature, and all other faith traditions. In other words, a full human experience must be brought to bear on the subject of technology. If we wish to follow this path to wisdom, it is necessary to distinguish the ‘useless or harmful from what is useful and salutary, and in all things glorify God’ (Merton 1966:15). Merton’s canny reflections address the harm resulting from the triumph of technology in the modern world. The problem is not technological advancement *per se*; rather, it lies in technology’s inherent potential for the destruction of authentic human ends. Merton’s challenge to 21st-century society is to conduct a careful examination of the potential problems that could result from a culture dominated by a technological mentality; and furthermore, to create a true community, as opposed to a thoughtless technological collectivity. Merton not only issues prophetic warnings regarding the use, and abuse, of technology; he also offers a measure of hope for the future through careful reflections on humanising work; applying a measured approach to using technologies; recognising the role of nature as a source of healing; and the adoption of the philosophy of a solitary. As Thompson (2012:xx) points out, even in a technological society, there are still inner yearnings for meaning, love, mystery, and community, which remain unfulfilled in a technologically saturated world. Shannon (1997:17) reminds us why Merton’s contemplative quest for wisdom and reality, viz. his spirituality, is still attractive:

Those who choose to live a contemplative life are convinced that there is much more to life than what you see. There exists, they would claim, a world of reality below and above (indeed all around) our ordinary daily experience. It is this world which is alone truly real. People who are content to live simply on life's surface, are completely oblivious to the wonders that exist within them and all about them. How mightily their lives would be changed if they became aware of this other deeper dimension.

In what could be called his 'critique of technology', Merton highlights the source of our existence, referring to the direct and pure experience of reality, that is a living contact with the Infinite source of all being (Merton 2012:5).

It is precisely this illusion, that mechanical progress means human improvement, which alienates us from our own being and our own reality. It is precisely because we are convinced that our life, as such, is better if we have a better car, a better TV set, better toothpaste, etc., that we condemn and destroy our own reality and the reality of our natural resources. Technology was made for man, not man for technology. In losing touch with being and thus with God, we have fallen into a senseless idolatry of production and consumption for their own sakes.... We no longer know how to live, and because we cannot accept life in its reality life ceases to be a joy and becomes an affliction (Merton 1966:222).

Merton's wisdom is not only prophetic; it also offers positive solutions and options for humanising our technological world. Merton (1966:332) invites us to begin by 'learning to admit values, which we fear, from which we are trying to escape. Values like solitude, inner silence, reflective communication with natural realities, simple and genuine affection for other people, admission of our need for contemplation'. In line with Merton's thought, Thompson (2012:74-76) points out that, in order to fully integrate contemplative values into our technological world, the workplace is a good place to start. The main reason for this is, of course, the vast number of hours that the average individual spends at work. The human element in the average workplace is often secondary in relation to the needs of the economic system. Merton had first-hand experience of this when he had to deliver a package to a General Electric factory in Louisville. He remarked that the 'religious seriousness of the monastery is like sandlot baseball compared with the big-league seriousness of General Electric' (Merton 1966:232). This Louisville plant represented the embodiment of the productive mentality that had been exhibited in an alternative

form in the monastery for many years. The problem was not work *per se*. As Thompson (2012:75) explains, ‘gainful employment was not inherently good or evil, but must be judged by the extent to which it promoted the contemplative life’. Monica Weis (2015:69-71), in *We always Need a Prophet*, offers three examples of the adverse effects of contemporary obeisance to technology, illustrating the need for the challenge posed by Merton’s insights and prophetic witness: (1) factory farming; (2) chemical misuse; and (3) technology, violence and ‘busyness’. Contemporary society seems to comprise a mass community of slaves to a host of techno-gadgets. Merton grasped the limitations of technology, as well as its potential for de-humanisation. His reading of the work of French philosopher Jacques Ellul (1912-1994) was certainly at the forefront of his thinking regarding the limitations of technology, and its potential to imprison the human spirit. Technology, indeed, too often becomes ‘an expensive and complicated way of cultural disintegration’ – a type of violence with which contemporary society is undeniably faced (Merton 1966:60). As Merton realised, when society buys into the ethic that what ‘can be done...must be done’, it allows technology to ‘possess’, instead of to ‘serve’. Merton, in bringing the foregoing into line with the concept of violence, elaborates as follows:

[T]here is a pervasive form of contemporary violence to which the idealist...most easily succumbs: activism and overwork. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many objects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence...The frenzy of the activist neutralizes his work for peace. It destroys his own inner capacity for peace (Merton 1966:73).

Merton’s solution for this kind of violence is the ‘tactic of love’ that operates ‘without hatred, without hostility, and without resentment’ (Merton 1966:86).

6.4.3 Spirituality at work

A growing number of employees are becoming aware of, and are beginning to express their concern about, the lack of fulfilment and meaning that they are experiencing in their places of work. Many people who are approaching mid-life are asking themselves whether life does not have more to offer than the achievement of position and the acquisition of material benefits. But is it possible for a business to be profitable and spiritual at the same time? Can employees be

both productive and spiritually fulfilled? However when the question of spiritual values within the workplace is examined, highly-charged issues arise that threaten to hamper deeper exploration and the discovery of any underlying and revealing insights. Amongst these issues are the following: the fear of people being overly dogmatic and the conflict that would arise; taboos against discussing religion in the workplace; the separation of church and state; freedom of religion, and unreflective childhood notions of the Divine. It is true that *spiritual values* mean different things to different people. New approaches in modern management theory pertaining to aspects such as productivity, human motivation, team-work, etc. have undoubtedly enhanced effectiveness. There does, however, seem to be another dimension that needs to be taken into consideration – one that relates management to the core of what it means to be human. The need to include and involve the whole person, and not just his or her work-related function, can no longer be overlooked. The option of working in an environment in which people’s discovery and living out of their spiritual values is encouraged, respected and appreciated, is increasingly becoming a requirement amongst the workforce. A growing number of people are seeking a work environment that does not impose a particular point of view, but allows for diversity of expression with respect to individual life purposes, and maintains a healthy balance between ‘working’ and ‘living’.

The recovery of a balanced approach to work, in Merton’s view, requires a correct anthropology – a balanced understanding of the telos of human life. Adam was placed in the garden to ‘till it and keep it’, but this labour was consonant with maintaining a ‘union with God’, a ‘contract with reality at its source’ (Merton 1961b:79-80). In many organisations today, employees are used as ‘tools’ – reflecting a form of oppression in which the labourer lives merely to work, instead of working to live. Efficiency often poses the risk of further destabilising family and community life (Thompson 2012:75). For example, constant relocations of employees continue, regardless of the consequences for family or community. The technological mentality of modern-day society nurtures a hyper-productive mindset in the current age of global competitiveness. Merton abhorred this focus on productivity – a mentality that at times even affected his own monastery. Instead, modern forms of production should humanely seek to facilitate the reintegration of the person – body and soul. Merton observed that such reintegration requires a new mental framework in terms of which work is carried out at a humane pace, and for a limited number of

hours per day. Such work would create the mental space in which contemplation could take place. Things are truly balanced when ‘everything is in unity, in order, at peace. Contemplation no longer needs to be a special “state” that removes one from the ordinary things going on around him, for God penetrates all’ (Merton 1956:84-85). The answer seems to lie in maintaining a healthy balance between work and other facets of human life; making use of small-scale technologies to improve the quality of life; and complementing this with the restoration that can be obtained from spending time in nature.

What would a more spiritual workplace mean in practice? It would mean that the place of work would be transformed from merely being a place to obtain enough money to survive – to simply earn one’s daily bread – to being a place of livelihood; a haven, where one does not only *survive*, but where one is *fully alive* – a condition that one can only attain when one’s spirit is allowed to express itself, enabling one to allow other people’s spirits, in turn, to be nourished and to flourish. One of the greatest benefits of a more spiritual workplace is that people are more in touch with the Source of their creativity. Experienced businesspeople know that creativity is the cornerstone of a business. It allows for new products and new innovative services to be launched. Creativity is the starting point of doing more with less, and, therefore, of productivity. As society moves more and more into a service-oriented and technological economy, creativity and innovation are being required to expand even further. The reality, however, is that this cannot be ‘demanded’ from people. An atmosphere has to be established in which innovation and creativity can flourish; and this is accomplished only when the bountiful expression of spirit is made possible. Spirituality in the workplace also leads to other benefits, such as improved communication; increased ethical and moral behaviour; and the promotion of the expression of talent. Many workplaces today are finding themselves in the transitional period between ‘work as survival’ and ‘work as livelihood’. New management techniques and new organisational structures may well be required in order to handle this emerging context. Spirituality helps employees to cope with the ever-changing work environment by allowing them to find a higher purpose and meaning in their lives. To employees who have a spiritual centre from which to work, no task is without meaning. Merton shows that the spiritual journey starts from within, in order to gain an awareness of self. It is from this central point – a point of contentment – that employees should be earning their daily bread. Such employees will be more productive, will

enjoy their work, and will ultimately maintain a better balance between working and other aspects of living.

6.5 Conclusion

One would hardly find a library, especially a university library, that does not contain several works of Merton on the shelves – often worn out from the number of hands they have passed through. Even though Merton was a monk, whose original intention was to write for a monastic readership, his writings were arguably more popular amongst lay people; and he literally had thousands of followers in general society, who took to his books even more readily than nuns and monks did.⁹⁹ It is a remarkable fact that during the past fifty years, Merton's readership has continued to grow steadily. His writings remain relevant and continue to be reprinted year after year. They have been translated into many different languages and are read by countless numbers of people in many parts of the world. In this regard, Shannon's (2005:48) observation rings true – namely, that there is a '...kind of magic about the name of Thomas Merton that brings together people of many diverse backgrounds'.¹⁰⁰ The increasing diversity of Merton's readership comprises more evidence that he is neither outdated nor irrelevant.

Besides the extensive publications of Merton's own writings, a significant body of literature on Thomas Merton has flourished. Scholars from different academic backgrounds have written extensively about the American monk and his works. His humanity, or perhaps his ability to articulate the human condition, seems to be the main factor that continues to draw so many people to Merton, thereby keeping his legacy alive. Commenting on Merton's humanity, Shannon (2005:50) states that Merton '...was real. He detested phoniness and pretense. He said what he thought and tried to mean what he said.' It is especially in his writing on issues of social justice that Merton's honesty comes to the fore. In Merton, one finds an example of an earnest, genuine, 'no-holds-barred' human being who struggled to find meaning in life and sought to

⁹⁹ Many monks were sceptical about the things Merton said, or even about the topics he chose to write about. Lay people, on the other hand, chose to forget that Merton was a monk, and felt that he was addressing them in their own circumstances in life. Figuratively speaking, society took Merton out of the monastery and made him '...one of their own' (Shannon (2005:48).

¹⁰⁰ I was fortunate enough to attend the 14th General Meeting of the ITMS, hosted at Bellarmine University on 4-7 June 2015. On Saturday evening (6th June), a banquet dinner was held; and seated at my table were an architect, a landscape architect, an author, an Anglican priest and myself – a manager in the corporate world. This is a good example of the diverse following that Merton has, even today, in the 21st century.

confront the absurdity that life so often seems to present. During his life, Merton knew loneliness, homelessness and alienation. There was a certain measure of vulnerability in his humanity; a reality that he never attempted to hide or deny. Furthermore, he possessed a unique ability to articulate the human situation and the struggle of mortals to deal with the ambiguities, contradictions and inequities which life often thrusts upon the human race. As Shannon (2005:51) observes, it is probably his ability to communicate clearly and wisely that makes it possible for so many diverse people to identify with Merton, thus ensuring that he remains relevant. People read Merton's story and see something of their own story in it:

He gives voice to thoughts and intuitions that were in their minds and hearts, but which they did not know were there, until Merton gave them expression (Shannon 2005: 51).

Merton also had the ability to perceive the 'real issues at hand' before others even began to look for them. He wrote with a unique sense of humour, but also with wisdom. Although a contemplative at heart, he had a deep regard for other people and constantly tried to find common ground with them.¹⁰¹ It was this regard for others that gave Merton such a keen awareness of the adversity of others, and which brought about his tremendous commitment to social justice and peace. He had an ability to look into the human condition that transcended his own life and his own generation. He succeeded in looking beyond the ephemeral and the superficial in order to see perennial human values – values that have not yet been fully appreciated or understood by 21st-century society.

The reasons why Merton's writings are able to speak to today's generation, and most likely, to generations yet to come, have been outlined above. Merton belonged to his own age and wrote in his own time in history; yet so much of what he wrote seems to reach beyond the culture of his own time. As Shannon (2005:54) puts it, he was 'supra-cultural, yet not ahistorical'. Breaking through cultural restraints in order to see what *can* be, is the role of the prophet. Merton was such a prophet. He had the insight and wisdom to discern the concerns, issues and questions that really matter in human life. He never claimed to have all the answers, but he did have a clear insight

¹⁰¹ Merton was convinced that the ultimate ground in which we all meet is the *hidden ground of Love* that we call God. This *hidden ground of Love* is the ultimate mystery which words fail to grasp or explain. In *Seasons of Celebration* (2009:120), Merton refers to this mystery as 'mercy'.

into the issues that needed to be addressed. As a result, Merton continues to direct the spiritual journey of many people – including those ‘...who are in communion with institutional forms of religion and, perhaps most astounding of all, people whose only link with spirituality is the monk who lived in Nelson County, Kentucky, in the Trappist monastery of Gethsemani’ (Shannon 2005:55). This chapter has explored the legacy of Thomas Merton and highlighted its importance for today’s world. It can be concluded, without any doubt, that Merton is still highly relevant today. In Merton, the 21st century seeker finds a spiritual guide whose embodied spirituality is both mystical and prophetic; a guide who can accompany the seeker on his or her own inner journey.

Chapter 7

CONCLUSION

7.1 Preamble

Confronted by the many challenges that characterise life in today's world, society as a whole is in dire need of strong (spiritual) leaders – brave persons of integrity who can lead the way and guide others through their example. Thomas Merton is one such 'spiritual guide'. Merton's life can be interpreted as a journey of integration, with the ultimate goal of finding his 'true self'; and it seems that he eventually did so, in the course of his religious life at Gethsemani. Through his mystical teaching, Merton enables people to learn the value of meditation and stillness, which ultimately leads to a heightened awareness that culminates in the development of new levels of compassion. In addition to this, his inter-religious dialogue facilitates a better understanding of the great wisdom traditions of the East, resulting in a suspension of judgment and an openness to other cultures and religions. The aim of this dissertation has been to bring these elements to the fore, and thereby contribute to the field of Merton studies. As Anthony Padovano states: 'The story of Thomas Merton is worth preserving for the same reason that any good story is worth keeping. It enables us to get on with life, to see connections beyond the random happenings of everyday experience, and, most important, to participate in the process by which life is continuous...' (1982:3). In view of the vast body of literature available on the life and legacy of Merton and the practical limitations inherent to a study of this nature, it was decided at the outset of the research project that the focus would fall mainly on *three* aspects of Merton's spirituality: his notion of the 'self'; contemplation as a key component of his spirituality; and the contribution made by his spirituality to contemporary society. The research for this dissertation had as its aim a consideration as to whether the spirituality of Merton is still relevant today. *Chapter one* began by stating the research question and the hypothesis, demarcating the research and explaining the research approach and methodology taken. After delineating the chapters of the study, chapter one continued to set the scene for the study by means of an endeavour to define 'spirituality' and 'mysticism'. *Chapter two* examined some of the major literary contributions, available in the corpus of writings by, and about Merton. In *Chapter three*, the life of Thomas Merton received attention, along with the cultural, social and religious milieu that influenced his upbringing,

teaching, and spirituality. In this chapter, the most important events that shaped Merton's life and spirituality were highlighted. Reference was also made to *The Geography of Lograire*, Merton's epic poem that covers many aspects of his inner journey. The study revealed that Merton's image of God changed drastically during the course of his life, which contributed to his psycho-spiritual development, and the unfolding of his inner 'self'. *Chapter four* dealt with Merton's concept of the self. *Chapter five* focused on contemplation as a major component of Merton's spirituality, demonstrating how, through contemplation, the various aspects of his personality were integrated. *Chapter six* outlined the value and relevance of Merton's spirituality for today. In this final chapter of the dissertation, the major threads of the study are drawn together and the findings are extrapolated.

7.2 Research question and hypothesis

At the beginning of the dissertation, the 'research question' was defined as follows: *Is the contemplative spirituality of Thomas Merton still relevant in contemporary society?* The hypothesis is that contemplation offers an effective way of integrating various aspects of the personality, and that as a result thereof, it is still relevant in contemporary society. In the research conducted for the purposes of this dissertation, evidence has been presented which supports the hypothesis, indicating that contemplation does indeed offer an effective way of integrating various aspects of the human personality, and that consequently it remains relevant for contemporary society. The research method followed entailed a literary study. The corpus of Merton's own work, along with contemporary research on Merton and his spirituality, has been explored. The study was undertaken from a phenomenological perspective, and the theoretical framework encompassed an inter-disciplinary and inter-religious approach, including disciplines such as spirituality, theology, mysticism and psychology. The value of this study lies in its particular focus on Merton's many and varied life-experiences, his reactions to these experiences and the way in which they influenced his spirituality.

7.3 Outcomes of the research

The many years that Merton spent at Our Lady of Gethsemani brought about profound changes in his understanding of the world – but also in his understanding of himself. This reflects

Merton's own experience of the 'inner journey' that is necessary in order to arrive at a more profound understanding of oneself (and of the world). In his writings, Merton makes it clear that this 'inner journey' is often marked by *intense inner conflict*, and that to embark on such a journey, the individual needs to be 'whole'. It is a journey that culminates in the *diminishment of the false self*, thereby allowing the 'true self' to emerge. In Merton's case, this journey opened him up to the world and created the necessary conditions that enabled him to engage enthusiastically with life (in contrast to his former wish to isolate himself from the world).

This was made possible through *contemplation* – another crucial theme in Merton's writings – which is closely linked to the concept of the inner journey. He explains the importance of contemplation as part of one's spiritual life as follows: Contemplation is man's highest and most essential spiritual activity. It is his most creative and dynamic affirmation of his divine sonship...it is the awakening of Christ within us (Merton 2003:34). Contemplation, as a phenomenon, engaged Merton for most of his adult years. He believed that, apart from death itself, contemplation is the only other way to arrive at the point where one's true self emerges, since contemplation requires the individual *to see things 'as they are'*. The contemplative is one who has cultivated the ability *to be content with the moment, as it is*. 'The contemplative', writes Merton, 'is not one who directs a magic spiritual intuition upon other objects, but one who, being perfectly unified in himself and recollected in the center of his own humility, enters into contact with reality by an immediacy that forgets the division between subject and object' (Merton 2003:151). For Merton, contemplation was the reason for his existence (Merton 1951:24, 76). Far from being a once-off event, contemplation involves *a process of ongoing conversion*. The *transformation* that resulted from this ongoing process in Merton's own life ultimately brought him into the desired *union with God*, appeasing a deep hunger at the core of his being.

Contemplation, as a phenomenon, occurs across most religions, including Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, etc. The fact that this phenomenon is experienced as 'real' is probably the one *common denominator between the different religions*; and, as Merton discovered, it is also an excellent point of departure for dialogue between different religions. Merton's *contribution to the body of contemplative literature* is threefold: (1) he affirms that contemplation is a real phenomenon and not merely a psychological experience or 'disorder'; (2)

he stresses the simplicity of contemplation, describing it as a ‘gift’ – with no preliminary effort on the part of the contemplative – leading eventually to the realisation that no effort is needed; and (3) he highlights the sobriety and humility of such an experience (Merton 2003:116). This ongoing conversion also transformed Merton’s way of *relating to the world*, to such an extent that it impelled him into the political arena, where he became, in a way, the ‘conscience’ of the peace movement of the 1960s. Subsequently, as a strong supporter of the non-violent civil rights movement, he was quite outspoken against racial injustices, violence and war. This was one way of taking the perspective that he gained through contemplation, turning it outward, and using it to view the world from a different angle and to connect with others at a much deeper level, and with greater compassion.

Although Merton wrote for his own time, much of what he has written still applies today, in the 21st century. Breaking through cultural restraints in order to see what *can* be, is the role of the prophet; and Merton was such a prophet. He had the insight and wisdom to discern the concerns and issues that really mattered in human life. He never claimed to have all the answers; but he did have a clear insight into the issues that needed to be addressed. Merton also had the unique ability to see the ‘real issues at hand’ before others even began to look for them. He managed to look beyond the ephemeral and the superficial in order to perceive *perennial human values*. An overview of Merton’s writings – particularly in the light of world events that have occurred in the decades since his death – brings *his prophetic role* clearly to the fore.

It is quite remarkable that Merton’s writings have remained relevant, are printed year after year, have been translated into many different languages, and are read by countless numbers of people in many parts of the world. After *The Seven Storey Mountain* became a best-seller and brought him instant fame, Merton continued to write for a diverse international audience. Shannon (2005:48) aptly remarks that there is a ‘...kind of magic about the name of Thomas Merton that brings together people of many diverse backgrounds’. The increasing diversity of Merton’s readership comprises further evidence that he is neither outdated nor irrelevant. His ability to communicate clearly, in a manner that resonates with readers of different backgrounds, makes it possible for people from all walks of life to identify with him, thereby ensuring that he remains relevant. People read Merton’s story and see something of their own story in it:

He gives voice to thoughts and intuitions that were in their minds and hearts, but which they did not know were there, until Merton gave them expression (Shannon 2005:51).

As a result, Merton continues to direct the spiritual journey of many people – those who are in communion with institutional forms of religion and, perhaps most astounding of all, people whose only link with spirituality is the monk from Gethsemani.

7.4 Limitations of the study

As is the case with most scientific studies, there are a number of limitations to this particular study on Merton. Firstly, the many psychological factors that may have influenced Merton's view and experience of life, posed some unique research challenges. One could easily argue that these factors would, without a doubt, have some level of influence on Merton's spirituality and the development of his *inner self*. However, it was not within the purview of this dissertation to examine these factors in depth, but rather to treat them as background information – leading to a deeper understanding of Merton and his spirituality. Secondly, since Merton had a very rich and complex spirituality, it was only possible to discuss a certain number of elements in a work of this nature. Elements such as his striving for monastic renewal; his fight for justice, peace and non-violence; and his inter-religious dialogue, especially with Zen Buddhism, although referenced appropriately, could not be investigated in any great detail.

7.5 Recommendations for future research

Even taking into account the vast amount of completed research investigating the person and spirituality of Thomas Merton, nevertheless, given there is still an inexhaustible interest in his work and thought. With respect to recommendations for future research, there are two particular fields of study that I would like to identify.

The first field of interest, related to Merton, is that of *ecology*. Nature played a significant role in Merton's life and contributed in no small way to his psycho-spiritual development. From the

time that he spent as a child watching his father paint landscapes for many long hours, to his final years of solitude in the hermitage at Our Lady of Gethsemani, Merton contemplated and wrote extensively about the beauty of his surroundings. Throughout his life, his study of the natural world shaped his spirituality in profound ways; and he was one of the first writers to raise concerns regarding ecological issues that have become critical in recent years. In the light of the above, it is somewhat surprising that so little research has been undertaken on this important element of Merton's spirituality. In fact, Monica Weis's *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton* (2011) is the very first scholarly study on Merton's writing on nature. Although Weis has masterfully situated Merton's work within the works of other nature writers and poets, making connections across literary and theological boundaries, and demonstrating Merton's evolving ecological consciousness at the beginning of the ecological movement, nevertheless, there is a need for more studies to be undertaken by scholars on this topic. This does not minimise Weis's achievement in portraying Merton's deep concern for protecting the natural world; and for highlighting the fact that the challenge of his environmental vision is as powerful and as pertinent in today's world (in which ecological crises are commonplace) as it was during Merton's own lifetime. With environmental crises presenting themselves on multiple fronts, our planet cannot accommodate 'guilty bystanders'. As Weis (2011:165) points out, 'Merton's life bears witness to our challenge: we need to become more awake, learn to really look at the geography around us, reflect on how it contributes to our identity, and discover how we, through contemplation, are called to maintain its integrity'.

The second field of interest, which requires further study, is on the topic of 'Final Integration', in light of Merton's correspondence with Reza Arasteh. In *Growth to Selfhood: The Sufi Contribution* (1980), Arasteh, drawing upon his insights into Western and Eastern culture, focuses on one of the most complex but fascinating aspects of human life – the nature of the self, and the process of growth to selfhood. He not only defines the origin of the conventional self, but also the traditional barriers to selfhood, and discusses ways of removing cultural barriers so that personality change can take place. This, Arasteh believes, will result in a new harmony and a new state of life, full of wisdom and spontaneity. Dr Arasteh analyses the spontaneous expressions of the self (known in Persian culture as *An*), describing them as typical of the 'creative moment' or 'climax of being' experience. He considers how such moments have

produced creative results in terms of experiential religion, or the discovery of laws of nature, or in terms of greater awareness of our place in the cosmos. As in Merton's case, Arasteh not only provides a perspective regarding the growth of the self; he also makes an important contribution to the techniques of achieving the lofty goal he sets. Arasteh (1980:38-39) acknowledges that the notion of rebirth through God's image is not unique to Islam. Making reference to Merton, who corresponded with him for many years, Arasteh states that such rebirth can occur through Christianity as well. Merton believed that self-renewal is one of the basic characteristics of Christianity. In this regard, Arasteh (1980:38) writes as follows:

Contrary to the belief which makes it seem that Christianity is a formalistic method for gaining a place in this world, Merton believed that the death of the 'old self' will create a new dimension in one's present life....

To date, no academic study has been conducted on the correspondence that took place between Merton and Arasteh. In view of the respect that they had for one another's work, and the emphasis that both men placed on self-renewal and growth, such a study is warranted.

7.6 Final remarks

This dissertation has explored the life and legacy of Thomas Merton and highlighted its relevance for today. In Merton, the 21st-century seeker finds a spiritual guide equipped to accompany him or her on the journey of life. Merton, writing to his community of monks whilst travelling in Asia, had the following to say about this journey: 'Our real journey in life is interior; it is a matter of growth, deepening, and of an ever greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts' (Merton 1968b:296). Merton's call to society and to every individual is an invitation to accompany him on this journey, where the 'self' that begins the journey is not the 'self' that completes the journey. In fact, at the end of the journey, there is 'no-one' left. This 'no-one', one's 'true self', Merton firmly believed, is none other than God himself.

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