



THOMAS MERTON ON CONTEMPLATION AND ITS SOCIAL  
DIMENSION: AN EVALUATIVE STUDY

MS. PHATSARA PHONGPHIT

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of  
the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts in  
Religious Studies

Graduate School of Philosophy and Religion  
Assumption University  
Bangkok, Thailand

2007

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An Evaluative Study

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The Graduate School of Philosophy and Religion, Assumption University, has approved this thesis as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Religious Studies.

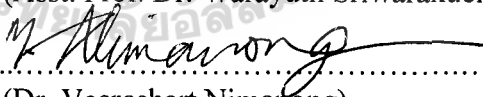


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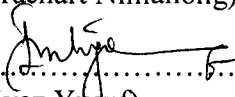
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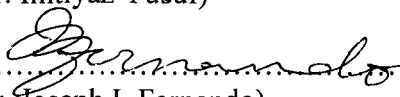
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**Thesis Title** : Thomas Merton on Contemplation and its Social Dimension:  
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### ABSTRACT

If man is called to participate in God's life, it is reasonable to regard contemplation of value and an end in itself. It may be argued that man in the modern world also needs contemplation.

Thomas Merton was a Catholic contemplative monk, who sought union with God through contemplation. Merton opened up the essence of what contemplation is for all walks of life, not only for monks and nuns. Merton strongly endorsed contemplation as an essential part of life. All his life, Merton committed himself to contemplation.

According to Merton, God is the core of contemplation. The Christians have experienced God through Jesus, who has an intimate relation with Him; therefore they take Jesus as their model and contemplate God through Jesus. Through contemplation, Merton had inner experience of the presence of God, union with God and transformation in God. Merton's contemplation helps us understand much of the meaning of the phrase found in the New Testament "I live, now not I but Christ lives

in me. And that I live now in the flesh, I live in the faith of the Son of God who loved me” (Gal 2:20).

Merton’s contemplation was his personal experience of God which overflowed into social concern. Merton became convinced that God’s overwhelming love and mercy received in contemplation should be shared with others. When man brings his love into society and the world, he brings also God’s love to the world. Merton defines that “Christianity is a religion of love” (NM, p. 106). Merton emphasized the significance of contemplation for effective social action and social transformation.

Merton had experienced that contemplation is the source of strength for living in peace. True peace comes from intimate communion with God. Merton became aware of God’s overwhelming love and peace in his own life. Merton was a peace maker just like Gandhi and Thich Nhat Hanh who devoted their lives to peace.

This thesis aims to understand Thomas Merton’s vision of contemplation, and to evaluate Merton’s experience on contemplation in regards to social concern and how it may contribute to peace in society.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iv
ABBREVIATIONS	viii
<b>Chapter I INTRODUCTION</b>	
1.1 Background and Significance of the Study	1
1.2 Thesis Statement	8
1.3 Objectives of the Thesis	8
1.4 Limitation of the Study	9
1.5 Relevant Researches	9
1.6 Contribution of the Thesis	10
1.7 Methodology of Research	10
1.8 Definition of the Terms Used	11
<b>Chapter II WHAT IS CONTEMPLATION?</b>	
2.1 Introduction	13
2.2 Descriptive Definition of Contemplation	13
2.2.1 Prayer and Contemplation	17
2.2.2 Meditation and Contemplation	19
2.2.3 Mysticism and Contemplation	21
2.3 Contemplation in Christian Tradition	23

2.4 Types of Contemplation	26
2.5 Contemplation and the Theological Virtues	27
2.5.1 Faith and Contemplation	28
2.5.2 Hope and Contemplation	29
2.5.3 Love and Contemplation	30
2.6 Contemplation in Other Religious Traditions	32
2.6.1 Buddhism and Contemplation	32
2.6.2 Hinduism and Contemplation	35
2.6.3 Islam and Contemplation	37
2.7 Summary	39

### **Chapter III THOMAS MERTON ON CONTEMPLATION AND SOCIAL CONCERN**

3.1 Introduction	40
3.2 Thomas Merton's Life and Work	41
3.3 Thomas Merton's Vision of Contemplation	47
3.3.1 Contemplation for All	48
3.3.2 Contemplation is a Grace	48
3.3.3 Jesus Christ as the Center of Contemplation	49
3.3.4 Contemplation of Jesus on The Cross	50
3.4 Requisites for Contemplation	52
3.4.1 Detachment	52
3.4.2 Silence	54
3.4.3 Solitude	55



3.5 Thomas Merton's Experience of Contemplation	57
3.5.1 Seeking God	60
3.5.2 Coming to Know One's True Self	61
3.5.3 Relationship with the World	62
3.6 Catholic Social Teaching	64
3.7 Merton on Social Concern	67
3.7.1 Contemplation and Action	70
3.7.2 Spiritual Dimension of Society	72
3.8 Summary	75

#### **Chapter IV CONTEMPLATION AS ENGAGEMENT WITH THE WORLD:**

##### **AN EVALUATION**

4.1 Introduction	77
4.2 Engagement in Contemplation in the World	78
4.3 The Formulation of Contemplation	80
4.3.1 Love of God	81
4.3.1.1 Jesus as the Model of Contemplation of Loving	83
4.3.2 Love of Neighbor	85
4.4 Contemplation is Universal	89
4.5 The Specific Contribution of Merton's Contemplation	91
4.5.1 Merton's Understanding of Peace	93
4.5.2 Merton's Concern for Peace	95
4.5.3 The Relation between Contemplation and Peace	97
4.6 Summary	102

**Chapter V CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

5.1 Conclusion	104
5.2 Recommendation for Further Studies	107

<b>REFERENCES</b>	109
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<b>AUTOBIOGRAPHY</b>	122
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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THIS THESIS

### I Thomas Merton's writings

- AT** refers to Merton, Thomas (1951). *The Ascent To Truth*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company.
- CGB** refers to Merton, Thomas (1966). *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. Garden City: Doubleday.
- CP** refers to Merton, Thomas (1969). *Contemplative Prayer*. New York: Herder & Herder.
- CWA** refers to Merton, Thomas (1971). *Contemplation in a World of Action*. Garden City: Doubleday.
- DQ** refers to Merton, Thomas (1960). *Disputed Questions*. New York: Mentor Omega.
- FV** refers to Merton, Thomas (1968). *Faith and Violence*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- GNV** refers to Merton, Thomas (1964). *Gandhi on Non-Violence*. New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation.
- HGL** refers to Merton, Thomas (1985). *The Hidden Ground of Love*. (Ed). William H. Shannon. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux.
- LH** refers to Merton, Thomas (1963). *Life and Holiness*. New York: Herder and Herder.
- LL** refers to Merton, Thomas (1980). *Love and Living*. (Ed). Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart. New York: Bantam.

- MJ** refers to Merton, Thomas (1978). *The Monastic Journey*. (Ed). Patrick Hart. Garden City: Image Books.
- NM** refers to Merton, Thomas (1963). *The New Man*. New York: A Mentor-Omega Book.
- NMI** refers to Merton, Thomas (1955). *No Man Is an Island*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- NSC** refers to Merton, Thomas (1962). *New Seeds of Contemplation*. New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation.
- PP** refers to Merton, Thomas (1997). *Passion for Peace*. (Ed). William H. Shannon. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company.
- R** refers to Merton, Thomas (1974). *A Thomas Merton Reader*. (Ed). Thomas P. McDonnell. Garden City: Image Books.
- SC** refers to Merton, Thomas (1949). *Seeds of Contemplation*. New York: Dell.
- SDM** refers to Merton, Thomas (1960). *Spiritual Direction and Meditation*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press.
- SJ** refers to Merton, Thomas (1956). *The Sign of Jonas*. New York: Image Books.
- SL** refers to Merton, Thomas (1992). *Silent Lamp*. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company.
- SSM** refers to Merton, Thomas (1970). *The Seven Storey Mountain*. New York: Image Books.
- TMP** refers to Merton, Thomas (1971). *Thomas Merton On Peace*. London: Mow brays.

- TS** refers to Merton, Thomas (1958). *Thoughts in Solitude*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy.
- WC** refers to Merton, Thomas (1981). *What is Contemplation?*. Rev. Ed. Illinois: Templegate Publishers.
- WS** refers to Merton, Thomas (1962). *The Waters of Siloe*. New York: Image Books.

## II Sacred Scripture

### A. Old Testament

- Ex : Exodus
- Dt : Deuteronomy
- Gn : Genesis
- Ps : Psalms

### B. New Testament

- Acts : Acts of the Apostles
- 1Cor : First letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians
- 2Cor : Second letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians
- Eph : Letter of St. Paul to the Ephesians
- Gal : Letter of St. Paul to the Galatians
- Heb : Letter of St. Paul to the Hebrews
- Jn : Gospel of St. John
- 1Jn : First letter of St. John
- Lk : Gospel of St. Luke



- Mk : Gospel of St. Mark
- Mt : Gospel of St. Matthew
- 1Pt : First Letter of Peter
- Phil : Letter of St. Paul to the Philippians
- Rom : Letter of St. Paul to the Romans
- 1 Thes: First Letter of St. Paul to the Thessalonians
- 1 Tm : First Letter of St. Paul to Timothy



# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background and Significance of Study

We live in the age of globalization, rampant materialism, consumerism and hedonism. The historic process of globalization has transformed human life through science and technology. Modern education is dominated by science and technology, offering a materialistic worldview. Life in the present day seems to be defined in terms of wealth and material self-indulgence. Above all, people find it hard to be self-reflective and are apparently at the mercy of a thousand distractions. They may be dissipating their energies by indulging in modern forms of amusement.

As a result, spiritual values are seemingly being eroded or relegated to the private sphere of life. In modern society man appears to be alienated and faces the danger of becoming a “thing” rather than “a person”, because he is more likely subjected to the rule of what is lower than himself and outside himself. As Pope John Paul II writes in *Redemptor Hominis*: “Man cannot relinquish himself or his place in the visible world that belongs to him; he cannot become the slave of things, the slave of economic systems, the slave of production, the slave of his own products” (John Paul II, 1979, No.16).

There is a visible decline in religious practice and belief. For example, in Europe generally, there has been in recent decades, a decline in the number of people professing belief in God and in an afterlife. In the same way, the Thai society is also experiencing very rapid modernization and strong influence of the modern mass media and

consumerism. Religious institutions are confronted by rapidly changing social circumstances and declining faith in traditional religions.

Max Weber (1864-1920), a German political economist and sociologist, used religion to explain capitalism realities. For him, human life is an arena in which causes are part of the reality of things as they are. He believed that “religion” supplies perhaps the most powerful source of legitimacy that one could have for the action one performs. In his most famous book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905) Weber examined both capitalism and Protestantism in order to show how religion and modern economic life were related, and what place religion has in the rise of modern economy.

According to Weber, the Protestant Christians extolled the virtue of poverty but encouraged accumulation of materials things. As they said that hard work become a way of serving and glorifying God. This view of all the spheres of life is sacred when dedicated to God and His purposes of nurturing and furthering life, affected the view of work. Weber's thought that Christian's vocation was no longer limited to the church, but applied to any occupation or trade. Capitalism tends to create a sense of business: austerity, industry and frugality, in order to make a profit. Capitalism then has become a value in its own right. It may conflict with the contemplative and ascetical religious life. He argued that the particular characteristics of ascetic Protestantism led to development of capitalism. He suggested that the Protestant ethic and capitalism have each underlying ethics which are related. The capitalists desire to accumulate more and more and the workers desire to work harder to earn as much as possible. Protestant ethic emphasizes the increase of world activity and the practice of self-denial.

To understand the role of religion in the modern world, it is helpful to look into

the phenomenon of secularization. Social scientists use the term “secularization” to express the phenomenon of people abandoning religious practice and belief, whereby religion loses its importance and influence on society. Secularization theory first developed to explain changes in the relation between religion and modern society in Europe.

Keith A. Roberts defines that secularization is transformation of society to a more rational, utilitarian way of life with a reduction in supernatural explanations. There is an, “increase in the rational mentality” of individuals, involving openness to new way of doing things and new ways of thinking that are not based only on tradition (Roberts, 1995, pp. 338-345). The modern empirical scientific world view has replaced a religious one.

Peter Berger points out that the causes of secularization are complex; he believes that its effects could be destructive. In his view a society cannot become stable if the role of religion and the integration function of a common religious world view is in decline (Berger, 2001, p. 210). He maintains that a society cannot long exist without discovering a core of common purposes. The role of religion and the integrating function of a common religious worldview are necessary for social stability. In fact, secularization is the process of social change in which religion loses social significance. That process may occur for a shorter or longer time period. If religion gives men and women meaning to their existence, then secularization may be the consequence of a crisis of meaning or the process of new ways of providing such meaning. On the other hand, if we understand contemporary society that tends to weaken religion, we may gain a better understanding of the presence and strength of religion in the tradition.

Modern technology has provided life with many comforts; yet people today seem to be lost and are searching earnestly for the meaning of life. Man is more than matter; he has spiritual needs too. For a balanced human development, man needs to grow along with technology, in his spiritual and social dimensions as well; if not, he will be an underdeveloped human being. As evident in our technological age, violence is on the increase and the abuse of technology dehumanizes people and pushes the underprivileged to the margin of society with their human dignity trampled. In contrast, Christianity stands for agapeic, self-surrendering love. There is no better love than laying down one's life for others (Jn 15:12-13) as exemplified by Jesus Christ.

In the process of globalization, science and technology seem to have more or less usurped the power of religion; hence God appears pushed aside. The (American) movement<sup>1</sup> of the 1960s deliberately used Nietzsche's phrase "God is dead"<sup>2</sup> as its slogan to emphasize the sentiment of man's rejection of God. With the "death of God" man is no longer burdened with any restraint - he can do whatever he wants. If life revolves around material things, people may have no time for contemplation, mystery and the deeper meaning of things.

Those who believe in the reality of God can experience His presence. At the same moment, many of us search for wisdom that will connect us with the divine and for meaning of everyday events. As the result of national surveys reveals that a certain percentage of Americans have experienced insight into the divine. The priest and

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<sup>1</sup> This movement in American theology arose in the 1960s known as the "death of God". The death of God movement is sometimes technically referred to as "theothanatology" (<http://en.wikipedia.org>).

<sup>2</sup> The slogan "God is dead" generated a dramatic debate in America in 1963-1967.



sociologist Andrew Greeley observed that “a full 35% of Americans reported they had had a mystical experience: feeling very close to a powerful, spiritual force that seems to lift you out of yourself” (Greeley, 1987, p. 47). We need to escape from the pressures of ordinary life in order to enter more deeply into God’s own mystery of personal love.

People in our time need spirituality to save their lives from the oncoming flood of materialism. In other words, spiritual perspectives are needed to balance the extreme materialism prevailing today. Concretely speaking, instead of aiming at the unlimited growth of wealth and consumption, we will do well to look for meaningful happiness and higher quality of life. Like Thomas Merton<sup>3</sup>, the Christians are called upon to renew their spiritual life in the sense of nourishing the soul with God. It is the essence of a Christian to participate in God. The world today, more than ever, needs authentic Christian life rooted in Christ through the way of contemplation which can lead to union with God.

Although much of the literature of Christian contemplation had been written many centuries ago, it would have been a mistake to think of contemplation as a purely medieval phenomenon. Contemplative life is to be found also at the present time. It may be said, in defense of contemplation, that those who are religious want to make a distinctive contribution to creative thought in religion and to adjust themselves as well to this world of space and time. The contemplative person would no doubt feel that he needs no such defense. If man’s highest activity is to love God, it is reasonable to regard contemplation as valuable, an end in itself, and not merely because of any usefulness it may have in this world.

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Merton (1915-1968) was an American Trappist monk at the Abbey of Gethsemani, Kentucky, USA. The essence of Trappist life is penitence, a single-minded love of God built up from destruction of self-love through physical mortification, intellectual humility and spiritual renunciation of all earthly ties (Wakefield, 1983, pp. 308-381).

Many Christians think that contemplation is not for them but for the monks, nuns and others who profess religious life. This is not true. Many Christians are turning to contemplation to quench their spiritual thirst. Merton wrote *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948), to emphasize that contemplation is for people not only for monks or religious. This book has sold more than one million copies and is translated into fourteen languages. This is a sign that people in the modern world desire contemplation, spiritual life and inner peace.

Merton wrote about forty books in a variety of styles like poetry, essays, inspirational books and hundreds of journal articles on the theme of contemplation. It is a new phenomenon that a contemplative monk extended an invitation to everyone to contemplate. Merton not only expressed the need for inner life of contemplation for the people in the world, he also reminded monks that they were living in the world for which they must have concern. As St. John writes, “to be in the world but not of this world” (Jn 17:14) is a message for all. Merton lived with the same goal as the Desert Fathers<sup>4</sup>, being in union with himself, with God and with others. Merton challenged the Christians to seek God through the path of contemplation. He opened the way of contemplation to all men in order for them to have inner experience with God through Jesus Christ. Pope John Paul II encouraged the believers in the third millennium to contemplate Christ, as the apostles saw Him with their eyes, heard Him with their ears and touched Him with their hands (1 Jn 1:1). Merton realized that contemplation is the union of our heart, mind

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<sup>4</sup> The Desert Fathers were Christian Hermits who lived in the Sahara Desert of Egypt, beginning about the third century. The Desert Fathers emphasized an ascent to God through periods of purgation and illumination that led to unity with the Divine and deeply affected the spirituality of Christianity (<http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com>).

and will with God by the act of pure love. Thus, contemplation is the way to develop into a perfect Christian.

Merton encourages us to have personal experience of union with God through contemplation. He has been able to translate his experience of God into human language that gives us an insight into contemplation. Merton was consumed with the love of God as a result of his contemplative life and invited all to a life of contemplation. According to Merton, a truly Christian world vision has to be expressed in a living and active application of love to the human problems of our own time. For this reason, a Christian ought to manifest his love of Christ to the others in attending to their needs. St. John writes: "By this love you have for one another, everyone will know that you are my disciples" (Jn 13:35). The Christians need to be witnesses of Christ in the world through a life of love as the first Christians did. The non-Christian said of the Christians "see how they love one another" (1 Jan 4:7).

Merton pointed out that Christians should assume full responsibility for transforming the world from within as the result of experiencing God in contemplation. He realized that true love for others is possible only in God, because only God can forgive, heal, transform and save us from concupiscence that is part of us. It is this love of God that generates love for others, for "...Interior contemplation and external activity are two aspects of the same love of God" (NSC, p. 192).

Therefore, Merton was clearly aware of the power of contemplation for social transformation, yet he refused to reduce contemplation to merely social concern. In loving the humanity of Jesus, the Christians learn to recognize him in those with whom he identifies with, namely all men and women, especially those who are suffering

injustice, violence and the marginalized. Those who have experienced God in contemplation are willing to leave God within to meet Him in others. Thus, Christians should realize that they cannot ignore their neighbor in their love of God, for God identifies with all the marginalized people. St. John says: “Anyone who says, ‘I love God’, and hates his brother, is a liar” (1 Jan 4:20). Again Jesus identifies himself with his people:

For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you made me welcome; naked and you clothed me, sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to see me. (Mt 25: 35-36)

I divide this research into four main steps of study. Firstly, to describe the definition and background of contemplation in Christianity and other religions. Secondly, to understand Merton's experience of contemplation. Thirdly, to evaluate Merton's contemplation, its impact on society, especially his concern for peace. Lastly, to recommend various other contemplations, which fascinated Merton, and may have contributed to love of neighbor and to bring peace to society.

## 1.2 Thesis Statement

The Christian's contemplation is not a withdrawal from the world but active engagement with the world in terms of social concern, as shown by Thomas Merton in our times.

## 1.3 Objectives of the Thesis

1.3.1 To investigate what contemplation is.

1.3.2 To understand contemplation as experienced by Thomas Merton.

1.3.3 To see the relationship between contemplation and social concern as shown by Thomas Merton.

#### 1.4 Limitation of the Study

This research is limited to the study of Thomas Merton's experience of contemplation and its impact on Christian social concern.

#### 1.5 Relevant Researches

There have been researches, focusing on the personality of Merton and his message. These researches mostly emphasize Merton the man, and the conflict that exist between contemplation and social concern. For example, Cynthia Sue Abair's *Contemplation and Community: Paradoxical Themes in Thomas Merton's Prose*, (1997) examines the three essential elements of Merton's contemplation: solitude, silence and detachment; and how these factors lead to service to the community. This thesis shows that Merton is a skillful writer and his writings have benefited society at large. The researcher brings out the paradoxical lesson: neither interior contemplation of God nor exterior responsibility to the world community can be achieved without the successful mastery of the other.

The research titled *Searching for a Place to Stand: Reflections of Spiritually-Rooted Social Activists* by Byron Plumley (1994), demonstrates the vital relationship that exists between spiritual grounding and non-violent social actions of Jesus of Nazareth, Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr. and Thomas Merton. This study brings together the need



for exposing the community of peacemakers with the life experiences of the above mentioned active peacemakers.

Ekman Pui-chuen Tam's (2001) book *The Influence of Zen-Taoism on Thomas's View of Contemplation* studies the relationship between Merton's view of contemplation and Merton's writing on Zen-Taoism. This research aims to show that Merton's later view of contemplation is influenced by his appropriation of the teachings of Zen-Taoism. However, the researcher finds that Merton's foundational knowledge of contemplation is also derived from the works of Etienne Gilson, Jacques Maritain, Thomas Aquinas and John of the Cross.

Finally, the research titled *An Inquiry into Thomas Merton's Search for the True Self: A Study of the Journals* was done by Jimmie Dean Usery (2001). Usery explores the life-long search of Thomas Merton for authenticity in his life as recorded in his journals. This research is based on a biographical description of Merton's experience from his own biographical and historical situations in his life and thought. Therefore, the significance of Usery studies on this topic might communicate its relevance for others.

## **1.6 Contribution of the Thesis**

The purpose of this thesis is to rediscover the value of contemplation in a globalized world where social ills need to be addressed.

## **1.7 Methodology of Research**

This study is a documentary research through reading the primary sources with a

44685 e.1

critical mind, to interpret, analyze, explain and thereby arrive at the conclusion of the research. It has three steps:

One, collect data from major sources that are available in libraries in Thailand, websites and Thomas Merton's archives.

Two, select data that are useful and appropriate for the thesis, especially where Merton's contemplative experience is related to social concern.

Three, interpret the data without bias and prejudice.

### 1.8 Definition of the Terms Used

**Contemplation:** is a gift of God. It "utterly transcends everything" we are, yet it is "the only meaning" of our existence (NSC, p. 176).

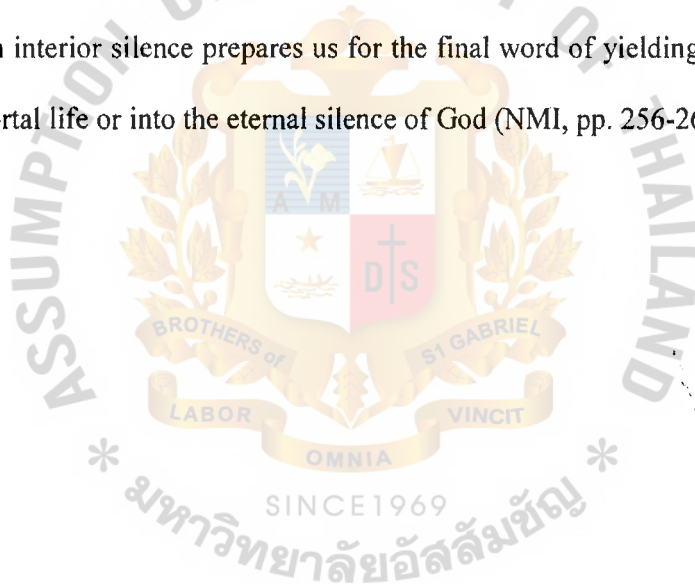
**Faith:** is an assent to God. In faith, one knows and is known by the loving God (Shannon et al., 2002, p.147). Merton's idea of faith is grounded in his experience and understanding of contemplation.

**Love:** is a creative force, a participation in the divine power to redeem and transform the world by loving creation as God loves it (DQ, p. 99). Therefore, love is inseparable from justice, from recognition and a defense of the dignity, the infinite worth of every other human being as created in the image of God (NM, p. 115). Finally, Merton confirms that "Love is my true identity. Love is my true character. Love is my name" (NSC, p. 60).

**Prayer:** There are two ways of praying; first, raising mind and heart to God, and second,

the discovery of God within, in the course of which one discovers one's own true self, the importance of awareness of God's presence, and the realization that true prayer always involves an entrance into the mystery of a God we never can name (Shannon et al., 2002, p. 364).

**Silence:** Merton has in mind an exterior silence (the silence of the tongue) and interior silence (the silence of the heart). An exterior silence removes the barrier between us and the world of things, things that exist not for themselves but for the praise of God. On the other hand, an interior silence prepares us for the final word of yielding self to God that terminates mortal life or into the eternal silence of God (NMI, pp. 256-261).



## CHAPTER II

### WHAT IS CONTEMPLATION?

#### 2.1 Introduction

Religion is not abstract but a way of life. The value and significance of a religious person is related to the Divine reality. To be an authentic religious person it is not enough to believe only in doctrines, theological formulae, or liturgical community, but he or she should have a direct experience of God or the Reality. Many religious traditions assure that contemplation is a medium to have personal contact with God. Abundant texts of description and explanation on contemplation exist in various traditions. Especially, in Christianity, it is a heritage which emerged from personal experiences, reflections and contemplative life in early time until today. It is quite difficult to use any definite term to communicate what contemplation is for people nowadays.

In this chapter, firstly, I shall concentrate on the background and the origin of the meaning of contemplation in general, and in the Christian as well as other traditions. Secondly, I shall discuss the main characteristics of prayer, meditation and mysticism in order to distinguish from contemplation. Lastly, I shall focus on the main factors for reaching the state of contemplation.

#### 2.2 Descriptive Definition of Contemplation

Some background discussion on Christian spirituality is necessary to understand the contemplative spirituality of Merton. The word *spirit* comes from the Latin *spiritus*, whose primary meaning is breath. In this sense it is something physical

but invisible: the air we breathe, the *odors* we smell. The word *spirit*, then, came to denote those invisible but real qualities, which shape the life of a person or community such as love, courage, peace or truth and a person's or community's own *spirit* is their inner identity, or soul. Each religious tradition has its own school of spirituality which represents specific cultural expressions of particular religious ideals. The term *spirituality* refers to aspects of the devotional practices of a religion, and especially the interior individual experiences of the believers. Spiritual context refers to the relationship between the individual and God (Downey, 1997, p. 43). It is the whole human person who practices virtue, who lives a religious life. He or she will not normally do that in conditions that are unfavorable to the practice of religion.

In the Christian context, spirituality is closely connected with the Christian's ideal of holiness and perfection rooted in Jesus' teaching. The Christians' reason for living is not to become perfect persons, but to have God as the center of their existence. It is possible for humans to communicate and relate with God because God is the first who initiated a relationship with humans through creation and history. The Christians shall be recognized if they live by Christ's spirit. Since Christ is the core and source of the spirituality of the Christians, it is essential to have vital contact with Him through contemplation. Contemplation is one of the elements of spirituality, because it is a means of response to the Spirit; and men have possibility to participate in the life of God. The Christians cannot live their lives dedicated to God through the various aspects of their lives unless they have had profound experience of God. But in the life of each one who tries to live a deeper spiritual life there must be some time habitually set aside, in which through contemplation they refresh and deepen their personal intimacy with God.



In the early days of Christianity, Christian spirituality emphasized the interior life, the life of the soul, the life of the virtues and the life to attain perfection through discipline. The spirituality of the early Church also held together the relationship between contemplation and practical action, individual devotion and corporate fellowship, sacramental acts and scriptural study. It is not confined to the rational-functional intelligence, but intuitively reached out beyond the visible to the invisible. After Vatican Council II the Catholic approach to Christian's life promotes more attention to economic accountability, social responsibility and civil life. Indeed, Christian spirituality is not simply for the interior life or the inward person, but as much for the body as the soul and is directed to the implementation of both the commandments of Christ, to love God and neighbor.

The word "contemplation" is rooted in the Latin *templum*, which refers to the space designated by a visionary with a divine reality. The Greek origin of the word "contemplation" comes from *theorein* meaning to regard or look at a spectacle or religious ceremony, though some trace it back to God and others to vision (Downey, 1994, p. 201). In other words, the word has the general meaning of speculative study of the admiration of beauty, or consideration of wisdom.

Contemplation is gazing on God. It is the ecstasy of man in the presence of his God, the ecstasy of the creature in the presence of its Creator. Bruno Barnhart points out that "A standard Catholic guide to the spiritual life might define contemplation as gazing with love upon God, or the experience of union with God" (Barnhart, 2001, p. 304). All contemplation is based on this essential and natural movement of the creature who, becoming aware of what he is, turns back toward his source. Contemplation can be as natural for the soul as a child's gazing on its father and mother.

Contemplation in the vocabulary of Catholic theology normally is restricted to that which has God as its object and God precisely as experienced through the supernatural virtues or this gift. The contemplation of God, of truth, life and love, is revealed in Jesus Christ, as He is the essential ground of the authentic Christian life. In contemplation, this essential thing is always to put us into contact with grace by an act of faith in Christ. Barnhart writes in his article *Purity of Heart and Contemplation* that: "Contemplation in the Christian context will be related to this center, that is, to the core of the Christ-mystery which is the new union of Divinity and humanity in Jesus Christ" (Ibid, 2001, p. 304). In short, contemplation in the Christian tradition is to lead people into a deeper experience of Jesus Christ for making it relevant in daily life.

Contemplation manifests itself to us in our minds, and this is so because the mind is the center, the focal point, of our awareness of what we are and of our knowledge of everything that happens in us. Contemplation is experiential knowledge of God that involves the whole person. According to Jordan Aumann:

The word contemplation defines an experimental knowledge in the sense that it calls into play the affective powers of the individual. Therefore, contemplation is an operation in which one experiences the happy blending of the cognitive and the affective powers in an activity providing great delight. (1998, pp. 330-331)

Aumann concludes that the nature of contemplation involves the following elements:

First, on the part of the object contemplated: truth or some aspect thereof sought for its own sake; second, on the part of the faculty used: the speculative intellect, not in its function as a reasoning power but to intuitive vision, though utilizing other cognitive powers as auxiliaries; third, on the part of the experience: a loving gaze that aroused delight and admiration, extending to the appetitive powers by which the delight is intensified. (Ibid, p. 203)

### 2.2.1 Prayer and Contemplation

In primitive times, prayer was required for the presence of some supernatural or superhuman power. This power should be capable of governing and providing whatever one is asking for. Prayer is important; it nourishes and keeps men close to the Divine. Prayer is often described in terms of intercourse and spiritual communion with God. In the development of religion, we find the characteristics of prayer in three forms.

Firstly, prayer as text, that is a collection of words as human communication directed toward a spiritual entity. Most prayer texts are composed in form of repetitive and static in character. For example, we find prayer as text in books of prayer, book of worship and descriptions of rituals.

Secondly, praying is the human act of communicating with deities with the elements of performance that constitute the act. It includes not only the form of words, but the active engagements of elements of the historical, cultural and personal setting in which it is offered. Also, a prayer act is commonly recognized as essentially prayer, such as song, dance, sacrifice and food offerings.

Finally, prayer as subject, is an aspect of religious beliefs, doctrine and theology.

A Christian prayer is a personal response to the presence of God in an effort to intensify that presence as a significant force in human existence. Through prayer, the Christians express their gratitude, adoration and the act of loving to God. It is the intention of prayer that they move into the personal relationship with God. Thus, they should open their minds, hearts and souls. In this condition, they will be free in order to have a personal relationship with God and to enter into the presence of God.

The main prayer in Christianity is the prayer through Jesus Christ, who as mediator has a relationship with God as the Father. This is the reality of Jesus' promise: "Anybody who receives my commandments and keeps them will be one who loves me; and anybody who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I shall love him and show myself to him" (Jn 14:21). Jesus is the perfect model in prayer. Also, Jesus teaches his disciples to pray to God with an intimate, trusting and obedient disposition.

K. J. Healy cites Guigo II, (a 12<sup>th</sup> century Carthusian<sup>5</sup>), saying that: "...meditation the careful consideration of the truths, prayer the heart beseeching God (petition), and contemplation the soul resting in God" (Healy, 1981, p. 675). Although, they have different methods and practices they still have the same purpose; the steps to ascend to union with God.

Since the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, prayer frequently included meditation and the various degrees of contemplation. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Catholic spirituality writers described prayer in the form of mental prayer<sup>6</sup>. Then, St. John of the Cross (1542-1591) and St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) are recognized in Catholic Church as great masters in the theology of the spiritual life and the doctrine of prayer. They began to call this form of prayer "acquired contemplation", active contemplation or the prayer of simplicity and infused contemplation (awareness of God) or mystical prayer (Healy, 1981, p. 675). However, they defined contemplation as a loving knowledge of God that could ultimately reach union with Him.

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<sup>5</sup> For Carthusians there is only one primary end, it is union with God in love. Their role is to support the Church by their prayer and austerities, and be a reminder to all of the primary purpose of all men, namely to love God above all (Cary-Elwes, 1968, p. 30).

<sup>6</sup> Mental prayer is a form of prayer which prepares the mind and heart in order to be united with Him.

Jordan Aumann refers to Jacques Bossuet (1627-1704), a French bishop, theologian, who defined the prayer of simplicity or acquired contemplation, as a simple loving gaze upon some divine object, whether on God himself, or on some other Christian truth (Aumann, 1998, pp. 327-329). In this prayer, the interior act of the mind and heart unites men in God. This prayer consists in a spontaneous, loving dialogue with God. It is a prayer that is a more intuitive way of communicating, seeking to go beyond thoughts, words, images and into a kind of resting in God.

Likewise, Oliver Clement writes that:

We are praying in secret when we speak to God with the heart alone and with concentration of the soul, and make known our state of mind to him alone, in such a way that even the enemy powers themselves cannot guess their nature. Such is the reason for the deep silence that it behoves us to keep in prayer...Ultimately prayer becomes spontaneous, continuous; it encounters and liberates the deepest impulses of our nature and the hidden glorification of objects. (Clement, 1994, pp. 185-186, 209)

Christian prayer is the path of communication of heart more than head. Clearly, prayer is not for enjoyment nor is it a form of spiritual consolation, but is a method of moving our developing relationship with God (Keating, 2000, p. 10). However, all Christian schools of spirituality agree on two points: prayer is necessary for salvation, and it is “a gift of God in Jesus” (Komonchak, 1991, p. 791).

### 2.2.2 Meditation and Contemplation

Meditation is close to contemplation. Sometimes, meditation is confused with contemplation. We should be aware of the difficulty in translating the concepts from one language and culture to another. As Barnhart points out, Asian traditions tend to use the term “meditation” to include what Christian tradition would call



“contemplation” (Barnhart, 2001, p. 4). The distinction between meditation and contemplation will be examined in the following discussion.

The English word meditation comes from the Latin *meditatio* conveying the sense of preparation and practice. The Greek term *melete* means care, study, exercise. In the Christian context, it refers to living and practicing in order to have a real participation in Christ’s mysteries. It is one form of prayer within a larger schema that is called vocal prayer and pure prayer or “prayer of the heart” in the desert tradition (Downey, 1994, p. 560).

What is the object of meditation and contemplation? Meditation involves concentration, the narrowing of the focus of consciousness to a single theme, symbol, catechism, or doctrine, yet it remains cognitive and intellectual. For example, in the period of the desert monks, meditation included memorization and recitation of the word of God or the sacred text. It was an oral exercise that kept the monk present to God’s word. Also, in traditional Buddhist context, meditation is essentially a formal exercise used to calm and concentrate the mind without being distracted by thoughts. Therefore, one should avoid thoughts and imagination in order to develop mental discipline and peacefulness without distraction. The afore-said meditation is called “calmness meditation” (*samatha kammattana*). Another kind of meditation is known as “insight meditation” (*vipassanā kammattana*), which emphasizes on contemplating and purifying thoughts and concepts within the mind. Both types of meditations are inter-related to one another.

In Christian tradition, meditation is the path of exercise to concentrate oneself in the presence of God with faith, reflection and abandonment. The process of meditation is normally guided by written material such as a Scripture, a spirituality



writing or inspiration of thoughts. Indeed, Christian meditation is the way of human effort to reach union with God. On the other hand, contemplation is a direct intuitive seeing, using spiritual faculties beyond discursive thought and reason. In contemplation, the first Christians only focused or fixed all their body, mind and heart only in God alone with their passion of love. Then, they let themselves empty their soul completely in order to find a direct and personal encounter with God, and that God will work in their heart and soul. Contemplation is what only God Himself can do for us. It is experienced and theologically evaluated as a gift of God. Therefore, men should open their mind, heart, soul and their whole being to God. Contemplation is considered a more intimate experience than meditation. Meditation and contemplation are not the same, but they are intimately connected. However, meditation is considered a preparation and contribution to the achievement of contemplation. It is always open to “the gift of contemplation” (Ibid, 1994, p. 560). Christian meditation is more than a technique. It is an act of religious exercise carried out as part of one’s following of Christ.

### 2.2.3 Mysticism and Contemplation

No definition could be both meaningful and sufficiently comprehensive to include all experiences described as “mystical”. In the Greek mystery cults, *muein* (to remain silent) probably referred to the secrecy of the initiation rites. The meaning of both terms in later usage is derived from the term “mystery” (Greek *mysterion*), rooted in *myein* (Greek meaning “to close,”) which conveys the sense of something secret, hidden, or not readily accessible (Ibid, 1994, p. 596).

In the history of Christian spirituality, mysticism has been viewed as the

highest expression of Christian prayer and the perfect Christian life. In early Christianity the term came to refer to be “hidden” in the interpretation of Scriptures and to hidden presences, such as Jesus at the Eucharist. Later this term was used in the context of divine experience. Nevertheless, the term mysticism is used to mean a constellation of distinctive practices, discourses, institutions, tradition and experience in supernatural.

Mysticism has two main characteristics important for religious life and for human transformation. Firstly, to become a mystic, one must have immediate experience without requirement of neither conceptualization nor rationalization. Mysticism is not an intellectual theory, it is a mystical experience. This mystical experience is an experience of the focus only on God. Such experience is often disguised and hidden deep within our human activities. Thus, nothing in such states requires religious interpretation. As William James, (1842-1910) American psychologist and philosopher explains, those who have had a mystical experience report that it “defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words” (James, 1982, p. 343). Secondly, mysticism is regarded here as a way of life that acknowledges the validity of personally experienced mystical states. It is the state of the manifestation of the activity of the gifts of the Holy Spirit <sup>7</sup> and operating in a human manner. Thus, mysticism is a state, which has not been sufficiently studied in philosophy and psychology.

It is quite difficult to identify precisely the differences between the terms contemplation and mysticism. In that case, Aumann agreed with the explanation of

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<sup>7</sup> Formally, the Holy Spirit is the third person of the Holy Trinity. The Spirit is distinct from but coequal with the Father and the Son, and is in the fullest sense of God. This understanding was canonized in the 4<sup>th</sup> century (Bowker, 2000, p. 250).

Maritain<sup>8</sup> that many identify mysticism with infused contemplation, which is not quite exact, but all agree on one thing that mysticism is an awareness of the divine activity in the soul. However, contemplation and mysticism throughout history have been associated with formal religious institutions.

The mystic's experience in contemplation is the experience of the Absolute. Christoph Elsas points out that: "The mystical process consists of a return of the spirit to the One by emanation relates to the preceding higher state as a reflection" (2003, p. 675). Christian mysticism is the gift of mutual love between man and God. Therefore man's vision is spiritual and requires an increasing spiritual life toward the higher state by the way of contemplation.

In modern Western use, prayer and meditation are practiced with human effort. It's a discursive activity, which involves reflection on sacred texts in order to have a profound understanding of God. In contrast, contemplation is the direct experience of divine grace from God. Mysticism is a total commitment of oneself to God. However, Christian spirituality considers prayer, meditation, contemplation and mystical experience as basic practices for perfection and union with God.

### 2.3 Contemplation in Christian Tradition

The history of the development of contemplation in the Christian tradition can be divided into three periods.

The first period: the Desert Fathers, especially Clement of Alexandria, Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, borrowed from the Neoplatonists the term *theoria*

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<sup>8</sup> Jacques Maritain (1882-1973), a French philosopher and political thinker, was one of the first theologians to explain the distinction between infused contemplation and mystical experience. See *La Vie Spirituelle*, Paris, VII (1923, pp. 50-636).

(contemplation). This originally meant the intellectual vision of truth, which the Greek philosophers considered to be the supreme activity of the wise person. To this technical term the Fathers added the Hebrew *da'ath*, that is, the kind of experiential knowledge that comes through love. It was translated into Latin *contemplatio* and handed down in Christian tradition (Downey, 1994, p. 201).

Around the second century, the Christians started to live the contemplative life of ascetics with the group of the Greek Fathers. The goal of ascetic practice is to eliminate vices and to reach union with God. Ascetic disciplines are always directed toward contemplation as the proper goal in spiritual practice. Their main aim was to attempt to achieve salvation, being close to God through asceticism. They lived by the rule, and to achieve this, they individually needed to be far away from one another and society. As the pioneer of the desert movement, St. Anthony of Egypt in the third century lived this form of religious life. Each individual lived alone in silence and solitude in the desert environment. The contemplative life, however, has its roots in the early desert movement in the desert where time was devoted totally to prayer and manual labor.

In the second period, Christian tradition developed further and religious orders emerged. A religious order is an organization of people who live in some way set apart from society in accordance with their religious devotion. Some religious orders practice literal isolation (cloistering) from the outside world, while some other religious orders remain engaged with the world in various ways. However, these orders may be distinguished by their discipline and way of life.

A religious community lived in a monastery of the great orders of contemplation. Christian monasticism, through which the individual soul could find

perfection, ascends to the highest ideals of the spiritual life. Monks not only achieve mystical union with God but are also of service to fellow human beings through prayer and good works. There were many orders in this period, such as the Carmelites<sup>9</sup>, Franciscans<sup>10</sup> and Benedictines<sup>11</sup>.

In the last period, that is, in the twentieth century, there was an enormous decline of religion whereby previously accepted religious symbols, doctrines and institutions began to lose their significance. Also, the world loses its sacred character as man and nature become the objects of rational-causal explanation. This phenomenon prompted many religious orders to examine their roles as to how they could still be faithful to their vocation<sup>12</sup>. At the same time many movements came up with new experiments in community in various parts of the world. As Kenneth Leech writes in *Experiencing God: Theology as Spirituality*:

Indeed, if we place Merton alongside a number of other recent writers and thinkers, we find a number of themes which are important in assessing the contemporary place of monasticism: while some are new emphases, others are more reinforcements of older ideas. (1989, p. 146)

Contemplation means having an experience of God, real though obscure, in all dimensions of human life. It is the capacity to encounter Christ, and the experience of encountering him, through a vigorous, incarnate faith (1 Jn 1:1). From the past to the

<sup>9</sup> The Carmelites is a Roman Catholic religious order of women living contemplative life. Founded in Spain in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by Teresa of Avila. The life and work of the Carmelite Nuns is exclusively of prayer and penance.

<sup>10</sup> Franciscan is used to refer to Roman Catholic religious order which follows St. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226). Franciscan monks live in total poverty.

<sup>11</sup> Benedictine is a person who follows the Rule of St. Benedict, who founded the Order in the sixth century. The Order's fundamental rules are humility, obedience and love of God.

<sup>12</sup> Vocation refers to a divine call to undertake a particular activity or embrace a particular "stage of life" on behalf of God or the community (Komonchak, 1991, p. 1087).



present time, therefore, Jesus, in His divinity, is the source of contemplation. Indeed, contemplation means God's action with a human being. Contemplation is the traditional name for that concentrated attention in which this phase of reality is revealed. It is an activity of all our powers: the mind, the will, the heart and the soul.

## 2.4 Types of Contemplation

In Christianity we find the description of contemplation in two main types.

### 1. Natural contemplation

It is the intuition of divine things in and through the reflection of God in nature and in the symbols of revelation. Natural contemplation beholds the divine through nature, the sign language of Scripture and liturgy. This is akin to peaceful abiding in the presence of God with a minimum of thinking and a maximum of loving attention. This could be achieved by practice by all the devout and diligent.

Natural contemplation, for example, is found in the aesthetic experience of the beautiful. Aesthetic contemplation is possible with regard to any object. Aesthetic contemplation is particularly easy as beauty removes the barrier between self and the objects. In this type, Christians cannot have full union with God, because they act in formal routine and external manner, although, they live for God. This is "contemplation of the divine in nature, not contemplation of the divine by our natural power" (Shannon, 2004, p. 67). However, natural contemplation is the way to prepare to be united with God.

### 2. Supernatural Contemplation

Supernatural or infused contemplation is distinguished from natural contemplation by the fact that the former is an operation of infused wisdom and



experience. Supernatural contemplation has been defined by various formulas, but the essential note that all definitions have in common is that supernatural contemplation is an experimental knowledge of God. Supernatural contemplation is a deep interior life and which leads to losing oneself in God alone. It is a direct experiential contact with God beyond all thought, that is to say, without the medium of concepts. Supernatural contemplation is the simple gaze upon God as known through faith and experienced through love. This act of contemplation, in which the soul is united with God, produces peace that is the delight of contemplation. Thus, God calls all souls to infused contemplation, which is the reason for their creation.

## 2.5 Contemplation and the Theological Virtues

God desires to share his own nature with us. God expresses his presence in human soul, and his presence increases until it absorbs into itself all human activity. The act of contemplation is God's alone. The method is necessary and quite heroic because all progress in contemplation depends entirely on the free gift of God and man's own efforts. To achieve the state of contemplation we must prepare ourselves. The theological virtues are necessary for the contemplation of the Christian life. They are also called theological or divine because they are given by God and lead immediately to God. They are gift of God for our relationship to God. St. Paul lists hope, faith and love as the three basic perfections of Christian existence (1 Cor 13:13). However, the theological virtues draw away from the natural or human standards in order to experience the divine and the supernatural. Aumann writes in *Spiritual Theology* that:

Faith looks beyond the horizons of human knowledge and clings to the truths and mysteries revealed by God in Jesus Christ; hope

causes us to regard the things of this world of little worth when compared to the life of glory to which we are called; charity impels us to love God above all else and to love all else in God, rejecting anything that is an obstacle to that love. (1998, p. 248)

The Christians believe in God and accept all that he has revealed; by hope they trust God to be faithful to His promises if they correspond to His grace; by charity they love God as their ultimate end. Thus, contemplation is the stage of the experience of God through virtues; faith, hope and charity. Moreover, theological virtues are essential for attaining contemplation because they enable the individual to experience and relate directly to God. I shall discuss the relationship between contemplation and theological virtues as follows:

### **2.5.1 Faith and Contemplation**

The word faith has various uses; its central meaning is equivalent to “belief”, “trust” or “confidence”. In Catholicism, faith is a supernatural act performed by Divine grace. It is the act of the intellect assenting to a Divine truth owing to the movement of the will, which is itself moved by the grace of God. The faith of the Christians is a particular form of life of a people chosen by God and standing in an active relationship with Him. The Christian’s relationship to God that is designated by the verb “to believe” often implies an assent of the mind, confidence in the heart, and obedience in the will. God is the originator of the covenant relationship. Faith, then, means the acknowledgment of God’s commands and implies obedience on the part of man. Faith expresses the acknowledgment of God’s promises and His power to fulfill them (Ex 4:1, 5:8-9, 30). Faith thus sums up all the ways by which men

express in their lives their relationship to God or the experience of contemplation.

The Catholic Church defined the virtue of faith as follows:

It is a supernatural virtue by which, thanks to the movement and help of God's grace, we believe what God reveals to be true, not because its intrinsic truth is obvious under scrutiny according to the natural light of reason, but on the authority of God himself revealing. (Vatican Council I, Denz.-Schon. 3008, 3011)

Faith reaches the intellect not simply through the senses but in a light directly infused by God. Faith takes man beyond the limits of his own finite intelligence. Faith is the experience of trusting in God. By faith, Christians know God. Yves Raguin says that "the presence of God, is always clarified by faith...faith is always there to throw its light on the sign that God uses to make His presence felt" (1974, p. 104).

### 2.5.2 Hope and Contemplation

The Christians hope to obtain from God what He has promised to give them, and all that they ask from Him is to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, eternal life and salvation. In the Old Testament the hope of Israel is what God promised, on His fidelity, truthfulness and power. Then, in the New Testament, God is called the God of hope (Rom 15:13); for He is the living God (1 Tm 4:10), who gives us eternal life (1 Jn 3:2-3). The hope of the Christians in God's eternal purposes is firmly grounded in the resurrection of Jesus (1 Pt 1:3). The resurrection as a fact of history vindicates the life, teaching of Jesus, and gives credibility to the hope that God in Christ is reconciling the world to himself.

The Scripture says: "Seek first the kingdom of God, and His justice and all these things will be given to you besides" (Mt 6: 33). God expresses his love through

His mercy and providence. It is a personal experience, an attitude of mind, a way of approving life in expectation of some future goal. Therefore, the Christians surrender their being to the unseen God and totally trust in God's love. According to Merton, hope will help achieve contemplation in the state of living within the present and with God. "Hope is the gateway to contemplation, because contemplation is an experience of divine things and we cannot experience what we do not in some way possess" (NMI, p. 33).

By hope, the Christians lay hands on the substance of what they believe, and by hope, they possess the promise of God's love. It is God who gives His own self totally to those who give themselves to Him (Ibid, pp. 27-33). Pasquale Foresi points out that "hope contains an element of abandonment to God, the belief that God loves us so much that we can be utterly trusting in his hands" (Foresi, 1974, p. 107). Theological hope does not remain lost in the soul, for the object of hope must be seen as a future good, possible of attainment. Hope is not a passive state, but an active state co-operating with Christ.

### 2.5.3 Love and Contemplation

The Christians are commanded to love with the love of God. St. John writes "My dear people, let us love one another since love comes from God and everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God" (1 Jn 4:7). God communicates this love to them through baptism by means of the Holy Spirit. St. Paul says: "The love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given us" (Rom 5:5). Charity, the perfection of the Christian life, is the moving spirit of a contemplative life. With a heart open to all mankind, he exercises a universal

apostolate: first, by example of a Christian life, second, by public and private prayer and third, by mortification.

The Christians should be open and let God's love penetrate the conceptual content of revelation in order to know God experientially in a higher and more perfect mode than is possible to our intelligence. In contrast, "love" is a pure gift of God, and it has to be a gift, for that is part of its very essence. An acquired contemplation that operates through love would involve a loving gaze upon God. Indeed, a Christian believes that love is the ground to make unity between God and man. Love of God makes our hearts love Him in return, and by this love we come to know God. Love of God is the deepest fulfillment of the powers implanted by God in our human nature which He has destined for union with Himself.

Love or Charity does not refer to God alone, but also to one's neighbors. The love of God causes us to love whatever pertains to God or whatever reflects his goodness, and it is evident that one's neighbor is a good of God and shares, or can share, in eternal happiness. For that reason the love of charity with which we love our neighbor is exactly the same charity with which we love God. They are not two charities but only one, since the formal motive of loving one's neighbor is the goodness of God reflected in him. Hence, when we love our neighbors for any other motive distinct from God, we do not love them with the love of charity

For a Christian, to accept suffering and anguish is necessary concomitant of the experience of the love of God. Man is no longer left to his own devices. And the Christians also know that, at the end of their personal journey, they will not be absorbed into God to the point of not existing anymore. It is the first of the theological virtue: "There are three things that last: faith, hope and love; and the



greatest of these is love” (1 Cor 13:13). Theological virtue is the action of the Holy Spirit in the faculties of the human being. Charity is superior to all other virtues. Theological virtues enable Christians to orientate their whole life and their actions to God, St. Paul points out:

We always mention you in our prayers and thank God for you all, and constantly remember before God our Father how you have shown your faith in action, worked for love and persevered through hope, in our Lord Jesus Christ...but we belong to the day and we should be sober; let us put on faith and love for a breastplate, and the hope of salvation for a helmet. (1 Thes 1:3-5, 5:8)

## 2.6 Contemplation in Other Religious Traditions

Although, great religions like Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam have their own sets of belief, dogmas and rituals, they share a common belief in the Absolute Truth which may be called Dharma, Brahman or Allah respectively. Hence their methods and paths to relate to the Absolute Truth may be different. Here the researcher intends to show briefly how, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam define the term of contemplation in their traditions.

### 2.6.1 Buddhism and Contemplations

Buddha (563-483 B.C.E.) claimed the realization of the ultimate truth; he did not identify himself as the representative of a transcendent God. Buddha was instead a human being who began to lead people to the “awakening” from all ignorance. The Buddha became an idol of worship and came to be identified with the ultimate existence. In Buddhism, the goal of religious life is nibbana (enlightenment). This



Buddhism offers the path of contemplation for all men to reach the enlightenment.

Buddhism is a religion without God. The place of God has been given to Dharma. It is through contemplating the Dharma that our words, acts and minds are purified and we become free and realize the truth. Contemplation is the process of looking, seeing, and understanding what that object is. As Barnhart affirms that “Contemplation is focusing with concentration on a single wholesome and directed thought; one purges the many random, discursive thoughts” (Barnhart, 2001, p. 105).

A Thai monk in the Theravada Sect, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, (1906-1993), gives the meaning of contemplation (anupassana) in several words; sustained, non-verbal, non-reactive, uninvolved, even-minded scrutiny of Dhamma (Buddhadasa, 1987, p. 152). Buddhadasa proposes the way of contemplation in terms of mindfulness as described in his book *Mindfulness with Breathing*, published in 1987. Contemplating is the practicing of detachment from material things, feeling and mind. In consequence, we will attain the state of liberation of mind or the state of “chit wang” (Thai word).

Likewise, in Buddhism, according to Christmas Humphreys:

Contemplation is an utterly impersonal awareness of the essence of the thing absorbed. Its technique, if one may use such a word in this connection, consists in achieving the utmost one pointedness of thought upon a given subject and then raising one's conception of the subject at the same time as one's consciousness. (Humphreys, 1990, p. 184)

Buddhism uses the term “Four Applications of Mindfulness” to mean the “contemplation” of body, feeling, mental states and mental events (Khantipalo, 1981, p. 29). Mindfulness simply means being aware of, being attentive to and observing one's own mind, watching where it is going and what it is doing etc. In the state of

mindfulness, human has experienced a reality when there is no attachment to the idea of self (my body and my mind). Buddhism emphasizes the practical matters of discipline and conduct leading to liberation through non attachment. Indeed, contemplation is the discipline which the Buddhists practice in order to reach the state of non-self. Buddhism divides the state of contemplation into four states; contemplation of body, contemplation of feeling, contemplation of mind and contemplation of Dharma (D. II. 290-315). There are four foundations of mindfulness or aspects of contemplation according to Mahayana Buddhism.

### 1. The Contemplation of the Body

The Buddhist begins with the contemplation of the body. When focusing one's contemplation on the movement of the body, when walking one has a comprehension of such things as the reason for walking and the intended destination. In contemplation of the body, breathing and the position of the body contribute to a general understanding of the body's true nature. This contemplation is not directed to a repression of feelings of bodily attraction through producing the emotional pressure. Therefore, contemplation of the body is a feature common to all exercises in order to lead to detachment with regard to the body.

### 2. The Contemplation of Feeling

This state leads to insight into feeling as we really are. In contemplation, we know that although feelings exist, we arise and pass away. Therefore in reality there is no self and one is free from ignorance. We are aware that we are passing events.

### 3. The Contemplation of the State of Mind

In this state, the appearance of thoughts, emotions and sentiments, indeed any state which affects the mind, must be noted, mindfully recognized and understood at

the moment of their occurrence. Thus, when the mind is properly cultivated it brings peace and serenity.

#### 4. The Contemplation of Dharma

This contemplation is aimed at only insight. This state of contemplation completes the four states of mindfulness; it consists in contemplating the path to attain Enlightenment.

In the state of contemplation, the task is not to remove thoughts away, but instead to mindfully observe each thought as it rises and falls in the mind. Such watchfulness reveals the nature of thoughts, emotions, afflictions and habit. As Buddha says “mindfulness, O monks, I declare, is essential in all things everywhere”<sup>13</sup> (SN.V., 115). However, the end of contemplation, then, is to gradually remove all aspects of the view of self, until one rediscovers his or her nature. Contemplation is a path to help empty out and purify false concepts within.

#### 2.6.2 Hinduism and Contemplation

Hinduism appears to be polytheistic, but ultimately all the gods (in Sanskrit devas) are manifestations of the one God, “the Supreme One” (Barnhart, 2001, p. 58). God of the Hindus has been described as omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient and infinite. Hinduism believes that the Ultimate Reality is one; this one and Ultimate Truth is self-luminous and is called Brahman. However, Hindu monotheism does not discard the various deities of the different faiths and cults but includes them as the manifestations of the One. He is one, yet His aspects are many. According to Hinduism, the ultimate goal of life is *moksha* which is described as the realization of

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<sup>13</sup> “Satim ca kvaham bhikkhave sabbatthikam vadamiti” (SN. V., 115).

one's union with God. The Hindu has relationship with Him in different deities to concentrate on His divine nature. Therefore, the human soul is divine and the entire universe is a manifestation of the Supreme spirit. For the Hindus, the term "Divine union" is equivalent to contemplation. In contemplation, one's mind is constantly fixed only on God, and one performs the duties with complete self surrender to God. In other words, mind and intellect are to be concentrated on God, and all actions are to be completely surrendered to Him. The Hindus concentrate the mind on the Divine; maybe a god such as Shiva, Vishnu, etc.

Moreover, the Hindus express their contemplation not only by focusing but they contemplate God with devotion and love. The Gita <sup>14</sup> says:

How much more this is so of the righteous brahmanas, the devotees and the saintly Kings. Therefore, having come to this temporary, miserable world, engage in loving service unto Me. (Gita IX, 33)

In the Gita it gradually becomes clear that this means adhering to, and living in the personal God.

According to Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950), the Hindu mystic and philosopher,

The divine life will give to those who enter into it and possess it an increasing and finally a complete possession of the truth-consciousness and all that it carries in it; it will bring with it the realization of the Divine in self and the Divine in Nature. All that is sought by the God-seeker will be fulfilled in his spirit and in his life as he moves towards spiritual perfection. (Aurobindo, 1993, p. 46)

S.N. Dasgupta, citing Ramanuja the great Vedanta commentator of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, defines devotion (bhakti) as a contemplation of God unbroken as the smooth

<sup>14</sup> Gita: The Bhagavad-Gita, a unique work (circa 200 BC-200 AD) that forms only an infinitesimal part of an immense epic of much greater age, has been for centuries the spiritual guide for Hindus (Cary-Elnves, 1986, p. 78).

and ceaseless flow of oil. He affirms that contemplation necessarily implies love of God as its inner motive. Then, Ramanuja also describes this contemplation as having its main source in love for God, who is so dear to the devotee. Therefore, it was this inner most profound love for God that helped him to withdraw his mind from all other things and to enter into such a contemplation of God that he became absorbed in Him and united in God (Dasgupta, 1992, p. 212).

Through the path of contemplation, one can attain liberation by complete surrender to God. The peace and the bliss of Divine union are the fruits of contemplation. As Bede Griffiths affirms, "Contemplation is freedom from all attachment, so that one adheres to God, to Brahman" (Griffiths, 1987, p. 105). This method is considered the easiest and the most efficient path to attain God because there is no distinction of caste, creed, gender and wealth. All who love God can follow this path and achieve the goal of life.

### 2.6.3 Islam and Contemplation

The Arabic word "Islam" means "submission", or to be more precise "the surrender of one's whole being" to the Oneness that is God (Allah). The highest aim of all Muslims is that all their life they must devote their whole being only to Allah. The final goal of Islam is God. From Him we have received life and to Him we shall all return. According to Islam, contemplation is not meditation or prayer but is that state of direct experience of Divine Presence. The experience of Islamic spirituality is based on a person's awareness and recognition of his existence and the existence of God. Islamic contemplation is a profound experience of the soul.



As the Sufis<sup>15</sup> commit and sacrifice themselves, and live their one life only for God. The Sufis distinguish three organs of spiritual communication: the heart, which knows God; the spirit, which loves Him; and the ground of the soul, which contemplates Him (Nicholson, 1989, p. 68). Muslims contemplate life, creation and deeper meanings of existence.

The Muslims contemplate God, in His name and Qualities. In this reality, it is not we who contemplate God but God Himself who contemplates Himself in His Qualities for the manifestation of which we are living. The Muslims contemplate God not as the object but as the subject. They contemplate the essence of God, and find it identical with His own. Reynold A. Nicholson (1868-1945) a scholar of Islamic mysticism distinguishes contemplation into two kinds. The first is the result of perfect faith, the second of rapturous love, for in the rapture of love a man attains to such a degree that his whole being is absorbed in the thought of his Beloved and he sees nothing else. Thus, in contemplation, we never see anything except God.

In Islam, to contemplate God does not mean to achieve inner peace or miracle. In contrast, contemplation brings about the purification of the spirit in order to be one with God. The Muslims are absorbed in the will of God; one should not at all follow one's own human desires, but to abide by the will of God alone. Therefore, Islam's contemplation is the highest state of "selflessness", when the consciousness of having attained "self" disappears (Ibid, 1989, p. 61). The Buddhists, the Hindus, the Muslims and the Christians are all experiencing the ultimate Reality but experiencing it in different ways through their own love and in their own traditions of faith. All the

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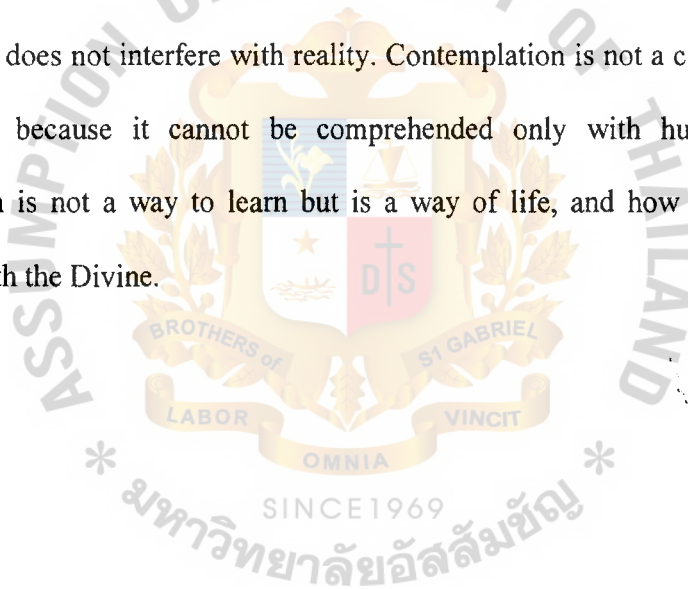
<sup>15</sup> Sufis: Muslims who seek close, direct, and personal experience of God, through prayer, meditation and strict life. Therefore, they are often described as mystics (Bowker, 2000, p. 561).



great religious traditions seek to reach their ultimate goal and to seek inner peace and true happiness.

## 2.7 Summary

The core of religious life is to unite with the Source, Origin or God. Religions offer the ways to people to attain union with the Divine through prayer, meditation, mystical experience and contemplation. In contemplation, through the effort of human intellect it is not possible to grasp the Divine. The Divine is not a concept in any accepted sense of the word. Therefore, the intellect must be used with the greatest care, so that it does not interfere with reality. Contemplation is not a clear or rational understanding because it cannot be comprehended only with human intellect. Contemplation is not a way to learn but is a way of life, and how to have direct experience with the Divine.



# CHAPTER III

## THOMAS MERTON ON CONTEMPLATION AND SOCIAL CONCERN

### 3.1 Introduction

Being a Christian is not merely a matter of accepting a few doctrines, going to church and reciting the creeds. Merton holds that establishing a relationship with God for any Christian is a lifelong task. Christians are called to love God and other human beings as Jesus has loved us. Christians believe that “everything we meet and everything we see and hear and touch, far from defiling, purifies us and plants in us something more of contemplation and of heaven” (NSC, p. 25). Contemplation is the way God transforms men into His life, so that “we know him as he knows himself” (SC, p. 74). For Thomas Merton, a Trappist Monk, contemplation is an antidote to materialism. Merton saw the necessity of a contemplation that would transform him to be Christ-like and unite him with Christ. He lived for this ideal.

In Christian tradition, the monks make a radical separation from their cultures and go apart for a healing of their visions. Merton did this by entering the monastery. As Merton’s thoughts and experience developed, contemplation became a way of living an ordinary life. He believed contemplation is necessary for all people of the world today.

In this chapter, I shall discuss the vision and experience of the contemplation of Thomas Merton. To attain this end, I will divide the study on Thomas Merton and Contemplation into three parts:

Firstly, to understand clearly what is meant by contemplation in Thomas

Merton's experience.

Secondly, to examine the influencing factors on Thomas Merton's experience of contemplation.

Thirdly, to discuss the Church's social role.

Fourthly, to study Merton's experience on contemplation in the view of social concern.

### 3.2 Thomas Merton's Life and Work

Thomas Merton was born on 31 January 1915 in Prades, southern France. His parents gave him little religious education while both were living as artists in Paris. Merton's mother taught him to read before he entered school, and he remained an avid reader all his life. She died when he was six and his father died when he was sixteen. This fact made Merton strongly feel that he was alone and looked forward to living a life of solitude.

The young Merton attended schools in France, England, and the United States. He proceeded to take a Bachelor's Degree (1938) and a Master's Degree at Columbia University in New York City, where he immersed himself in the writings of William Blake<sup>16</sup>, Thomas Aquinas, Augustine and Maritain. In 1938 he was at Columbia where he was baptized into the Roman Catholic Church. When he became Catholic, he took the social teachings of the Church seriously and got involved in student peace movements.

In 1935, Merton met Daniel Walsh, a teacher who influenced him greatly.

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<sup>16</sup> William Blake (1757-1827) was an English poet, painter and printmaker. Merton completed his Master's thesis: *On Nature and Art in William Blake*.

Daniel could observe that Merton was inclined toward a more spiritual, mystical, and experiential way of thought. He was “the first one” to encourage Merton to become a priest and told Merton about the contemplative life of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance<sup>17</sup> (SSM, p. 259).

In 1941, Merton attended a retreat at the Trappist Abbey of Gethsemani. It was one among the most important episodes and turning points in Merton’s life. Merton entered the Trappist monastic community (Cistercian Order) at Gethsemani, Kentucky, on December 10, 1941. Encouraged by the Abbot of Gethsemani, Merton (1948) wrote his autobiography under the title, *The Seven Storey Mountain* that became a best-seller and a classic. During the following 20 years, Merton wrote prolifically on a vast range of topics, including the contemplative life, prayer, and religious biographies. A great deal of his published material was extrapolated from his lengthy and detailed personal journals; thus most of his work is a kind of “spiritual autobiography” (King, 1992, p. 6).

Merton wrote about spiritual things from the point of view of experience rather than in the concise terms of dogmatic theology or metaphysics. Thus the appearance of a spiritual text differs from that of systematic theology or philosophy, even though it may appear in a treatise form. His later writing focused on controversial issues like social problems and Christian responsibility: race relations, violence, nuclear war, economic injustice and ecumenical issues. An analysis of Merton’s writings reveals that his secular concern had its roots in his quest for union with God. In other words, Merton’s contemplation was rooted in traditional Catholic

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<sup>17</sup> Around the third and fourth centuries, the Cistercians took their origin from the Desert Fathers as model of their monastic life. It is the life of silence, prayer, work and fasting. For the Cistercians, contemplation is a prayer of simple regard that proceeds from love and responding love.

mystical theology.

In his last years he was instrumental in founding the Catholic Peace Movement and he was involved himself in dialogue with monks of Eastern Religions particularly with Buddhist monks. Twenty-five years after his death his books continue to sell. Most of his original papers are kept in the archives of The Study Center at Bellarmine College, Louisville, Kentucky, USA.

Merton was a rare individual, who encompassed himself in almost equal degrees the four elements of religion: the institutional, the intellectual, the social and the mystical. Yet Merton presented little in the way of original thought. His great contribution was the particularity of his person and the synthesizing of ancient and universal truths. Glenn Hinson writes:

Merton's originality lay, therefore, in the way he fed the whole tradition of contemplation through his own gifted and fertile mind and personality so as to create a profound new synthesis which could speak not only to his monastic confreres but even to the wider circle of humanity. (1975, p.13)

Merton died in Bangkok, Thailand, while attending an ecumenical meeting with Buddhist religious leaders on December 10, 1968, 27 years to the day after he entered the Abbey of Gethsemani. Merton was a spiritual master, a brilliant writer and a man who embodied the quest for human solidarity. Posthumously, several volumes of his letters and seven of his personal journals were published.

To understand Merton's vision on peace, we need to explore and understand those who had an influence on him; among them are Mohandas Gandhi and Thich Nhat Hanh.

Gandhi (1869-1948) was an authentic religious cum political figure for social transformation. Gandhi or "Mahatama" meaning "great soul", struggled to seek the

truth of peace through nonviolent resistance across the globe. It is suitable for all situations and all people to acquire inner peace and to promote peace in the world. Gandhi used the word *satyagraha* to explain his concept of nonviolent action dedicated to truth. Merton was interested in Gandhi's thought on non-violence (*ahimsa*) which influenced his view on peace. Merton learned from Gandhi's thoughts which were rooted in religion that inspired and encouraged many people and many movements sacrificing for peace. Merton understood that Gandhi's action of non-violence was rooted in religious experience.

Merton advocated a contemplation which leads to inner unity and a spirit of non-violence. In this reality, Merton used the word "interior life" to explain Gandhi's action on nonviolence. Merton said that we must start to believe in the potential of goodness and to refuse to be involved in sin or evil. This means that he will express goodness through compassion in order to act against violence. To bring peace to society is not only to solve the problems of injustice, political conflicts, and violence in many forms. Above all, it is to eliminate evil in thoughts, words and deeds. Thus, with unity between God and man real "peace" will be possible. Merton writes:

Hence the way of peace is the way of truth, of fidelity to wholeness and being, which implies a basic respect for life not as a concept, not as a sentimental figment of the imagination, but its deepest, most secret and most frontal reality. (PP, p. 208)

Merton believed in Gandhi's philosophy of non-violent resistance to evil. Merton learned from Gandhi that the liberation of India was to Gandhi a religious duty because for him the liberation of India was only a step to the liberation of all mankind from the tyranny of violence in others, but chiefly in themselves. Therefore, Merton considered Gandhi "a sign of the genuine union of spiritual fervor and social



action in our time” (SDM, p. 229).

For Gandhi, there is no religion that is separated from human activity. Merton strongly agreed with Gandhi that peace and non-violence cannot be obtained without God. Merton believed that non-violence needs a supernatural courage by prayer and spiritual discipline. As Gandhi’s writes,

Belief in non-violence is based on the assumption that human nature in its essence is one and therefore unfailingly responds to the advances of love... The non-violent technique does not depend for its success on the goodwill of the dictators, for a non-violent resister depends on the unfailing assistance of God which sustains him throughout difficulties which would otherwise be considered insurmountable. (GNV, pp. 25-26)

Peace does not begin from outside us but from inside, from our hearts and our consciousness. Gandhi’s non-violent action is the fruit of inner peace and freedom within. Merton affirmed “therefore a truly free and just society must be constructed on a foundation of non-violence” (Ibid, p. 43). Gandhi was a real peacemaker and a witness to the cooperation of the whole Indian people with the religion of non-violence. Indeed, Gandhi’s spirituality on non-violence is valid for the whole world. Thus, Gandhi stands as the greatest figure of the twentieth century.

In 1961, Merton became involved with problems in the American society, especially with the issue of Vietnam War. This even led Merton to meet Thich Nhat Hanh<sup>18</sup> at his monastery. It was more significant and more enriching for Merton to develop inner peace. During the war in Vietnam, Nhat Hanh committed himself to

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<sup>18</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh is a Vietnamese Buddhist monk now in exile in France. Nhat Hanh was nominated by Martin Luther King Jr. for the Nobel Peace Prize (1967). “Thich Nhat Hanh is a holy man, for he is humble and devout...His ideas for peace...would build a monument to ecumenism, to world brotherhood, to humanity” (<http://us.penguingroup.com>).

doing actions which contribute to peace in society. Nhat Hanh decided to become a monk for the reason of service and compassion in the way of Buddha. His life and teachings have deeply influenced millions of people, including Merton.

Merton points out that “Nhat Hanh is a free man who has acted as a free man in favor of his brothers and moved by the spiritual dynamic of a tradition of religious compassion” (TMP, p. 153). Later, Merton writes an essay titled: *Nhat Hanh Is My Brother* which was published in *Faith and Violence* (1968). His message is about a declaration of human solidarity with those suffering in the war, specially, the innocent people; women, children and the aged.

Merton was impressed with Nhat Hanh’s love of religious life for peace. For Nhat Hanh, peace is a practice on mindfulness, a practice of being aware of our thoughts, our actions and the consequences of our actions. Mindfulness is the practice of stopping and becoming aware of what we are thinking and doing. Thus, mindfulness is the source of individual happiness. Moreover, the practice of “mindfulness” is beneficial for people of all faiths; it helps us to have the experience of inner peace in modern society.

Merton felt strongly that Nhat Hanh’s thoughts and his way of life are very much similar to his own. First, both of them were contemplative monks. Second, they express their ideals in monastic life in commitment to action for peace in daily life. Third, they believe and put into practice their ideals in loving-kindness, so that it may transform the individual consciousness. Therefore, Nhat Hanh is a peacemaker on the path of peace and non-violence in the Buddhist tradition. Nhat Hanh says that: “Christian contemplation includes the practice of resting in God, which, I believe, is the equivalent of touching nirvana” (2003, p. 207). On the other hand, Merton was

the instrument of God to love and serve only God in the path of Christianity. The Vatican II Document *Gaudium et Spes* explains:

This peace on earth cannot be obtained unless personal well-being is safeguarded and men freely and trustingly share with one another the riches of their inner spirits and their talents. A firm determination to respect other men and peoples and their dignity, as well as the studied practice of brotherhood are absolutely necessary for the establishment of peace. Hence peace is likewise the fruit of love, which goes beyond what justice can provide. (*Gaudium et Spes*, No, 78)

### 3.3 Thomas Merton's Vision of Contemplation

Merton's main theme of writing is his experience on contemplation: *What is Contemplation?* (1950), *New Seeds of Contemplation* (1961) and *Contemplation in a World of Action* (1973). Through his writing, Merton intended not to describe the definition of contemplation specifically as Thomas M. King says:

Merton 'defined' the term more than a hundred times, but the variety of his definitions - together with the ordinary difficulty in speaking of divine things - makes it impossible to state precisely what he meant. (1992, p. 37)

A close look at Merton's contemplative vision reveals that a great deal of his published material was extrapolated from his lengthy and detailed personal journals; thus most of his work constitutes a kind of spiritual autobiography. Nevertheless, all of Merton's writings on contemplation flow from his experience and inner life. Contemplation reaches out to the knowledge and even to the experience of the transcendent and inexpressible God. It knows God by seeming to touch Him. However, I shall point out four main visions, which Merton expressed through his commitment to a contemplative life.

### 3.3.1 Contemplation for All

Merton affirmed that every baptized Christian is called to a life of contemplation, which is not confined to the monastic enclosure. The grace of contemplation is available to all, to those who are outside as well as those inside the monastery. As time passed, Merton grew more insistent in his writings, on the crucial importance of lay Christians to be committed to a life of contemplation while working for social transformation in the light of the Gospel<sup>19</sup>.

### 3.3.2 Contemplation is a Grace

According to Merton, contemplation is not to have knowledge of God in terms of intellectual conviction. It is not something that we can attain by our intellectual effort or by perfecting our natural human qualities. On the contrary, "it is the gift of God who, in His mercy, completes the hidden and mysterious work of creation in us by enlightening our minds and hearts" (NSC, p. 5). God who takes the initiative to love first as St. John writes: "he first loved us" (1 Jn 4:19). Thus, the grace of contemplation is freely given to all men, which they may accept freely and respond to by developing it. Merton writes:

Contemplation is intimately connected with the pure and perfect love of God which is God's greatest gift to the soul. It is a deep and intimate knowledge of God - a union of love - a union in which we learn things about Him that those who have not received such a gift will never discover until they enter heaven. (CWA, p. 11)

This contemplation is like a mirror reflecting back to God the gift of being and love which God has given to His creature. God is not particularly interested in

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<sup>19</sup> There are four Gospels in the New Testament of the Bible on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. They are according to the writers Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

demonstrating His power. Instead, God intends to express his love to all His creation. Therefore, man will grow through contemplation, in order to participate in God's own life. Contemplation is the state of the presence of God without concepts, moved by the Spirit beyond the capacity of human effort and aided by grace to achieve it. It is wholly God's work and quite beyond description. It is a pure gift. Contemplation is a gift from God that man can participate in the inner life of God. "We must respond to God's gifts gladly and freely with thanksgiving, happiness and joy; but in contemplation we thank Him less by words than by the serene happiness of silent acceptance" (NSC, p. 231). Thus, man should respond with all his heart, mind, soul and not merely with the external acts of worship and service.

### **3.3.3 Jesus Christ as the Center of Contemplation**

One cannot learn contemplation from others, but can only learn directly from Jesus by personal relationship with Him. Merton indicates that contemplation is on God who is the first to love all mankind and that God makes man understand through Jesus. Similarly, men have known how to love God through Christ. The witness of Jesus and his message is that men can know God through personal experience of Him in contemplation. Thus, Jesus communicates His life to men and opens to them infinite horizon on God. Contemplation will bring the union between God and man. "Contemplation means attention to God, which is to say faithfulness and worship to the God of Jesus Christ, not to any other divinities" (Raguin, 1974, p. 121).

Merton affirms that contemplation is a deep participation in the life of Christ. Christ revealed God to us, and at the same time taught us that the new commandment of love was the basic law of human perfection. According to Merton:



The normal way to contemplation is a belief in Christ that is born of thoughtful consideration of His life and His teaching. But just because all experience of God comes to us through Christ, that does not necessarily mean that every contemplative always, invariably, arrives at his contemplation through Christ as He may exist in our imagination. (NSC, p.151)

### 3.3.4 Contemplation of Jesus on The Cross

Maybe we think that contemplation will be a life of happiness. Usually we contemplate beautiful things. In contrast, the state of contemplation is not always the state of beauty, goodness and intellectual knowledge, but also we can find ourselves in the state of suffering and darkness. Therefore, God can also be revealed through this state, and these adversities can become an opportunity for union with God.

The Christians are called to contemplate suffering. By contemplating Jesus on the cross, they learn to accept all suffering and hardship in their daily lives. Merton affirms that: "For contemplation is simply the penetration, by divine wisdom, into the mystery of God's love, in the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ" (NMI, p. 78). We will learn and grow through suffering which is the way for purification and perfection in love. St. Paul writes, "Let there be light shining out of darkness, which has shone in our minds to radiate the light of the knowledge of God's glory, the glory on the face of Christ" (2 Cor 4:6).

Man learns to renounce himself and to surrender to God from the root of intimate relationship with Jesus on the cross. John of the Cross (1542-1591) calls this a state of "darkness". It is the moment of one of the trials; thus, we put all our life in the hands of God and only trust in Him. Frederic Joseph Kelly affirms that Christian contemplation is thus centered, not on a vague inner appreciation of man's own spiritual essence, but upon the Cross of Christ (Kelly, 1974, p. 69). Merton's view on



contemplation is still strong in Christian faith. The state of contemplation will help us realize the significance of the death of Jesus. For this reason, I shall focus on how Merton shares the fruit of contemplating Jesus' passion and death, which are love of Jesus and his redemption for personal sin and social sin.

The high point and the culmination of Jesus is his passion and death on the cross. The Christians try to understand that the destiny of human existence is to sink deeper into death as part of their lives, that this destiny is the merciful, eternal call of God's love. This is love that redeems and fills our being because it is absorption into the death of Jesus (Rahner, 1992, p. 136). Jesus expresses his extreme abandonment sensitively that He had suffered most in His life, when He cries out "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt 27: 46). At this point, Christ expresses his great love for mankind. Jesus by the sacrifice of his life on the cross has paid the price for our sins and brings us to unity with God again. It is true that the Christians emphasize the passion and crucifixion of Jesus. Jesus' death on the cross expresses his immense love to redeem us from sin.

Christ shares his passion, resurrection and redemption of the world. The Christians follow Jesus not only for their personal, individual salvation, but also for the salvation of all mankind. We contemplate the cross, and then we enter into the full meaning of union with God in the redemption. The great Fathers of the Eastern Church when referring to union with God use the word "divinization" to mean that we can become one with God by reliving the mystery of the death and resurrection of the Lord (Ciardi, 2003, p, 120).

Redemption by Jesus Christ is still continuing in the world. Man is called to participate in and to commit his life to redemptive love. Redemption is not merely the

individual's being forgiven and rescued for eternal life. It is also the divine work of saving people from economic slavery, political oppression and social abandonment. Redemption is also the grace that transforms human communities and societies so that they might be truly humanizing places of shared life and faith (Reiser, 1994, p. 69).

### **3.4 Requisites for Contemplation**

In Christian spirituality, in order to attain the state of contemplation one needs to pray, meditate and read the Scriptures etc. For Merton, to reach contemplation, there are the following elements: detachment, silence and solitude in order to retreat into the inner sanctum, to be alone with God. It is grace that prepares man for contemplation.

#### **3.4.1 Detachment**

The word detachment, in the context of contemplation, means detachment physically and spiritually. The aim of detachment is to be free of oneself in order to commit oneself to God. This freedom is necessary to know the reality of God. Detachment is an important condition to attain contemplation because it is the first step toward relationship with God. Merton affirmed that desire is the heart of attachment. Merton writes: "The desire of creatures as ends in themselves cannot coexist with the desire of God as our true end" (AT, p.57). It is not creatures, but the desire for them that stands as a barrier between God and man. St. Paul points out that:

You must give up your old way of life; you must put aside your old self, which gets corrupted by following illusory desires. Your

mind must be renewed by a spiritual revolution so that you can put on the new self that has been created in God's way, in the goodness and holiness of the truth. (Eph 4: 22-24)

In spiritual goods, we should be detached from the pleasures of prayer, a system of spirituality or in a method of meditation or in contemplation itself. Merton suggests that all these things will bring themselves marks of heroism and sanctity. These things are obstacles to contemplation. We should be detached from all material things and spiritual things in order to desire and to seek only God's will. That does not mean that we cannot possess material things, but we possess them for serving God or because we do God's will. Indeed, detachment is seen in negative terms as long as we see the process from the human side. If we were able to see it from the perspective of God, it might be possible to see it positively. The purpose of detachment is freedom, to respond to God, to be clothed with the divine nature. We are completely free to serve God in perfection for God alone. Therefore, Merton emphasizes:

The most important thing that remains to be said about this perfect contemplation, in which the soul vanishes out of itself by the perfect renunciation of all desires and all things, is that it can have nothing to do with our ideas of greatness and exaltation, and is not therefore something which is subject to the sin of pride. In fact, this perfect contemplation implies, by its very essence, the perfection of all humility. (NSC, p. 285)

Christ is an excellent example of how to detach oneself from all things, especially his suffering and abandonment on the cross. We should follow His step; therefore we must empty ourselves as Jesus did, through denying ourselves. We should completely forget ourselves and be free from material and spiritual things. "They are no longer interested in their external selves" (Ibid, p. 60). Merton

committed all his life only to attaining the intimate union with Christ. "In order to find my true self in Christ, I must go beyond the limits of my own narrow egoism. In order to save my life, I must lose it. For my life in God is and can only be a life of unselfish charity" (NMI, p. 61).

### 3.4.2 Silence

God is person and God is not a thing, thus man lives his silence in order to listen to the "word of God" (NSC, p.14). Silence is necessary for contemplation. In silence we ultimately find our true self each of us needs in order to grow spiritually. The Christians should "learn to listen in loving silence and waiting in expectation for God to speak His Logos" (Maloney, 1977, p.115). Merton realized that, the first step to keep silence is to practice physical silence, especially the exercise of stringent control of the tongue. Merton as a monk was bound by a strict rule of silence. In his monastery, monks never conversed with one another, and spoke only to their Superiors and then with others only when necessary. On the contrary, these silent monasteries are now well known as the home of truly happy men. The life is difficult, no doubt, but the faith and self-sacrifice which make it possible also fill the hearts of the monks with a peace which the world cannot give. In the state of contemplation one becomes "absorbed in what is said to it, and (is) not aware of itself as existing outside of what is spoken to it" ( HGL, p. 571). Silence is the language of love.

The basis of entering into contemplation is how to keep one's mind, heart and will in silence in order to listen to the voice of God or to hear the Word of God. Therefore, for intense listening, one must be empty of one's own word or voice. Merton had in mind an exterior silence (the silence of the tongue) and interior silence

(the silence of the heart). An exterior silence removes the barrier between us and the world of things, things that exist not for themselves but for the praise of God. According to Merton, we keep silent not because we like silence or we desire to grow in the spiritual life. In contrast, we need to be silent in order to respond to God's love. Merton believes that "love" is the door to enter the silence of God, which leads us to know His voice. Then, we know that only God's silent spirit can teach us how to love each other. Merton writes:

And because they do not know the silence of love, they cannot know the silence of God, who is Charity, Who cannot destroy what He loves, Who is bound, by His own law of Charity, to give life to all those whom He draws into His own silence. (NMI, p. 193)

Silence creates the atmosphere in which we can put on the mind of Christ. Silence makes relationship possible and unites man with God. For this reason Merton says that "Contemplation is essentially a listening in silence" (CP, p. 90).

### 3.4.3 Solitude

A great thing for a man to discover is his solitude, and he/she should learn to live in it. For there he/she finds that he/she and God are one: that God is alone as he/she himself is alone. Merton's definition of solitude does not involve merely doing, but being a man of God. For Merton, solitude is the actualization of a faith in which a man takes responsibility for his own life. He faces its full mystery in the presence of the invisible God. According to Merton, man cannot isolate himself (physical solitude) by escaping to the mountains or the desert, but by escaping into the great formless sea of irresponsibility in the crowd of people. For Merton, solitude is not loneliness when it is shared, but the essence of community. Merton understands



that “Solitude is the conviction that it will help you to love not only God but also other men” (NSC, p. 8).

Merton understands that in our interior solitude, we are not alone, but God is present in us. Merton says that: “The more we are alone with God the more we are with one another, in darkness, yet a multitude” (Ibid, p. 66). We need to detach ourselves from dependence on created things and on other people, as well as from false ideas of self, in order to stand before God in nakedness and simplicity. This is simply what the contemplative vision is all about. It witnesses to human solidarity in God. As an inescapable element in the encounter with God, solitude is the central feature for Merton’s contemplation.

Merton divides solitude into two kinds:

1. False solitude (exterior) which is the actual physical separation from others; and external solitude which has some reference to actual space, to geography, to physical isolation from the towns and the cities of man (Ibid, p. 81).

2. True solitude (interior) which is the solitude of spirituality. Interior solitude of the soul is absorbed in the immense and fruitful silence of God, and learns something of the secret of His perfection by love.

It is dangerous to go into solitude only for your own self, because the true solitude is to be alone with God. Therefore, the contemplation of the Christian solitary is the awareness of the divine mercy transforming and elevating his own emptiness and turning it into the presence of perfect love and perfect fullness. One, who is called to solitude, is not called merely to imagine himself solitary. “However,



the truest solitude is not something outside you, not an absence of men or of sound around you; it is an abyss opening up in the center of your own soul” (NSC, p. 80).

### 3.5 Thomas Merton’s Experience of Contemplation

Here I intend to study Merton’s contemplation as the inner experience with God. How is it possible that man can experience His presence and He lives within? The Christians should always seek the experience of God’s presence in their lives. Merton opens up a way for personal union with Christ; it is the divine union with Him. The concept of religious experience is logically and practically complex. Fundamental to the concept is emphasis on actual living through an event; actual enjoyment or suffering which composes an individual life. We know God not only by our intellect but also by our experience directly; one’s thoughts, reasoning, doubts and insights about God and one’s relations thereto, one’s striving to lead the Christian life, one’s successes and failures in the enterprise, and so on (Alston, 1993, p. 34).

According to Rodney Stark, an American sociologist of religion, experience may be divided into two types on the basis of the perception of divine presence. The first will be called a generalized sense of sacredness. Here are emotional experiences of reverence or solemnity that lie on the borderline between the sacred and profane, for example, as with a great sense of sacredness invested in such moments as marriage ceremonies or the death of loved ones. The second will be referred to as a specific awareness of the presence of divinity. The characteristic feature of these experiences is the perception of divinity in a specific sense or in a special way (God, Jesus, a creator, and so on) and the presence of divinity everywhere (Stark, 1965, p. 309).

For Merton, contemplation is a direct experience of God in a full and true sense. Contemplation brings knowledge, in the sense of gaining insight and wisdom. Merton's understanding of religion is not by doctrine alone but by living or experiencing it. His explanation of experiencing God is expressed as follows: first of all is to open all mind, heart and all being toward God. Merton touches the presence of God within his life and he realizes that God does not exist only in His creation but also inside the human being. For this reason, he felt strongly the presence of God in his life, at the same time he finds his true self. Merton affirms that contemplation is the personal and individual experience with God. For Merton, the presence of God is not through reading dogma but from experience of God's love. Merton says that:

We do not see God in contemplation – we know Him by love: for He is pure Love and when we taste the experience of loving God for His own sake alone, we know by experience who and what He is. (NSC, p. 154)

Merton, therefore attempts to define contemplation as states of consciousness as “real experiences” of union with God. However, Healey gives three reasons for Merton's strong and deep spirituality and religious experience as follows:

First of all, he reminds us powerfully of the reality of God and the central place God should have in our lives. Secondly, Merton never tires of reminding us of the necessity of prayer, contemplation and solitude. All who seek God sincerely need an element of withdrawal and solitude–time to make the connections in their own lives as they pursue the wholeness that can lie dim and hidden. This is needed so that they can be open to themselves, open to God, and fully alive to the reality of God in the world around them. Finally, Merton continually reminds us of the fullness of the

Christian message. We are all called to union with God and to union with one another in the love of Christ (Healey, 1989, p. 68).

Catharina Stenqvist's article *Thomas Merton and his View on Contemplation* states that Merton's explicit reason for not being precise is that contemplation cannot be taught as if it were a doctrine. Contemplation can only be grasped and understood through experience (Stenqvist, 1993, p. 279). In Merton's contemplation, he brought his own direct experience of searching for God to lead him into an awareness of his personal union with God in Christ. Elena Malits<sup>20</sup> supports Merton on this point and believes that he (Merton) is an important contemporary Catholic for two reasons:

One is the quality of his experience as a person undergoing transformation in an anguished era of history and in the life of the Church. The other is Merton's extraordinary facility for articulating that experience in the form of autobiography. (Malits, 1977, p. 283)

According to Merton, contemplation is his own direct experience with God. This is the value or significance of any religion in that the believer has a profound spiritual relationship with the prophet of his/her own religion. Merton remarks:

For God is present to me in the act of my own being, an act which proceeds directly from His will and is His gift. My act of being is a direct participation in the Being of God. God is pure Being, this is to say He is the pure and infinite Act of total Reality. All other realities are simply reflections of His pure Act of Being, and participations in it granted by His free gift. (CGB, p. 221)

Merton's contemplative spirituality is not primarily about prayer or methods of prayer. It is not one single compartment of human life; it embraces each and every aspect of our lives and all our relationships to God, to others, and to the whole created

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universe. The knowledge of God is not in terms of intellectual conviction; in contrast, it rather understands the reality assimilated by experience into total being. Thus, God is the first person and the first initiative in the experience of love. Merton writes:

The contemplative empties himself of every created love in order to be filled with the love of God alone, and divests his mind of all created images and phantasms in order to receive the pure and simple light of God directly into the summit of his soul. (WC, p.71)

Merton describes the three modes of contemplation for beginners, in order to attain the experience of God. Firstly, it is the emptying of the soul in which images vanish, concepts, words are silent, and open out within you until your whole being embraces incomprehensibility of God. Secondly, it is through the interior suffering and anxiety, because it is the only place in which we can find any kind of stability and peace. For this reason, God reveals Himself in a light that is painful and He purifies us. Thirdly, it is not to feed and satisfy either the senses or the imagination or the intellect; the will rests in a deep luminous and absorbing experience of love (NSC, pp. 275-276).

According to Merton, contemplation is an individual experience and a way of life to reach an experience of reality, not a philosophic account of reality. Contemplation is a direct and immediate relationship experienced with the divine. Merton realized that contemplation is more than an exercise of prayer; it involves the experience of (1) seeking God, (2) coming to know one's true self, and (3) learning one's relationship to the world:

### 3.5.1 Seeking God

It should be clear that this seeking is unlike any other that we undertake. We

may seek for something we have lost or we may seek to meet a person we have never met before. Seeking in such contexts always means the quest for something that is not present. Clearly, this is not the meaning of seeking God, for God is everywhere. God is present for everything that exists. In fact, all else exists only because it receives its existence from God and is sustained in existence by God.

For Merton “God” is the core of contemplation. In other words, the interior life of Merton is perfect contemplation. Merton learns to realize that the love of God seeks him in every situation, and seeks his good. Then, Merton understands that all the situation of life in the Will of God came to him as an interior invitation of personal love. Merton points out that “the seeds that are planted in my liberty at every moment, by God’s will, are the seeds of my own identity, my own reality, my own happiness, my own sanctity” (Ibid, p. 33).

God created us and shared his life, and then the Christians are fulfilling His will by seeking the end for which God made them. Thus, the desire is the first step for seeking inner experience in God. Merton realizes that “the desire is the most important thing in the contemplative life. Without desire, we will never receive the great gifts of God” (WC, p. 20). Man, therefore, not only waits for God’s love but he should respond to His love, through seeing God in every circumstance of his life.

### **3.5.2 Coming to Know One’s True Self**

Experiencing the Reality of God in contemplation makes it possible for the contemplative to experience created reality as it truly is. Merton thinks that in every human creature there is something of God. Thus, in discovering the reality in ourselves, we discover God, who is Reality itself. Merton realizes that contemplation



should start with awareness of “self” or “SUM, I Am” (NSC, p. 9). One is aware of the presence of God and all his being. That is why Merton can describe contemplation not only as seeking God, but also as coming to know the true self in God. In this state of contemplation, man finds existence in his own self or his identity. Merton writes: “contemplation is precisely the awareness that this “I” is really “not I” and the awakening of the unknown “I” that is beyond observation and reflection and is incapable of commenting upon itself” (Ibid, p. 7). For the Christian the culmination of contemplation is an experience of the presence of God within oneself which is beyond description. Since the true self, the innermost “I,” is the perfect image of God, the “I” awakens to find himself within the presence of Him whose image he is (Kelly, 1974, p. 70).

In contemplation, as we let go of words and concepts as a way of relating to God, we enter God’s own silence in the depths of our being. There we discover and experience God in a relationship so direct that we discover our own true selves in God. As Shannon cites Merton’s expression of this truth in a profound way in *The New Man*:

The experience of contemplation is the experience of God’s life and presence within ourselves not as an object, but as the transcendent source of our own subjectivity. Contemplation is a mystery, in which God reveals Himself to us as the very center of our own most intimate self. (NM, p. 83)

### 3.5.3 Relationship with the World

It is as true to say that God loves the world and the world lives by responding to His love. When we find God in contemplation, we find the rest of reality, especially our fellow human beings. We discover them not as a mass, but as individual persons, each distinct and unique in the eyes of God, yet not separate from



God or from one another. When we become aware of our total dependence on God and the same dependence of all reality on God, we experience a sense of interdependence with all God's people and a sense of the responsibility we have toward them. Thus, true contemplation increases our sense of social justice and involvement. It also increases our ecological consciousness and concern to use, but not abuse the good things of creation that God has given us.

Many people turn to the law of nature or world history for contemplation instead of the Word of God. They are mistaken by thinking that they can turn to the values of the world instead of Christ. However, it is only "in Christ" that we can achieve our ultimate goal and meaning. Any man who wants to help others must first be "in Christ" striving to achieve the "supreme freedom" (Balthasar, 1986, p. 65).

Merton suggests that we should share the fruit of this experience in our relationship with others and society. The role of the individual is complementary to the society. The individual is responsible for the common welfare and prosperity of his society. This responsibility is not only to the society but also to God. In this way the individual works with a sound social-mindedness and genuine feeling of inescapable responsibility. On the other hand, the society is also responsible to God for the welfare of the individual. When the individual is able he is the contributor and society is the beneficiary. In this case he is the beneficiary and society is the contributor. Thus, duties and rights correspond harmoniously. Responsibility and concern are mutual. Shannon writes that:

His religious experience gave Merton the motivation for his ever deepening commitment to peace, justice, and human equality. For in the religious experience he met God and discovered his own true self in God; but more than that: he also confronted, in God, his fellow men and women not as a faceless mass, but as persons, each infinitely

precious and all linked to one another in a network of relationship, grounded in God, that made them one. (HGL, p. VIII)

### 3.6 Catholic Social Teaching

The social teaching of the Catholic Church is a collection of teachings on the human person and the human community. Church authorities advocate social teaching in terms of political, economic, and cultural policies, which uphold Christian understanding of personal dignity, family life, religious conduct, and purposeful living in community and society. The social teachings are based on sources in revelation and tradition, its approach is in relation to new situations and almost always in the solution of problems emerging from social evolution. Moreover, all the social teaching is rooted in Christian Scriptures. Therefore, all the documents of Catholic Social Teaching have “the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the gospel” (Gaudium et Spes, No. 4).

The Catholic social teaching upholds that all human life is sacred because it is the product of the creative action of God from its very beginning and remains in a relationship with the Creator. Men and women are created in the image of God and are called to cooperate with and to extend the work of creation (Catechism, 2427). They are instruments of God to complete the work of creation, to perfect its harmony for their own good and that of their neighbors. They seek to participate in the nature and essence of God, and should be treated with the appropriate dignity and respect. Therefore, the human person is “the beginning, the subject and the goal of all social institutions, and it must be the human person which for its part and by its very nature stands completely in need of social life” (Gaudium et Spes, No. 25).

In Christian's view society is an association of people who are united by a principle that transcends each individual (Catechism, 1880). Society shall be ordered with a primary emphasis on the spiritual and moral needs of its members. The Christians will respond with responsibility to society according to their conscience, guided by God. For example, in the realm of political life, the Catholic Church believes that "state authority is ultimately grounded not in a secular social contract between people and rulers but in a correspondence between the behavior of the state and the will of God" (Dwyer, 1994, p. 626).

The Christians should involve in society not only for their sake but more for the common good with self-sacrifice and generous service to others. For the Christians, the common good contains three essential aspects, each of which imposes a role on public authority: respect for the person, social well-being and development, and peace. They must know that they are called to personal intimacy with God, that theirs is a role that no one else can fill on the level of personal life for God. Each one has a special part to live in God's plan for the salvation of men, and to spread the Kingdom of God.

The Catholic Social Teaching began with the Encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (Capital and Labor) by Pope Leo XIII in 1891. The nineteenth century was a period of radical change in politics, economics and society. After the French Revolution the Catholic Church was confronted with new and changing structures. In this period, the Catholic Church had to take account of divergent social philosophies and ideologies, and of the fundamental changes in social life that were initiated by industrial capitalism. Consequently, scholars had their own discipline and judgment on society.

Meanwhile, the Church's teaching was a guide to understand all the complex situations arising from the Industrial Revolution.

At present, the Catholics have been addressed by the social teaching of Vatican II (1965) to move out into the horizontal dimension. They are not only to bring Christ into the world but also to be witnesses of His presence, especially among the poor, the oppressed and the suffering. In fact, to be a Christian, one must love and serve all men. A Christian's task must bring love, justice and peace into society. The Christians believe that all humans are children of God; they have personal, social, and instrumental rights which must be secured, to live according to the standards appropriate to human dignity. The Vatican II Document *Gaudium et Spes* (1965) guides the Catholics on how to be aware of their identity in the modern world:

The root reason for human dignity lies in man's call to communion with God. From the very circumstance of his origin man is already invited to converse with God. For man would not exist were he not created by God's love and constantly preserved by it; and he cannot live fully according to truth unless he freely acknowledges that love and devotes himself to the Creator. (Ibid, No, 19)

The Catholic teachings on social issues hold good not only for Catholics but also for the service of society. The Church encourages the Christians to commit their individual capability of performing actions for which they are responsible, and to be firm in their faith based on the message of the Sacred Scripture. The ultimate concern of the Church is the salvation of men's souls, for which both guiding principles and specific means must be provided. However, the Church has a dynamic transforming grace to bring about the total renewal and regeneration of human society through divine revelation.

The social doctrine of the Church, which proposes the principles for

reflection, criteria for judgment and directives for action, is addressed in the first place to members of the Church. It is essential that the faithful engaged in human promotion should have a firm grasp of this precious body of teaching and make it an integral part of their evangelizing mission. The Christian leaders in the Church and society, and especially lay men and women with responsibilities in public life, need to be well informed of this teaching so that they maybe inspired and live their lives according to the Gospel.

### 3.7 Merton on Social Concern

Man is a member in society or a citizen in the country; he cannot ignore his task for society. According to Merton, the Christians must be authentic Christians as well as good citizens of the country. They should have a sense of responsibility for their commitment to civic affairs by observing the law. They will help the government and society to respond to God's plan for humanity and to be completely at the service of each human person. Merton emphasizes a Christian's role as follows:

Obliged to take an active part in the solution of urgent problems affecting the whole of our society and of our world, it is not enough for us to ignore such things on the ground that we are helpless, and can do nothing constructive about the situation. It is a duty of charity and of justice for every Christian to take active concern in trying to improve man's condition in the world. (LH, pp. 117-132)

The discipline of the Christians in society is first of all the discipline of fidelity to his duty to state, family, profession and as a citizen. This discipline can demand sacrifice and responsibility. Merton points out that man will identify his own self only in God. Love made man full of freedom to commit themselves to one another and society. However, Merton was convinced that human's social awareness



demands a certain inner silence and discipline. Merton believed that a Christian's task is to contribute to society with total commitment. In fact, this transcendent self is identified perfectly with God in love and freedom.

The Christian's God is the one who starts His relationship with man. The meaning of Christian life is determined by his relationship to God in return. Therefore, man has the capacity to grow divine infinitely. Merton affirmed that, with the grace from the Spirit of God man will be able to fulfill his task on the individual and social levels. Merton emphasizes that Christians should be faithful to their own vocation, which is God's plan for them. However, all their actions will be done according to God's will.

Merton's life of contemplation was about experiencing God, and he passed on this experience to others and society. Merton describes his experience with three great emphases: First, emphasis is on the human as distinct from the merely collective or the technological. In other words "man is not of the process of production". The second is to respect the personal aspect in man, that is to respect his solitude, his right to think for himself, his need to learn, his need for love and acceptance by other persons like himself. The third emphasis is on wisdom, love and on view of society as less activist, more contemplative; it enables men and institutions to see life in its wholeness, with stability and purpose, though not necessarily in a politically conservative sense (CGB, p.83).

Merton was a monk, who deliberately withdrew himself to the margins of human society, and found certain solidarity with other marginal people. Whether one is inside or outside of the social establishment, we are all called to live a contemplative life. There are signs that Merton had been reflecting on this marginal,



social critical role as a monk as early as the late 1950s. In this period, the United States had many troubles like the Cold War and nuclear weapons. Later, in the 1960s, Merton became a social critic, existing at the fringes of society. This view seems very close to the early desert tradition with its rejection of compromise and convention.

We do not need to separate God from the world in order to find Him, but we can find Him within us. Merton believed that if man is to have any influence in changing his social world, he has to change himself first. Merton quoted Benedictine literature that has become almost a commonplace of the Western monastic tradition:

The contemplative life is to retain with all one's mind the love of God and neighbor but to rest from exterior motion and cleave only to the desire of the Maker, that the mind may now take no pleasure in doing anything, but having spurned all cares may be aglow to see the face of its Creator: so that it already knows how to bear with sorrow the burden of the corruptible flesh, and with all its desires to seek to join the hymn-singing choirs of angels, to mingle with the heavenly citizens and to rejoice at its everlasting incorruption in the sight of God. In fact contemplation should transcend action. (CP, p. 51)

Merton sought to love solely for God and for others, with an increasing sensitivity to the call of God and love. For Merton, it is only in assuming full responsibility for our world, for our lives and for our selves, that we can be said to live really for God. The whole human reality interpenetrates the world of nature and the world of history. As St. Paul writes "For anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation; the old creation has gone, and now the new one is here. It is all God's work" (2 Cor 5:17-18). This experience of being loved by God at the deepest level of our consciousness gives us strength and inspires us to new heights of self-giving and creativity.

Merton understood that: "If we experience God in contemplation, we experience Him not for ourselves alone but also for others" (NSC, p. 269). Therefore,

“our life in Christ is then a life both of receiving and of giving. We receive from God, in the Spirit, and in the same Spirit we return our love to God through our brother” (Ibid, p.159). For Merton, contemplation was not a part of his life but the fullness of a totally integrated life. Merton concluded that no one is excluded from the need to contemplate and to share the fruits of this practice.

### 3.7.1 Contemplation and Action

Contemplative life in Christian tradition means to escape society and to be alone with God in order to be united with God. In contrast, Merton’s contemplative life sought God in solitude, silence and searched for union with God through others. Contemplation means rest, suspension of activity; withdrawal into the mysterious interior solitude. The soul is absorbed in the immense and fruitful silence of God and learns something of the secret of His perfections which is not through seeing, but by furtive love.

On the other hand, contemplation is no longer merely a brief moment, satisfied by recollection and peace. An active life in the practice of virtues, mortification, and charity prepares us for contemplation. Merton defines the action as no longer a matter of resigning ourselves to works; in contrast, we let God place us exactly where God wants us to be and He is the one who works in us. In other words, Merton wrote that a Christian’s action is based on a complete sacrifice of our self and our life to serve God in others. As Merton affirms that “action is charity looking outward to other men, and contemplation is charity drawn inward to its own divine source” (NMI, p. 65). The action should emerge from the spirit of contemplation. God is the one who acts through our generosity; we are only an instrument of God’s

action. Indeed, “action is a grateful response that flows from our awareness of God’s presence in this world” (Nouwen, 2005, p.16). Merton viewed that action is a gift from God, not solely by capacity of human action.

For Merton, all Christians are called to serve society, not confining their activities to the demands of their professions but help to close the gap between interior intention and external acts. As James Thomas Baker comments, Merton believes that “if Christians would seek truth before political success they would not only please God but make more lasting contributions to the future of man” (1971, p. 119). Meanwhile, the Christians should be socially concerned and should view social ideals and actions in the light of the word of God. Therefore, in Merton’s social vision of contemplation, man is not only prepared for social action, but his social concern and action should flow from contemplation.

The action calls for sacrifice through love of Christ in others. The Christians seek to follow Christ in all aspects of their life. They commit their life, not only to prayer and penance, but also to their social commitments and responsibilities. Their social action will renew society because it flows from the inner renewal of their Christian life. A Christian’s role is to bring the inner presence of God into society and to become prophetic witness of God’s love. Merton’s view on social dimension does not come from the intellect but more from its own being, which is the fruit of inner life with God.

Man is not only an individual but also has a community aspect. Likewise, man does not love God in isolation, but loves God in others. Clearly, Merton uses a metaphor to explain the relationship between contemplation and action: “Action is the stream, and contemplation is the spring. The spring remains more important than the

stream, for the only thing that really matters is for love to spring up inexhaustibly from the infinite abyss of Christ and of God” (NMI, p. 65).

The Christian will discover his own inner being and unity with God through living in contemplation. Contemplation and action are not opposed to each other, but are two aspects of the same love of God. “ It is only through contemplation that one is able to act as one’s own self apart from the demands of the times” (King, 1992, p.124). Action and contemplation grow together into one path and in unity with God. Action and contemplation dwell together, filling our whole life because the Spirit of God moves us in all things. Contemplation does not remain in silence, solitude, and prayer, but we express our love and service to others and the world.

### 3.7.2 Spiritual Dimension of Society

The term “Kingdom of God”, originates from Jewish Scriptures with early references to Yahweh as King (Dt 33:5) with an eternal reign (Ex 15:18). In Christianity, the Kingdom of God has two meanings; first, the reign of God in which the will of God is the rule; second, the rule of God for the political liberation of Israel. The Kingdom of God is the rule of an eternal sovereign God over all creatures and things (Ps 103:19). The Kingdom of God expresses the impact of God’s gracious and decisive act of salvation through the ministry of Jesus.

Merton realized that the Kingdom of God is not built with the doctrine or a certain religious practice but based on freedom and love. In other words, “it is to build a society which is founded on respect for the individual person, since only persons are capable of love” (DQ, p. 142). Clearly, the Kingdom of God is the being of Jesus itself, which is love. His unconditional love makes us free from our own

selves, thus we desire to build our society on the model of His Kingdom. Merton defines that:

The Kingdom of God is, then, not the Kingdom of those who merely preach a doctrine or follow certain religious practice: it is the Kingdom of those who love. To build the Kingdom is to build a society that is based entirely on freedom and love. (Ibid, p. 142)

How can the Kingdom of God be built in society? Merton views the world or society as the Kingdom of God. Merton points out that man participates in the Kingdom of God not only by natural maturity but by the full supernatural life of Christ. Man can touch or relate the reality of God through the human reality of Jesus. The Christians are responsible to lead all men to participate in the Kingdom of God. The Christians believe that humankind is one family and has one Father. The Christian communities are called upon to love and to serve one another. Henry Townsend points out that “the kingdom which Jesus announced is interior kingdom, but an interior kingdom which is to overflow into men’s relations with one another” (Townsend, 1976, p. 29). Therefore, the task of the Christians is to promote the Kingdom of God on earth, through their love for others and for God.

Merton believes that “the most important need in the Christian world today is this inner truth nourished by this Spirit of contemplation: the praise and love of God, the longing for the coming of God’s glory, his truth, his justice, his Kingdom in the world” (CP, p. 115).

The Kingdom is already established; the Kingdom is a present reality. But there is still work to be done. Christ calls us to work together in building his Kingdom. We cooperate with him in bringing it to perfection. (DQ, p. 141-142)

The Kingdom of God is beyond concept of space and time because it is the



divine presence of Jesus among the people. Merton believes that the Kingdom of God cannot be established by slogan or marching armies; it can only be the work of persons who have reached not only natural maturity but the full supernatural stature of Christ (Ibid, p. xii).

Merton defines the Kingdom of God as the Kingdom of Love. He encourages the Christians to seriously build the Kingdom of God in this world. "For Merton, the reality of the Kingdom is at the heart of both the contemplative and the active dimensions of the Christian life" (O' Connell, <http://muse.jhu.edu>). Merton encourages us that:

A Christian society is one in which men give their share of labor and intelligence and receive their share of the fruits of the labor of all, and in which all this is seen in relation to a transcendental purpose, the history of salvation, the Kingdom of God, a society centered upon the divine truth and the divine mercy. (CGB, p. 94)

Christ is the King of Peace, who has come into the world and saved it. He has saved Man. He has established His Kingdom, and His Kingdom is the Kingdom of Peace. A Christian's task is to continue this tangible presence of Jesus in society. Indeed, the presence of Jesus brings joy and peace. St. Paul writes that "Kingdom of God offers a powerful vision of hope for the future of this world in God's plan of salvation, which intends to realize the values of justice, peace, love, and joy" (Rom 14:17). The Christians live their lives in the present moment to fulfill God's will. For Merton, the Kingdom of God is not something yet to come in the future but a reality in the present. As Balthasar writes "Contemplation is the eternal reality of the Kingdom of heaven; through contemplation it also becomes a reality here and now,



for mankind and for the world” (1983, p. 104).

Merton often quotes Jesus’ final prayer for his disciples: “Father, may they be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you, so that the world may believe it was you who sent me that they may be one as we are one”(Jn 17:21-22). Thus, the Christians cannot ignore the world in which they live their contemplative life with God. Merton realized that contemplation must lead to the service of people with whom Jesus identifies. In Christ, God offers man a new participation in His life, because it is a sharing in His inner life. Merton became convinced that God’s overwhelming love and mercy received in contemplation should be shared with others in His Kingdom.

### 3.8 Summary

In the Christian tradition, the monks lead a radical life. In the Christian tradition, the monks are called to live a radical Christian life with Jesus, the center of their lives. Jesus said to his disciples “If anyone wants to be my disciple, he must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me” (Mt 16:24). This radical life finds its expression in the observance of the evangelical counsels which are the three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Through the vow of poverty, the monks renounce voluntarily attachment to material goods and make themselves free to seek God alone. Through the vow of chastity, they renounce willingly sexual indulgence and the life of the family for the sake of a single-minded and whole-hearted union with God. Through the vow of obedience, the monks, renounce their will and seek the will of God expressed in the community they belong to. Their radical following of Christ is a challenge to the world of materialism, permissiveness and individualism. One of the rules of St. Benedict, the founder of monasticism in Europe is “Ora et labora”

(Pray and work). The monks divided the day into three parts: eight hours of prayer/meditation, eight hours of work, and eight hours of sleep/rest. This is part of the radical life of the monks.

Merton took a similar step by entering the monastery. As Merton's thoughts developed, contemplation became a way of living in ordinary life. He believed contemplation is also necessary for a Christian's life. Merton's contemplation is a life of seeking God and finding Him by love and sharing that love with others. Merton emphasized the significance of contemplation for effective social action and social transformation. Moreover, Merton experienced that the more he shared his contemplation, the more he received the joy of knowing God and unity with all others.

Merton spoke his last words to a multi-religious conference in Bangkok in 1968. Just before his death, he revealed the key to his spirituality of non-violence. Merton was convinced that he was not only assuming the role of a peacemaker in public life, but he ought to be more faithful to his vocation and fulfill his religious role as best as he could. Merton points out that the duty of a Christian in the world is to strive for peace with all his or her power and intelligence, with faith, hope in Christ, and love for God and humanity. Contemplation is the way by which God transforms men into His life, so that we know Him as He knows Himself (SC, p. 74). Merton affirms that man cannot follow a certain course to contemplative experience, but can respond in an appropriate way to God's grace. Merton writes that "I may love not for the sake of merit, not for the sake of perfections, not for the sake of virtue, not for the sake of sanctity, but for You alone" (NSC, 45).

## CHAPTER IV

### CONTEMPLATION AS ENGAGEMENT WITH THE WORLD: AN EVALUATION

#### 4.1 Introduction

In the twentieth century, globalization emphasizes more than ever technology and economic growth. We face many situations that appear to be out of control such as terrorism, nuclear weapon proliferation and crimes in various forms imaginable. Facing many social problems, the Christians began to reflect on how they can contribute to the presence of Jesus in the midst of society. They believe that His presence will spread the climate of love and peace.

Merton became aware of God's overwhelming love and peace in his own life. Merton realized that he should take responsibility by sharing all the fruits of contemplation toward others in society. Merton understood that he did not have the capacity to solve all social problems, but he was convinced that from his inner experience of contemplation, he had inner peace which could be instrumental in bringing peace to society. Merton, therefore, offered a new challenge to the Christians to reconsider contemplative dimension of social involvement, derived from his own religious inner experience.

In this chapter, I shall evaluate Merton's experiences of contemplation which is needed for Christian life in the modern age. Also, I intend to examine Merton's experience of contemplation and how it can contribute to peace in society by evaluating some questions concerning contemplation.

## 4.2 Engagement in Contemplation in the World

It is the role of the Christians to commit their lives to communion with God. They should be conscious that they cannot exist without God, the Creator. The Catholic Church teaches her members to be aware of their identity of being Christians. *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern world* affirms that:

The root reason for human dignity lies in man's communion with God. From every circumstance of his origin man is already invited to converse with God. For man would not exist were he not created by God's love and constantly preserved by it; and he cannot live fully according to truth unless he freely acknowledges that love and devotes himself to His Creator. (*Gaudium et Spes*, No. 19)

In his writings, Merton invites us to experience Christian contemplation, in order to grow deeply in spiritual life; the awareness<sup>21</sup> of God's presence in our life. In his *New Seeds of Contemplation* (1962), he explores the nature and importance of contemplation that struck a chord in the heart of Catholics who are struggling to harmonize contemplation and stress of every day living. Merton encourages serious seekers to find their own unique way of maintaining the presence of God in the midst of the immense pressures of the modern world.

Some Christian contemplative monks search for personal union directly in God alone, but not with others. Merton clearly seeks a profound union with God through others. Merton was criticized for stepping out of traditional contemplative life. Some feel that a monk should remain within the monk's society, and should not

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<sup>21</sup> The word "awareness" describes an experience or a state of heightened consciousness (Shannon, 2002, p. 19).

involve himself in the secular world. Merton has some reasons why he brought the fruit of contemplation to others and society. He gave his reasons as follows:

Firstly, Merton realized that a monk is a part of the world like anybody. He lives and shares the same resources of earth with other human beings. In fact, Merton represents a new way of being. Merton affirms that all his being is a call for intimacy with God and contemplative life. It is also a call to renew the contemplative life and monastic life, in terms of the people of the world today as well as of a new relationship to the world.

Secondly, as a monk of the Cistercian Order, Merton was responding to the Church's requisition for greater spirituality to counter the distractions of the world. Merton suggests that creative contemplation is needed to adapt the heritage of the past to the needs of a new age. He held that contemplation is the union of mind and will with God in an act of pure love, accompanied by knowledge of Him as He is in Himself. Therefore, the essence of the Cistercian tradition is Christian love.

Merton devoted his writings to the basic elements of Cistercian life and contributed much to the growth and the renewal of the Order. The Cistercians' rules and regulations of one thousand years are still relevant to modern society because of three reasons:

1. They adapt the regulations appropriately in tune with the time and circumstances when necessary. For example, they made their rituals and prayers shorter than past practices.
2. They keep a strict routine of putting the Scriptures into practice in their life.

3. They help each person to grow in the gift of self and to advance responsible collaboration with others.

Lastly, Merton had gradually transformed himself more like Christ through contemplation. But his transformation does not mean that he lost his concern for society. Contemplative actions for social concern result in the enrichment of his relationship with God. These actions do not reduce the value of contemplation, but improve it.

The Christians try to do good to others. They imitate the example of Jesus by living their daily life for the service of all men. This is clearly reflected in Christian social work. Jesus is recorded to have said, "I tell you solemnly, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me" (Mt 25:40). Jesus makes it clear that love of neighbor means willing to assist anyone who is in need, even at a cost. For example, if a Christian had two coats while his neighbor had none, the Christian naturally gave the extra one to him.

Indeed, God did not create men for life in isolation, but as members of community. The spirit of God is love and He deeply shares this love with all mankind. For this reason, each man is to bring His Spirit to society. Man should open his heart to receive it and commit himself to give to others. Man needs help from others and to attain his own perfection by love. The Christians' love is not just a desire to love, but involves responsibility for one's own action and responsibility for others. Therefore, love is measured by proof of how much we respond to God's love.

#### **4.3 The Formulation of Contemplation**

For Merton, to attain the state of contemplation, we need not only respond to



God passively, but we also need to make our own effort to reach it. Merton made a choice for his own life to live in solitude, silence and detachment from all things. Above all, for Merton, pure love is the heart and cause of true contemplation; as he says there is “no contemplation without love” (At, p. 13). Merton realized that “The man who loves God alone loves all men in God and for God. He does not have to leave Him to find them in Him, and his love for them is no distraction from his love for God” (MJ, p. 56). Surely, Merton is a seeker in the path of love in order to attain the state of contemplation.

If love is the formulation of contemplation, how is love of God and neighbour possible in the contemporary world with all its demands, distractions and temptations?

#### **4.3.1 Love of God**

Merton followed the traditional Catholic teaching, considering man as the image of God. Man seeks to reach the perfect likeness of the original image of God by loving. The likeness of God is the actualization of capacity for love. To attain this pure grace, man should be united in God through contemplation. Merton maintains that man cannot by himself attain contemplative experience, but man can only respond to God’s grace by nurturing it. He realized that God of love seeks after man’s love. Francis Thompson, in his book *Hound of Heaven* writes: “God, the Hound of Heaven is running after the deer, for its love” (<http://www.bruderhof.com/articles>). Merton asks all of us to see the loving hands of God in all situations in life. They are God’s invitation of personal love. Merton writes: “the seeds that are planted in my liberty at every moment, by God’s will, are the seeds of my own identity, my own

reality, my own happiness, my own sanctity” (NCS, p. 33).

According to Merton, contemplative experience is the way to experience the core of the Reality, not a philosophical understanding but God. It begins with total *kenosis*,<sup>22</sup> of total emptying of all that is not God by becoming a void in which the light of God or the glory of God, the full radiation of the infinite reality of His Being and Love can be experienced. Merton believed that “Love is a creative force, a participation in the divine power to redeem and transform the world by loving creation as God loves it” (DQ, p. 99). Through love the soul can reflect on its own loving activity and thus become the object of its own knowledge. The spirituality that Merton was writing states that all genuine contemplative spirituality must be in love. This spirituality is very close to Balthasar’s<sup>23</sup> remarks:

Love is the matter and goal of contemplation, so, from the outset, it should be directly aimed for and practiced. Love wants to be in the presence of the beloved, so the contemplative places himself in the presence of God, or rather, he realizes in his spirit the truth that God has long since placed him in his presence in a unique way. (Balthasar, 1995, p. 128)

Love does not present itself as an object to be admired and contemplated in and of itself, but rather directs the recipient’s gaze to the Giver and Subject of Love. Love does not pretend to comprehend or embody the invisible but instead gives itself over in order that the recipient might encounter the intention of the Giver. God’s love is unconditioned Love; it is not fulfilled through being conceptualized, but rather is

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<sup>22</sup> Kenosis a Greek word meaning “emptying” derived from St. Paul’s description of Christ as having “emptied himself, taking on the form of a man, born in the likeness of man” (Ph 2:7). The Catholic view is that Christ was fully divine and fully human, but emptied himself of the glory that is his by nature (Kamonchak, 1991, p. 556).

<sup>23</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-88) was a Swiss theologian, considered to be one of the most important Catholic intellectuals and writers of the twentieth century (<http://www.ignatiusinsight.com>).

fulfilled in giving of itself. Humanity necessarily resounds to this divine Love, since it is given without limit and condition. Humanity has no alternative but to will to receive or refuse such Love. A religious person responds to God's call by surrendering himself in love, so he responds to God by faith and by commitment in fidelity to God.

In a state of contemplation, we see that all circumstances of our life are in the plan of God's love. As Merton writes: "It is God's love that speaks to me in the birds and streams; but also behind the clamor of the city God speaks to me in his judgments, and all these things are seeds sent to me from His will" (SC, p. 2). How do the Christians respond or live their lives in order to follow the Will of God? The Scriptures say "It is not those who say to me, Lord, Lord, who will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but the person who does the Will of my Father in heaven" (Mt 7:21) and "he who obeys the commandments he has from Me is the man who loves Me" (Jn 14:21). Therefore, the Christian's love is not so much a matter of feelings as it is an act of the will, but it is manifested to them by circumstances, by the duties of their state in life. Thus it is possible to love God in the contemporary world, if one generously responds to the call of God.

#### **4.3.1.1 Jesus as the Model of Contemplation of Loving**

If the ultimate goal of contemplation is a united life in God, how can one reach it? Merton indicates the way of "love" as the core of contemplation in order to become like Jesus. Merton offers secular people the option of Jesus as the model human who acted in love. Therefore, Jesus is the center of Merton's vision of contemplation. Merton affirms that the core of Christian humanism is the ideal that

God is love, not infinite power. Being Love, God has given himself without reservation to man in that He has become man. It is man, in Jesus, who has the mission of not only making himself human but of becoming divine by the gift of the Spirit of Love (LL, pp. 135-149).

It is basic to a Christian to follow the way of Jesus. Jesus of Nazareth is a person in an absolute commitment to unconditional love. Love in the New Testament as Jesus taught to love God, with all your heart, soul, mind and with all your strength. The second is, love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these (Mk 12:28-31), which includes even the love for your enemies (Mt 5: 43-46). For the Christians, Jesus is their model teaching them two things: to be children of one single Father and to be brothers and sisters to one another.

Baptism is a sign of purification and through this, God reveals that man is the image of God. Only man is created "in the image of God". This is clear in the Old Testament when God said "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness. God created man in his image..." (Gn 1:26-27). Then, God continues to keep the relationship with man through Jesus. Jesus reveals to us who is God through His love. Therefore, man cannot ignore his responsibility to be an image of God.

Merton realized that to respond to God's love is first of all to live the Will of God. Jesus is the perfect example who expressed His great love in order to fulfill the Will of God by loving and serving others. Merton was convinced that the way to know the Father is through Jesus Christ. His contemplation focused on Jesus, who is not only the Son of God, but also a true man. Jesus is the image of God. Merton believed that the essence of being a Christian leads to an inner experience with Jesus in order to be like Him, who is love. For the Christians, existence is constituted by

experience of the Father's unconditional love revealed to us in Jesus. "No one knows the Father", says Jesus, "except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him" (Mt 11:27). Then, Paul tells the Christians of Rome "The spirit you received is not the spirit of slaves bringing fear into your lives again; it is the spirit of sons, and it makes us cry out 'Abba, Father!'. The Spirit himself and our spirit bear united witness that we are children of God" (Rom 8:15-16). The revelation that love is of the essence of God's heart, that God is love (1 Jn 4:8), is given in all its fullness in Christ himself. Jesus expresses his infinite love by saying "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Lk 23:46).

Merton's words are simple and profound. When Father de Grunne asked Merton "what we are asked to do at present?" Merton answer was "not so much to speak of Christ as to let him live in us so that people may find him by feeling how he lives in us" (Forest, 1973, p. 216). Since Jesus had perfectly accomplished God's will, the Christians are invited to imitate his life. Moreover, Jesus is the revelation of God's will for mankind. Merton understood that Christian love is not human sentiment but a concrete love, as Jesus loves men without condition or category. He loves everyone as they are. Merton realized that Jesus lived in him and helped him go deeper into contemplation. Merton writes:

I must learn that my fellow man just as he is, whether he is my friend or my enemy, my brother or a stranger from the other side of the world, whether he be wise or foolish, no matter what may be his limitations, is Christ. (DQ, p.124)

#### **4.3.2 Love of Neighbor**

Merton points out that we not only live the life of contemplation in order to have the experience of finding union with God, but also we are united with our



brothers in Christ so that we discover God and know Him. Merton believed that love is only the way to direct contemplation toward others. "To love God is to respond to His will expressed in the need of another person, or at least to respect the rights of others" (R, p. 429). Therefore, God's life penetrates our souls and His love possesses our faculties and we are able to find and to unite with Him. According to Merton, a truly Christian world vision has to be expressed in a living and active application of the Christian faith in the human problems of their own time. For this reason, the Christians ought to manifest their love of Christ to others by attending to their needs. As St. John writes: "By this love you have for one another, everyone will know that you are my disciples" (Jn 13: 35).

Merton realized that he could not ignore his neighbor, for God identifies with all men and women, especially those who are suffering and the marginalized. Jesus concludes with the statement "as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me" (Mt 25:40). Thus, the Christians involved in social action must conform to their deepest religious principles by putting into practice the teachings of Christ in the social context of the contemporary era.

How is it possible to love others? According to Merton, to love another person, we have to give him an identity of his own. We must love him for who he is, and not what we see of him. We have to love him not for what we can benefit from him, but to benefit him. This would require the kind of love which "transforms" us into the other person. Then, we will be able to see things his way, feel what he feels, as if his experiences are our own. This kind of "transformation" into the other would be impossible without sacrifice. If we cannot remain ourselves while being transformed into the other, we are not yet capable of a fully human existence.

However, we can achieve our ultimate goal as a human being through Christ.

Jesus teaches us to treat one another as we would like to be treated: “All the commandments: You shall not commit adultery, you shall not kill, you shall not steal, you shall not covet, and so on, are summed up in this single command: You must love your neighbor as yourself” (Rom 13:9). Love of God and love of neighbor stand in a relationship of mutual conditioning. The concept of Christian love is one that challenges us to “love your enemies,” or to “love without thought of return”. It is a love that flows out to others in the form of compassion, kindness, tenderness and self-giving. Merton was clearly aware of the power of contemplation for humankind because those who have experienced God in contemplation are willing to leave God within to meet Him in others.

Merton invites us to see Jesus in our neighbor; we can realize His personal love only through “the eyes” of contemplation. Merton affirms that the Christians’ love should come from their faith. Through faith, they see and touch Christ in their brothers. Merton writes:

It is the needle by which we draw the thread of charity through our neighbor’s soul and our own soul and sew ourselves together in one Christ. Our faith is given us not to see whether or not our neighbor is Christ, but to recognize Christ in him and to help our love make both him and ourselves more fully Christ. (DQ, p. 125)

Through the life of contemplation, Merton realized that we love and serve others because we see Jesus in others. It means that we enter deeply into the minds and hearts of others; that we truly understand their problems, needs and troubles as well as their joys, so that we share everything with them. Therefore, love is the motive power that brought all things into being and sustains our existence through

time. Love is the supreme experience we are able to attain.

Merton took responsibility not only for his perfection, but also he brought other souls to God. As Rahner affirms:

The original relation to God is the love of neighbor... There is no love for God that is not, in itself, already a love for neighbor; and love for God only comes to its own identity through its fulfillment in a love for neighbor. (1992, pp. 134-136)

In Merton's view, a relationship with God is vertical and relationship with others is horizontal. The extent of man's relationship with God reflects the same relationship for others. In other words, the more love we have for God, the more love we have for others. As the diagram below shows that:



Indeed, the more we love God, the deeper our love of others becomes, and the more love of others grows. Therefore, it is a duty for us to increase our love for others, as Aquinas remarks:

Hence it is clear that the act by which we love God, and by which we love our neighbor is specifically the same. Consequently the habit of charity extends not only to the love of God, but also to the love of our neighbor. (1952, p. 501)

Love for others should actually grow through love for Jesus. It is only in a loving relationship with Jesus that we conceive the possibilities of love for others.

God is to be loved as the supreme Good and source of happiness, and the neighbor is loved as sharing in the happiness we receive

from God. We are to love God more than we love ourselves because God is the source of our very nature and of the grace by which we participate in the highest Good. (Ibid, II-II, 26, 3)

Merton's contemplation helps a Christian go to the heart of what God has revealed of himself to humanity. It becomes clear that God is love. It is the affirmation that the apostle John makes at the culmination point of revelation, throughout which God had constantly demonstrated his love to humankind. As the first encyclical of Pope Benedict XVI *Deus Caritas Est* (*God Is Love*) says that "Love is the light – that can always illuminate a world grown dim and give us the courage needed to keep living and working. Love is possible, and we are able to practice it because we are created in the image of God" (No. 39). Clearly, with freedom, man can place himself in the state of gift in return and God's love of the world would be with the fullness that freedom makes possible. Man's free decisions are seen to share truly in God's love. Therefore, God is really waiting upon man's free decision. In short, freedom is the ability to commit ourselves, to dedicate ourselves completely to God.

#### 4.4 Contemplation is Universal

Did Merton advocate contemplation only for the Catholics or is contemplation universal and inclusive rather than particular and exclusive?

One of the intimate goals of contemplation is a Christians hope to transform him or herself in order to be like another Christ. The inner dynamic of contemplation leads naturally to the transformation of the whole human being. The purpose of contemplation is not the experience of attaining peace or joy, but to seek and live completely in union with God. In the state of contemplation our minds concentrate

only on God, we will touch at some deep emotional and spiritual level by God's own disarming spirit. We are drawn ever deeper into God. Our lives are transformed in God (Dear, 2001, p. 50).

Merton's writing on contemplation is not theological or systematic. Merton is a spiritual guide who is intent on pointing out the need for personal submission to a God who communicates himself in man's heart, the ground of his being. Therefore, Merton says that we will be not only transforming, but that we are being transformed. "The degree and intensity of our transformation depends precisely on our union with the Holy Spirit, on the purity of the image with us" (NMI, p. 159). Contemplation brings man beyond selfishness and attachment to a place where our true and natural selves find transformation and perfection. Frederic Joseph Kelly studied Merton's writing, and then he writes that:

Contemplation helped him to transform his vision of the world, and enabled him to see all men and the history of all mankind, past and present, in the light of God. No human relationships were excluded by principle from his prayerful concern for human unity. He was convinced that a universal compassion for all mankind was one of the true fruits of contemplative prayer. (1974, p. 264)

Contemplation is beyond self-reflection but complete self-emptiness. For Merton, therefore, contemplation is the way to reach union with God. But how can man become like Christ? In contemplation, Merton's experiences originated from the totally new kind of awareness of his true identity when he lost himself in God. To attain the state of being fully united and be transformed in Christ, man needs to empty himself of attachment, just as a glass should be empty in order to contain water. Merton said that true emptiness is not a static state, but rather a dynamic emptying of everything, including oneself. As a consequence, it will no longer be us who live, but



Christ will begin to live in us. In this state of contemplation, the human soul is so close to God that it is transformed into the being of God. We will experience what it means to be free from ourselves, from our limitations, from all the things of ours.

Similarly, Theravada Buddhism sees *nirvana* as a transcendent state initially experienced in life, and then finally passed into at death. In order to attain it, a person becomes an arahant, that is one who has had all possibility of attachment and delusion destroyed. He or she thus has a radically transformed nature with profound insight and coming to fully embody the qualities of the Dhamma. Dasgupta, a Hindu scholar, points out that contemplation is the experience of unity with God and then by its own inner movement passes for its own realization into the various other modes of relationship through which ordinary human love expresses itself (1992, p. 121).

However, Merton considers contemplation to be fundamental to human beings, in order to have relationship with the Divine, where they find the meaning of peace and happiness. Through their own traditions and practices, people of all faiths can attain union with the Divine, even though their ways of attaining are different, their end is more or less the same. As the Muslim Sufi poet Rumi writes about the different religious traditions: "As the lamps are many but the light is the same. It comes from beyond" (Banani, 1994, p. 166). Thus, contemplation is universal and open to all human beings.

#### **4.5 The Specific Contribution of Merton's Contemplation**

To be a Christian is to bring God's love into society. This is a mandate received from Jesus: "Love one another as I have loved you" (Jn 13:34). Jesus came to live among us, to show us how to love others. Therefore, it is essential to continue

the search for the presence of God in others. For this reason, contemplation is not only for the monks and nuns, but also for people from all walks of life, because all are called to a deep interior life, and to pass the fruits of contemplation to others. How can we share the presence of God with others, unless we first let Him live within us?

Merton lived almost twenty years in the monastery; however, he became involved in social problems of violence and war. Still, Merton's challenge is that if we believe in peace within, then we must commit ourselves to bringing peace to the whole humanity. Merton was convinced that as a member of society, he should also be responsible in contributing to the making of a good society. David W. Givney quotes Merton who said, "I feel myself involved in the same problems and I need to work out the problems of the world with other men because they are also my problems" (1983, p. 4).

There are different ways of sharing the fruits of contemplation with others. Although contemplative life may appear to be separated from society, Merton still argued that those contemplatives are involved in the affairs of society through their contemplative prayer. On the other hand, Merton brings the fruits of contemplation through his writings and to have direct personal contact with religious leaders. An analysis of Merton's writings reveals that his secular concern had its roots in his experience of contemplative life.

According to Merton, social concern of a contemplative life must spring from the fruit of contemplation. All the actions that we do outside of contemplation should reflect our interior life with God. Merton writes that "Try to make all your activities bear fruit in the same emptiness and silence and detachment you have found in contemplation" (NSC, p. 192). Through their sacrifices for God, human beings find

greatest freedom from the knowledge that God's work is materialized via their lives. Moreover, Merton emphasizes that faith, hope and love must be present in action in the validity and significance of human choice and decision.

The fruit of contemplation is found in his writings, which strongly influenced the civil rights in USA. His later writings focused on controversial issues like social problems and Christian responsibility: racial discrimination, violence, nuclear war, and economic injustice. Merton was interested in social issues (racial justice and world peace) while he was a student at Cambridge (1933-1934) and Columbia University (1935-1939). Merton had strong desires to humanize society. He sought to find ways of remaining where he was, while at the same time reaching out in loving concern to a troubled world.

Therefore, human activities showing responsibility and concern for society spring from the fruit of God's love which stimulates human actions for the good of society. In fact, contemplation is the way to deepen one's spirituality. Indeed, human society benefits much from those who have the gift of contemplation.

#### **4.5.1 Merton's Understanding of Peace**

In the Scriptures, the term "peace" means God effects forgiveness, reconciliation, and union. The Scriptures reflect many varied historical situations, all different from our own social and political arenas. The Scriptures, which speak primarily of God's intervention in history, contain no specific treatise on peace (Komonchak, 1991, pp. 748-749).

Pope John XXIII in his encyclical *Pacem in Terris (Peace on Earth)*, in 1963 identified the essential conditions for peace in four pillars, which are the requirements of the human spirit: truth, justice, love and freedom. According to the teachings of the Catholic Church “A true peace, which is always more than the absence of war, flourishes in a social order which is founded on truth, built on justice, enlivened by love and refined in freedom” (No, 37). This document inspired Merton’s quest for true peace. The Catholic social teaching has emphasized authentic development and true peace which promotes the good of every human being, and society as a whole. Through this authentic development a solid foundation of true peace can be constructed.

When Merton mentions peace, he is unable to ignore speaking out on non-violence. For him non-violence means commitment to the liberation of the oppressed, but it must include the liberation of the oppressor as well. “The key to non-violence is the willingness of the non-violent resister to suffer a certain amount of accidental evil in order to bring about a change of mind in the oppressor” (FV, pp. 27-28).

Merton points out that the cause of violence is sin. In other words, evil begins in the human heart, and to remove the danger of war, we need to remove the spirit of aggression, egoism from which war arises, and we need to reconstruct a conscience. Through sin we consciously move away from God; however, God still moves closer to us and invites us to embrace non-violence. The Christians, therefore, are redeemed from this sin of violence and shown a way out of their sinful condition; into the new creation of God’s peace. Merton affirms that the religious basis of the Christians’ non-violence is the concept of the Redeemer Christ. Man participated in

this redemption with his obedience to living as God's creatures. Thus, man helps transform others, and allows himself to be transformed by and with others, in Christ (FV, p. 17).

However, some believers may claim he is using force or violence to defend the rights of God; therefore, he may say, he acts in God's name. Also, he allows himself to destroy or to kill in God's name. Hence, religious feeling becomes only a weapon in the soul of the believer, instead of being a factor of reconciliation and principle of mutual understanding and forgiveness. Pope John Paul II journeyed to Ireland in 1979 and said:

Violence is a crime against humanity, for it destroys the very fabric of society...To all of you who are listening I say: Do not believe in violence; do not support violence. It is not the Christian way. It is not the way of the Catholic Church. Believe in peace and forgiveness and love; for they are of Christ. (1979, pp. 273-74)

#### **4.5.2 Merton's Concern for Peace**

How can contemplation contribute to peace in the world? Does contemplation necessarily lead to peace?

A Christian's duty is to contribute to human dignity and especially world peace. Peace is not a static concept or an abstract idea. Moreover, Merton as an authentic Christian felt that we need to be responsible members of society in order to bring peace to men's souls. The writings of Merton on non-violence and peace have impacted and influenced the American Catholics to work for peace, and they are active today. There are several Merton Societies in various countries as well as an International Merton Society that regularly study his thoughts, applying his spirituality and perpetuating his memory. The Merton Annual has so far published 14



volumes of articles and reviews, devoting to his thoughts, his social involvement and his spiritual legacy. However, all action for peace springs from the inner experience of contemplation.

From 1960 on, Merton continued to speak out against racism, and the injustices that produce violence and war. Merton supported the civil rights movement, spoke against the cold war, nuclear weapons, and the Vietnam War. Merton helped the Christians to understand the peace issues. In this thesis, I shall focus only on how Merton's life and his writings of contemplation contributed to peace.

In 1962, Merton's stand on social issues is clearly seen from his article *Nuclear War and Christian Responsibility*, in which he criticized the American Catholics for passively accepting the H-bomb<sup>24</sup> as a weapon of defense.

These changes in him, Merton insisted, were owed to his experience of solitude and faithfulness to the demands of the contemplative life. That had taught him openness, detachment, and compassion. It enabled him to enter into the experience of others different from himself, because Merton's sense of his own identity was fashioned and established through contemplation. (Malits, 1977, p. 289)

From 1950 to 1965, Merton's writings contained numerous inspirations for the Christians to understand their role in contributing to the world peace. Merton's first writing on peace was the article *The Root of War is Fear* (1961), published by Dorothy Day<sup>25</sup>, the founder of the Catholic Worker Movement. This article gave high visibility to Merton's strong anti-war stance. He became the target of considerable

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<sup>24</sup> The US has produced the biggest ever man-made explosions so far in the Pacific archipelago of Bikini, part of the Marshall Islands. It is believed the hydrogen bomb was up to 1,000 times more powerful than the atomic bomb that destroyed Hiroshima (<http://news.bbc.co.uk>).

<sup>25</sup> Dorothy Day (1897-1980) an American peace activist, combining a radical position on social issues with a conservative and unquestioning theology of Church and sacraments (Shannon, 1985, p. 135).

criticism in the Catholic press. Merton wrote many letters to spiritual leaders, politicians and academics. The letters concern compassion, prayer, contemplation, and its relationship to social issues. Merton's letters acted as a spiritual guide to James H. Forest<sup>26</sup> and others in launching the Catholic Peace Fellowship. Forest cited Penn Erie's *Thomas Merton's Struggle with Peacemaking, 1985*: "It is my intention to make my entire life a rejection of, a protest against the crimes and injustices of war and political tyranny which threaten to destroy the whole race of humanity and the world" (Forest, 1992, p. 27).

To be a Christian peacemaker today is to live in the midst of the paradoxes that characterized the life of Jesus. Merton's life was the witness of a peacemaker by remaining in the monastery rather than by going out to live a life of an activist. Merton tried living his contemplative life as a social sign of God. Merton said that the Christians should learn from Gandhi how his acts of charity and social concern grew out of an inner strength, which he felt could best be found in contemplation (1971, p. 199). His social thought has emphasized the social dimension of contemplation and Christian spirituality of peace.

#### 4.5.3 The Relation between Contemplation and Peace

First of all, Merton emphasized that true peace springs from the interior life of Christ. Merton points out that Christ brings peace to the heart of man and to the world through His resurrection. As Merton quoted the Scripture that "we knew that Christ

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<sup>26</sup> Forest was much involved in the Catholic peace movement and was several times imprisoned for his peace activities. In 1973 he became editor of Fellowship, a publication of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), whose headquarters are at Nyack, New York. He has written several books on Merton (Shannon, 2002, p. 158).

came into this world as the Prince of Peace. We know that Christ Himself is our peace” (Eph 2:14). “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you,” (Jn 14:27). “Peace be with you!” (Ibid, 20:19). Merton was convinced that peace is possible when there is a “willingness to renounce our petty selves and find our true selves beyond ourselves in others and above all in Christ” (MJ, p.110). Therefore, Jesus Christ is the core of the contemplation and source of peace. “Peace” is a gift of Jesus’ life which He shares with us.

Inner peace is possible for those who have given themselves unconditionally to Christ. This inner peace comes from intimate communion with God and illumined by the Christ. As Komonchak concludes,

Peace is both gift and task, requiring the work of human hands and minds and hearts. Short of the fullness of the reign of God, the disciples of Jesus Christ, on pilgrimage in the modern world, work toward shaping a peaceful world which claims justice as its foundation. (1991, p. 753)

Merton was firmly convinced that Contemplation is the source of strength for living in peace. In daily contemplation, can we turn to the God of peace, grow in the spirit of nonviolence, and become God’s instruments of peace. The Christians should be reconcilable in order to prevent wars and violence. Merton responded to Pope John XXIII’s *The Christmas Message 1958* with “however, the Christian struggle for peace depends first of all upon the response of man to God’s call to the service of His merciful designs” (TMP, p. 39). Merton responded to the teachings of the Church with his commitment and sacrifice. Merton realized that “peace demands the most heroic labor and the most difficult sacrifice. It demands greater heroism than war. It demands greater fidelity to the truth and a much more perfect purity of conscience” (PP, p. 106).

According to Merton, it is a task for the Christians to let the seed of peace grow from the fruit of contemplation, and then share this peace with society and the world. The Christians know that there is a radically sound possibility in every man, and they believe that grace and love always have the power to bring out possibilities for peace at the most unexpected moments. They must become active in every possible way, mobilizing all their resources for contributing peace to the world. Therefore, a Christian “is one who is committed to the unity of the human race, to the search for a common ground that transcends division even as it respects legitimate differences” (Shannon, 2002, p. 330).

The great religious men of different religions such as Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Thich Nhat Hanh are respected because of their deep commitment to peace and non-violence. Clearly, Merton stands for justice and peace from the perspective of non-violence that is rooted in contemplation. Marabai Bush, Director of the Center on Contemplative Mind in Society cites Dalai Lama’s words: “When we have inner peace, we can be at peace with those around us. When our community is in a state of peace, it can share that peace with neighboring communities, and so on” (www.Kosmosjournal.org).

The basic foundation of contemplation supports people to live in harmony, enjoying peace and justice. Through our love, contemplation will bring the greatest happiness and peace to the world because the need for love lies at the very foundation of human existence. In all religions there seems to be common criteria expressed as the “Golden Rule”. However, the most important thing is for people to try to live or practice their religion in their daily life. Religion plays such an important role in human affairs. Contemplation generates a deeper sense of compassion, reciprocity

and mutuality that spreads to others and society. This inner peace is rediscovered through contemplation and shared with society and the world. Indeed, peace is the cultivation of understanding, insight, and compassion and combined with action. The responsibility to foster peace is not limited to governments, but must also start within each human heart.

Merton quotes Origen that “No longer do we take the sword against any nations nor do we learn war any more since we have become the sons of peace through Jesus...” (SDM, pp. 135-1). Peace springs from the depth within us and from the Spirit of God working in us. Merton’s commitment to society has promoted peace not just by his intellectual writings but from his sacrifice in living a life of contemplation. Thus, Merton’s activity for peace is rooted in a spirituality nourished by contemplation. Merton wrote a letter to Charles S. Thomas in 1962:

Our first task is to liberate ourselves from the assumptions and prejudices which vitiate our thinking on these fundamental points, and we must help other men to do the same. This involves clear thinking, lucid speech, but very positive social action. And since we believe that the only really effective means are non-violent, we must learn non-violence and practice it. This involves in its turn a deep spiritual purification necessary to begin this task which He has willed for us. May we go forward in our poverty to accomplish this task insofar as may be given us by His Spirit. (HGL, p.575)

We witness every day fresh scenes of violence, confrontation and crisis in many parts of the world. We cannot avoid the results of violence which may affect us either directly or indirectly. This situation may pose a question “Can those who do not have experience in contemplation contribute to peace?”. In my view, to contribute peace to the world is not dependent on only contemplative people, but on each person. Man as a social animal must live with others because human beings are



interdependent. It is impossible to isolate oneself and ignore others. First, we have to live in harmony with our family, and then with our neighbors and other members of society. To be able to do so we need to treat them as equal regardless of differences in culture, race, religion or political conviction. Once we are able to live in harmony with others there would be no conflicts and eventually no violence. The respect and acceptance of the diverse values of others will result in a deepening of good will. The acceptance and even the taking over of value from other's good will should mean enrichment and deepening of one's own faith. We should respect one another as members of the one human family. Thus, mutual respect and understanding open a forum for exchange and collaboration with others for the good of humanity.

We should also learn to discover how we could work together to resolve conflict and promote common values. We can live and work together as a communion of communities to achieve the goal: a world of peace. Therefore, we should accept others as valuable human persons and join with them for peace and for a better world. Man has many dimensions and each dimension deserves reasonable care and attention. However, man in the modern age has sadly neglected his spiritual dimension and the resultant problems are evident in the widespread ethnic and religious conflicts, racism, violence, environmental degradation, etc.

In the life of each one who tries to live a deeper spiritual life there should be some time habitually set aside for contemplation through which one refreshes and deepens one's personal intimacy with God. Contemplation plays a vital role in fostering gestures of peace and in consolidating conditions for peace. It exercises this role all the more effectively if it concentrates on what is appropriate for it. Man is called to foster universal brotherhood and to spread a culture of peace by living a

deeper spiritual life. I am aware this is easier said than done. The situation in the modern world is so complex that there are no easy solutions. Nevertheless, Merton offers us a ray of hope for peace through contemplation.

#### 4.6 Summary

The Christians have to show the world that they follow Christ by love. Merton's contemplation was rooted in Jesus' teaching of love. He expressed his love of Christ by seeking and living all situations in his life in Christ. Merton was convinced that it is God's love that makes our love possible. In deed, man's capacity to achieve this communion with God lies in his surrendering himself to God's love, in losing himself in God. He desired to live in total contemplation and at the same time intended to have more responsibility for others. For Merton, contemplation enables one to see Christ in others and to respond to their needs in loving concern and mercy. Thus, a new dimension is added to their Christian life; they live not only for themselves, but also for Christ in others.

Merton's concern for social problems is crucial to the development of his contemplative life. In his view, by assuming full responsibility for the world the Christians must love and serve their neighbor; then they can be said to really love God. Merton realized that love for oneself and others is possible only in God, because only God can forgive, heal, and transform the sinful human being. Through contemplation, therefore, the Christians can be an instrument of God to bring His presence, love, peace and healing to society.

Although Merton was clearly aware of the power of contemplation for social action, he refused to reduce contemplation to merely a means to this action. Again

Merton affirms that:

True contemplation is inseparable from life and from the dynamism of life - which includes work, creation, production, fruitfulness, and above all love. Contemplation is not to be thought of as a separate department of life, cut off from all man's other interests and superseding them. It is the very fullness of a fully integrated life. It is the crown of life and of all life's activities. (R, p. 400)



## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### 5.1 Conclusion

It is difficult to analyze and evaluate Merton's writings, not because of the numerous articles and books he wrote but because of the unsystematic way of his writings which include poetry, essays, letters and diaries. His later writings were more and more on contemplation and social issues illustrating his commitment and concern for the human condition and human development. However, it may be worthwhile to summarize his writings on the experience of contemplation in the Christian tradition with four characteristics:

1. Contemplation is union between God and man

Merton reminds us that God is the first to invite man to participate in an intimate relationship with Him. The Christians are called to be one in God as the Father and the Son are one (Jn 17:21). Contemplation attains its perfection in union with God, whereby man immerses himself in God. Certain things may seem impossible, but God's grace makes the state of contemplation possible. Contemplation is not merely an effort of the human being only, but above all it is a grace from God. This grace is manifest in faith, hope and love. Therefore, contemplation is God's call to man to union with Himself.

On the other hand, Man responds freely with consciousness to this grace. Man needs to let his mind and heart free and open in order to respond and live fully according to His will. By continued living in daily life of detachment, silence and solitude, man is transformed to be in total union with the intimate life of God.

Contemplation starts with the “desire” of God. Man is called to concentrate and focus only on God. Merton explains that in contemplation we perceive God not as subject and object, but we embrace God within our being and our own life. Indeed, the important thing is not to live for contemplation but to live for God.

## 2. Jesus Christ is the core of contemplation

Jesus’ life in this world was based on his relationship with the Father. God has revealed himself to men in Christ but He has revealed Himself first of all as love. In Jesus, God reveals his presence in the world through Jesus. This presence achieved a union between God and man. For Merton, Christ is the heart of his contemplation. Therefore, it is Merton’s direct inner experience of union with God through Jesus Christ. In contemplation God is not a concept but the real person, as he can listen, touch and love.

## 3. Contemplation is personal experience of love

Contemplative spirituality in the past tended to be a spirituality of doing, aimed at good behavior to please God. In contrast, Merton’s contemplative spirituality is a spirituality of being, aimed at awareness of oneness with God. The experience of contemplation is the experience of God’s life and His presence within oneself not as object but as the transcendent source of one’s self. Contemplation, therefore, is rooted in personal experience, which is attuned to the reality of “self” nourished with the Spirit of God.

In Christianity, the relation to God starts in love and is fulfilled in unconditional love. It is an “I”-“You” relationship. Merton’s contemplation is directed toward love of God and love of neighbor with the latter being the only



genuine sign of the presence of the love of God. Just as Christianity is a religion of love, Merton's contemplation is the path of love.

#### 4. Engaging in Contemplation for Society

Merton's monkhood should be a sign of compassion, a witness to inner peace, which is the fruit of contemplation and communion with God. In fact, Merton gives a positive witness to the presence of Christ in the world. He helped the Christians to understand some social issues in the modern world. Merton uses the expression "the world" to signify not the cosmos but those people who are self-seeking, ego-centered, and who have rejected God's love. For Merton, the Christians should be aware that their involvement in society is a responsibility because God had called them to be His instruments. The Christians require a personal relationship with Jesus who is manifest in social awareness and concern. Clearly, Merton's experience of contemplation shifts the blame for what is wrong in the world away from God and humanity.

Contemplation is an activity of all our powers: the mind, the will and the heart. In other words, contemplation means having an experience of God, real though obscure, in all dimensions of human life. It is the capacity of love to encounter Christ and experience Him. Contemplation creates inner peace within us and is the result of love. Through the way of contemplation of love, Merton became involved in efforts for compassion and peace. Through the process of contemplation, Merton was concerned and committed to the shaping of the Catholic peace movement.

## 5.2 Recommendation for Further Studies

The fruit of contemplation is inner peace which will help religions come together to learn about each other's beliefs and shared values, and to discover the possibility of living and working together to build societies of compassion and peace. Such encounters seek to instill a spirit of mutual respect and genuine understanding of one another that will make religions a force for good. We recognize that in the interrelated context of the contemporary world, cooperation is no longer an option but a necessity. Religion will prosper in this century only to the extent that we can maintain a sense of community among people of different faiths who work together as a human family to achieve peace in the world.

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, well-known for his broad-mindedness and pluralistic view of religion and who encouraged inter-religious dialogues, states that "understanding best one's own religion, understanding deeply the religion of each other and mutual collaboration will save humanity from all kinds of materialism" (Buddhadasa, 1967, p. 3). Merton's views of contemplation are relevant to inter-religious dialogue, and quite useful in the task of building a civilization of peace and compassion. Merton had begun applying the fruits of contemplation, such as the reality of emptiness, to his dialogues with other religions.

In God "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). God is present in the dynamism of man's life and activity. Today, we are searching for a living God of personal relationship. Merton's contemplation offers man a living God for today and tomorrow. The spirituality growth path has only begun. I believe that Merton's contemplation could be a great contribution to individuals and society. His spirituality of contemplation may not change the world entirely but at least I hope that his strong

conviction in living a contemplative life and its resultant social dimension will serve as an impetus to make this planet a world of peace, love and universal brotherhood.



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