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TRUE SELF IS NO SELF? A KENOTIC READING OF  
THICH NHAT HANH'S "PLEASE CALL ME BY MY TRUE NAMES"  
THROUGH THOMAS MERTON'S UNDERSTANDING OF ZEN

BY

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## **Abstract**

This thesis intends to be an interdisciplinary study to integrate missional, spiritual, and theological reflection for a kenotic approach to interreligious dialogue. The thesis begins with attending to the sapiential dimension of Christian theology as the cradle of a kenotic identity from which hospitality for religious others are fostered. On the basis of exploring Thomas Merton's Sophia Christology, the second part of the thesis turns to examine the influence of Zen on Merton's view of self and questions related to the comparability between kenosis in Christianity and *sunyata* in Buddhism. As a praxis of interreligious dialogue, the last chapter of the thesis offers a comparative reading between Merton's prose poem "Hagia Sophia" and the poem "Please call me by my true names" by Thich Nhat Hanh. By introducing the Buddhist notion of interbeing, the thesis hopes to show how the interreligious dialogue may contribute to the expression of an authentic self-identity that reflects the concerns of the feminist perspective and is culturally competent in the more collectivistic Asia.

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## **Introduction: The gift of strangers on pilgrimage**

Interreligious dialogue<sup>1</sup> is not an option but a vital necessity in today's globalized and pluralistic world, where people of different religions have regular and unavoidable contact. Hans Kung states, "There will be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions and no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions."<sup>2</sup> Leslie Newbigin confirms that a true understanding of the gospel itself ought to enable Christians to retain integrity of their faith even as they enter into a genuine dialogue with others who do not have the same commitment.<sup>3</sup> Interreligious dialogue concerns the fundamental issue of Christian identity in relation to religious others. The church in dialogue participates in the *missio Dei* that defines its essence, although in practice interreligious dialogue and evangelism are not without tension.<sup>4</sup>

The first and foremost challenge of the Christian practice of interreligious dialogue is the quest of a theology that differs from the typology for exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism; instead of imposing our conceptual understandings of soteriology onto non-Christians, we come to engage with other religious traditions on their own terms. According to David Bosch, the

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<sup>1</sup> Interreligious dialogue refers to the intentional constructive engagement between religious traditions, which might be distinguished from the traditional apologetics in motives. The outset of the modern interreligious dialogue movement is marked by the 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago. The development subsequent to the parliament, according to Leonard Swidler, is largely attributed to the two intra-Christian ecumenical movements—1910 in Edinburgh and 1927 in Lausanne—initiated by Protestant leaders. The Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church (1962–65) took an unprecedented step to pay serious attention to interreligious relations and massive Muslim involvement on the global level begins in 2007. With reference to a joint document of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples and the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue published in 1991, four ways of dialogue are identified: dialogue of theological exchange, dialogue of religious experience, dialogue of action, and dialogue of life. Catherine Cornille, "Introduction," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*, ed. Catherine Cornille (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), xii-xvii. And Leonard Swidler, "The History of Inter-Religious Dialogue," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*, ed. Catherine Cornille (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 3-9.

<sup>2</sup> Hans Kung, "The World's Religions: Common Ethical Values," (speech, at the opening of the Exhibit on the World's Religions at Santa Clara University, March 31, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Leslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub, 1986), 139.

<sup>4</sup> John D. Dadosky raises questions about interreligious dialogue related to evangelism: "When does the Church evangelize, when does it dialogue with others and how does one avoid dialogue becoming simply a veiled form of evangelization, and how does one remain faithful to the evangelical mission of the church in the dialogue?" And yet, mission is not merely about the *bene esse* of the church, but also about its *esse*: the church is always bearing witness while engaging in interreligious dialogue. John D. Dadosky, "Merton's Dialogue with Zen: Pioneering or Passé?" *Fu Jen International Religious Studies* Vol. 2 No. 1 (N. Summer 2008): 70. And Leslie Newbigin, *The Household of God*, reissue edition (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2008), 143.

standard threefold paradigm concerning the relations of other religious traditions to Christianity is confined to the eschatological soteriological framework.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the discussion concentrates on the question: Is Jesus the only way to salvation? Or do other religions also “save”? Bosch repudiates that religion is all about an assurance of individual salvation after death, “particularly if one adds that all people have to do to attain it, is to subscribe to a set system of dogmas, rites, and institutions.”<sup>6</sup> Neither should this assurance of individual salvation after death be the focal point of interreligious dialogue. The superior status of the church is reinforced by overly emphasizing its institutional role in mediating salvation. Other religious traditions are only being judged from their possible salvific values in directing people toward the church where they might get access to salvation proper.<sup>7</sup>

At stake here is not simply the question of the *missio ecclesiae* proselytizing the religious or non-religious others but, much more deeply, the misrepresentation of a Christology that is made subservient to soteriology while undermining its cosmic dimension. *Missio Dei* attends to the vision of *shalom* - wholeness and well-being in every way. At its heart, *missio Dei* is the ushering in of the kingdom of God rather than the enlargement of the church. The presence and activity of God are to be recognized throughout all created order including the secular world, the religious traditions outside the church, and all of the so-called non-Christian realms, if such division even exists.<sup>8</sup> The original intent of God, who placed humanity in the garden of Eden, the first sanctuary

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<sup>5</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, twentieth anniversary ed., American Society of Missiology Series, No. 16 (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2011), chap 12, iBooks.

<sup>6</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, chap 12, iBooks.

<sup>7</sup> Bosch notices that throughout its history, the Christian missionary movement of the church at times has been motivated by the desire to somehow mediate a narrowly-defined salvation: “It refers solely to something which happens to an individual after death and suggests that people join a specific religion in order to be guaranteed this salvation, that religions expand geographically and numerically in order to ensure such salvation to ever greater numbers of people.” He adds, “Such an ahistorical and otherworldly perception of salvation is spurious, particularly if one adds that all people have to do to attain it, is to subscribe to a set system of dogmas, rites, and institutions.” Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, chap 12, iBooks.

<sup>8</sup> The book of Genesis presents to us a God of all who created the heavens and the earth (v. 1). In addition, it is believed that the author of Gen 1 has no interest in giving a competing account of creation against the other ancient Near East cosmogonies because “there can be no victory enthronement motif [when] God has not become sovereign; he has

of God,<sup>9</sup> is divine hospitality. Reconciliation of the divine-human relationship after the Fall can be interpreted as a homecoming: the parallel drawn between Jesus's saying in Jn 14:1-3 and the image of the Israelite household, "*bet ab*" (father's house), suggests that the goal of redemption is a reincorporation into the house of the heavenly Father.<sup>10</sup> Ever since Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection, God's dwelling on earth is the people of God as the body of Christ.<sup>11</sup> Since the *kenosis* of Christ is a gesture of power, for "we are the body of Christ only as we give Christ away,"<sup>12</sup> the Church is only the Church if it exists for others. On the one hand, divine hospitality is witnessed and extended to all humanity through the people of God who are called to participate in the *missio Dei*; on the other hand, Amos Yong inquires the implications of the good Samaritan being portrayed as the one who embodied divine hospitality, despite the fact that the image of the Samaritan also represented religious others to the Jews of the first century.<sup>13</sup> The practice of hospitality in interreligious dialogue implies that both "guest and host can reveal their most precious gifts and bring new life to each other;" in fact, as Henri Nouwen believes, "the distinction between host and guest proves to be artificial."<sup>14</sup>

Chapter 1 of the thesis attends to the sapiential dimension of Christian theology as the cradle of a kenotic identity from which hospitality for religious others are fostered. With reference to wisdom theology and the feminist understanding of kenosis, Thomas Merton's Sophia Christology will be illustrated. On this basis, chapter 2 turns to examine the influence of Zen on Thomas Merton's view of self; the discussion brings forth the question related to the comparability

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simply never been less than sovereign." Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 32, 36.

<sup>9</sup> Susan Maxwell Booth, *The Tabernacling Presence of God: Mission and Gospel Witness* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 14.

<sup>10</sup> Sandra L. Richter, *The Epic of Eden: A Christian Entry into the Old Testament* (Downers: IVP Academic, 2008), 39.

<sup>11</sup> Booth, *The Tabernacling Presence of God*, 107.

<sup>12</sup> Anna Mercedes, *Power for: Feminism and Christ's Self-Giving* (London: Continuum International Pub, 2011), 148.

<sup>13</sup> In reference to the parable of the good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37). Amos Yong, *Hospitality and the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor. Faith Meets Faith Series* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2008), 82-83.

<sup>14</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Show Me the Way: Readings for Each Day of Lent* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), Kindle.

between kenosis in Christianity and *sunyata* in Buddhism.<sup>15</sup> As a praxis of interreligious dialogue, chapter 3 offers a comparative reading between Merton's prose poem "Hagia Sophia" and the poem "Please call me by my true names" by the prominent Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh.<sup>16</sup> The Buddhist notion of interbeing is introduced to shed light on the quest of a self-identity, for an expression that is culturally competent in the more collectivistic Asia.

The kenotic theme in this thesis is more than a topic of study but also informs its methodology. From the notion of kenosis, the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo develops the metaphysical understanding called *verwindung* (weak thought).<sup>17</sup> *Verwindung* refrains from absolute propositional truth or authoritarian metaphysical structures; Vattimo believes that only by deconstructing the "objective truth" of God can the "redemptive meaning of the Christian message" can be grasped. Here *verwindung* coincides with the apophatic inclination of Merton, who claims that "the way to contemplation is the way of emptiness and night."<sup>18</sup> Merton's apophatic spirituality is deepened with the exposure to Zen. In a similar way, in Zen Buddhism "clinging to views can prevent us from arriving at a deeper, more profound understanding of reality. Buddhism urges us to transcend even our own knowledge if we wish to advance on the Path of

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<sup>15</sup> The contemporary Buddhist-Christian dialogue finds its origins in the establishment of the Kyoto school founded by Nishida Kitaro in the early twentieth century. Later, between 1980s and 1990s, Masao Abe and John Cobb began a series of dialogues (mainly conceptual exchanges) that came to include a large circle of Buddhist and Christian scholars, resulting in some significant publications focusing on the Buddhist idea of *sunyata* and the Christian notion of *kenosis*. Paul O. Ingram, "Christian-Buddhist Dialogue," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*, ed. Catherine Cornille (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 377-379. And Charles B. Jones, "Emptiness, Kenosis, History, and Dialogue: The Christian Response to Masao Abe's Notion of Dynamic Sunyata in the Early Years of the Abe-Cobb Buddhist-Christian Dialogue," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 24, no. 1 (2004): 117-133.

<sup>16</sup> Thich is the family name adopted by most Vietnamese Buddhist monks and nuns as it is the first syllable for *Shakyamuni* in the Vietnamese language; while Thich is not a title, it is more than a surname. Nhat is one, implying oneness, and Hanh means action. Together they express Thich Nhat Hanh's aspiration to the engaged Buddhism. Thich Nhat Hanh is also referred by many as Thay, which is the title for teacher. This thesis will address Thich Nhat Hanh by his full name. Chan Kong, "Foreword to the Fourth Edition," in Thich Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2020), iBook.

<sup>17</sup> *Verwindung* is a German term originally coined by Martin Heidegger. Gianni Vattimo, who is deeply influenced by Heidegger, uses the term in developing his philosophy of the strength of weakness. Yet, Vattimo's use of *kenosis* is sometimes subject to criticism as an unorthodox interpretation. Gianni Vattimo, *Crederci di credere*. Milano: Garzanti. Engl.: *Belief* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996/1999), 87-88. Cf. Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, "Kenosis, Dynamic Sunyata and Weak Thought: Abe Masao and Gianni Vattimo," *Asian Philosophy*, no. 25 (2015): 358-383.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Merton, *Cistercian Contemplatives: A Guide to Trappist Life* (Trappist: Gethsemani Abbey, 1948), p. 55. Cf. John F. Teahan, "A Dark and Empty Way: Thomas Merton and the Apophatic Tradition." *The Journal of Religion* 58, no. 3 (1978): 266.

Awakening.”<sup>19</sup> After all, the Buddha compares his own teachings as a raft. Anyone who use the raft to cross the river is not supposed to cling to it after they arrive on the other shore.<sup>20</sup> The way of “knowing by unknowing” opens up what Sarah Coakley calls *théologie totale*, that is to reconceive the task of doing theology through contemplation and prayer. Knowing God is understood as a relational experience rather than the possession of static knowledge about God; *théologie totale*, which “continually risks destabilization and redirection” of systematic theological truth, is kenotic in nature.<sup>21</sup>

Kenosis as a theological method is particularly relevant to the practice of religious dialogue in the pluralistic context of a post-Christendom era. Too often, Christian particularity, with its historical baggage of crusading triumphalism and imperial aggression, is interpreted as a superiority over other religious traditions, which becomes a thorny issue in interreligious engagement.<sup>22</sup> Today the task of interreligious dialogue is essential for the churches in Asia, many of which were established as a result of nineteenth century missionary activities from Europe and North America. These churches are now releasing their theological dependency on Western ideology to reclaim their authority, articulating a theology of their own by tapping into their rich indigenous spiritual traditions.<sup>23</sup> *Verwindung* names a way of overcoming existing rigidity through twisting, distorting or healing, as opposed to the more straightforward *überwindung*,<sup>24</sup> where bitter memories of a colonial Christianity are entangled with colonial legacy and non-Christian beliefs

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<sup>19</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing: The 14 Mindfulness Trainings of Engaged Buddhism*, 4th ed. (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2020), “The First Mindfulness Training Openness,” iBook.

<sup>20</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Awakening of the Heart: Essential Buddhist Sutras and Commentaries* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2011), “The Raft is Not the Shore,” iBook.

<sup>21</sup> Sarah Coakley, “Recasting ‘systematic theology’: Gender, desire, and *théologie totale*,” in *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay “On the Trinity”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 48.

<sup>22</sup> For example, Thich Nhat Hanh was initially troubled by the Christianity that was used a vehicle of colonization in Vietnam and considered that “in such an atmosphere of discrimination and injustice against non-Christians [...] it was difficult for me to discover the beauty of Jesus’s teachings.” Cf. Robert Harlan King, *Thomas Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh: Engaged Spirituality in an Age of Globalization* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 7.

<sup>23</sup> Kwok, Pui-Lan, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 29-33, 47-50.

<sup>24</sup> Botz-Bornstein, “Kenosis, Dynamic Sunyata and Weak Thought,” 367.

are not only accepted as legitimate worldviews and religious practices but embedded in cultural values that shapes people's understanding of their self-identity. Merton visions the same hope to appropriate religious resources of local cultures while guarding against mindless borrowing: "I think we have now reached a stage of religious maturity at which it may be possible for someone to remain perfectly faithful to a Christian [...] and yet to learn in depth from, say, a Buddhist or Hindu discipline and experience."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Direction, 1975), 113.

## **Chapter One: A kenotic Sophia Christology as the theological framework for interreligious dialogue**

Christopher Pramuk rightly points out that, “what Christology requires today is a method and language that does not efface difference right out of the gate, but that is committed to listening to the other receptively, contemplatively.”<sup>26</sup> For Pramuk, the answer lies in the Sophia-inspired Christology that emerged in the last decade of Merton’s life, a Christology that cultivates a spirituality of contemplation in action that catalyzed his interreligious engagement, at the same time, kept Merton grounded in the Christian faith. The chapter proposes that a sapiential spirituality of finding God in all things, with its sensibilities to the wisdom woven in creation, its commitment towards truth and its relational way of knowing, has the potential to construct a Christ-centric worldview that comes not by being exclusive but instead leads to the forming of a kenotic identity that create space for others. Jesus Christ, the kenotic one, whose life is a manifestation of God’s generosity, vulnerability, and hospitality to what is not-God, the “other,” informs the Christian practice of interreligious dialogue. The first part of this chapter provides a brief overview of wisdom theology and the notion of kenosis and their relation to the practice of interreligious dialogue. Then we will turn to examine Merton’s Sophia Christology and an atonement theology of hospitality, followed by its implication to the practice of interreligious dialogue.

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<sup>26</sup> Christopher Pramuk, “Wisdom, Our Sister: Thomas Merton’s Reception of Russian Sophiology.” *Spiritus* 11, no. 2 (2011): 193.

## 1. An alternative perspective from sapiential and feminist theology

### a. A sapiential shift

Wisdom theology has the potential to provide a more inclusive point of contact between Christianity and other religions. In the biblical theology of wisdom,<sup>27</sup> Yahweh is often perceived as the Creator and the Giver of life (Prov 4:13) to everything that exists. God as the ground of all beings is the Mother who gives birth to all of creation and tenderly holds them in nurturing and sustaining care.<sup>28</sup> The generosity of God is revealed in her nonselective provision (Gen 1:29–30; Matt 5:45). Yahweh’s interests of care, then, include but transcend the covenant nation of Israel to address the needs of all created order and humanity. In fact, wisdom theology in the OT is always seen as complementary to covenant theology.<sup>29</sup> Prov 3:19 states that it was by wisdom that Yahweh founded the earth, and there is no area of created life to which wisdom does not apply. Careful observation and reflection can discover divine truth imbedded in creation; in other words, God can be met within and experienced in the world.

The appropriation of OT wisdom theology in the NT is often centered on Jesus Christ as the ultimate manifestation of God’s wisdom who becomes the ultimate source of the Christian’s wisdom (1 Cor 1:24, 30).<sup>30</sup> A parallel is drawn between Sophia of Prov 8 and the *Logos* of the Johannine prologue. The *logos* was already present at creation (“in the beginning”) as equal to

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<sup>27</sup> Traditionally, the five books in the OT – Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs are classified as wisdom literature, and sometimes also the book of Wisdom and Sirach.

<sup>28</sup> Dearborn Kerry, “The Crucified Christ as the Motherly God: The Theology of Julian of Norwich.” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55, no. 3 (August 2002): 288.

<sup>29</sup> R. Murphy argues that, unlike most of the rest of the OT, the theology of the Wisdom literature is centered on creation rather than redemption. It primarily describes God as the Creator. E. C. Lucas, “Wisdom Theology,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings*, IVP Bible Dictionary Series, 3, ed. Tremper Longman and Peter Enns (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), 903.

<sup>30</sup> Illustrations of Christ bearing divine wisdom are evidenced in: Matt 2:1, the account of the visit from the Gentile “wise men” (magoi); Lk 2:52 takes note of Jesus “[growing] in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men;” and those who heard his teaching were amazed (Mk 6:1-5). The Pauline Epistles make even more explicit links of Christ as the wisdom of God. For instance, the wisdom of Christian spirituality denotes the mysterious union of the Trinitarian God in Christ (Eph 1:3-14). Craig G. Bartholomew and Ryan O’Dowd, “Jesus, the Wisdom of God,” in *Old Testament Wisdom Literature: A Theological Introduction* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2011), 231-260.

God and as the one through whom “all things were made” (Jn 1:1-3). To identify Jesus as Sophia incarnated, the gospel of John draws from both ideas of *logos* in the ancient Greek philosophy and the personification of wisdom in Jewish literature, which exemplifies a way of reconciling the particularism of Israel to the Greco-Roman cosmopolitan culture.<sup>31</sup> The universal divine presence and the special revelation in Christ are both encapsulated in the image of God as Sophia. Bosch poses questions regarding this dynamic in interreligious dialogue: “How do we maintain the tension between being both missionary and dialogical? How do we combine faith in God as revealed uniquely in Jesus Christ with the confession that God has not left himself without a witness?”<sup>32</sup>

Wisdom theology honours mystery; in the face of endless knowability, we are all pilgrims on the journey of growing into truth—greater wisdom or the mystery of God. In comparison to something like a prophetic messenger formula—“thus says the Lord”—indicating a direct divine revelation of Yahweh’s words to the people of God, “in wisdom theology God’s people speak to one another regarding the challenges of living a faithful and fruitful life before God and others.”<sup>33</sup> That is to say wisdom can be obtained through dialogue. The wise man is viewed as one who has the courage to press beyond the easy answers to face the most difficult and painful questions with brutal honesty. Rather than a conformity of mind to truth-claims, what is emphasized here is the process of orienting towards truth.<sup>34</sup> In this sense, making space to accept the doubts and inquiries from religious others does not mean giving away the integrity of Christian faith.<sup>35</sup> For the Christian message to be relevant to its circumstance, theological formulation is always in the process of

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<sup>31</sup> Bartholomew and O’Dowd, “Jesus, the Wisdom of God,” 245-247.

<sup>32</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, chap 12, iBooks.

<sup>33</sup> John Kessler, *Old Testament Theology: Divine Call and Human Response* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2013), 463-464, 449.

<sup>34</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, chap 12, iBooks.

<sup>35</sup> In wisdom theology, proverbial sayings conveying the belief of life follow a rationally understandable principle: “God blesses the righteous but the way of the wicked shall perish” is in contrast with texts that take incomprehensible aspects of life seriously, expressed through the form of dialogue, disputations and reflections. John Kessler, *Old Testament Theology*, 463-464, 501-503.

being contextualized. As John Cobb notices, throughout the history of Christianity, integrating otherness into itself has always been a way of creative transformation for Christian theology.<sup>36</sup> Interreligious dialogue calls for a disposition on the part of the Christian to rethink the blessedness of receiving in a kerygmatic moment.

David Benner views that “the Christian wisdom tradition is not a set of beliefs to be embraced but a transformational path to be walked,” and “the journey of transformation is a journey into God.”<sup>37</sup> The wonder of experiencing God engages us in an evolving mystery and thus goes against the illusion of framing God into some abstract principle of intellectual apprehension. Bosch considers, “Dialogue is only possible if [...] we go expecting to meet the God who has preceded us [...] we do not have God in our pocket and do not just take him to the other; Jesus accompanies us and also comes toward us.”<sup>38</sup> Interreligious dialogue is a place of divine encounter, at times leading us to marvel at the mystery instead of working to resolve the unknown, even if it means leaving the encounter with a bit of ambiguity. Acknowledging the sapiential dimension of Christian theology not only provides a common ground for interreligious dialogue, but it also responds to the spiritual hunger of the post-modern world today:

Turning away from the established churches and the rationalist-materialist culture of the modern West, many people in our time have set out on a personal spiritual quest. They experience no attraction to a [Christianity] that has all the answers and no questions, no to a religious life that is completely programmed. Their quest, is, in some way, a search for wisdom.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> John B. Cobb, Jr., “Is Christianity a Religion?” in *What is Religion? An Inquiry for Christian Theology* (Concilium 136), eds. Mircea Eliade and David Tracy (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 9. Cf. Jeffrey Carlson, “Pretending to Be Buddhist and Christian: Thich Nhat Hanh and the Two Truths of Religious Identity,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 20, no. 1 (2000): 119.

<sup>37</sup> David G. Benner, *Living Wisdom*, 2nd ed., revised and expanded (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2019), 7, 172, 245.

<sup>38</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, chap 12, iBooks.

<sup>39</sup> For reading fluency in the context of this thesis, “Catholicism” in the original text is replaced by the broader term “Christianity.” Bruno Barnhart, *The Future of Wisdom: Toward a Rebirth of Sapiential Christianity* (Rhinebeck: Monkfish Book Publishing Company, 2018), 17.

b. A kenotic perspective

Kenosis is another element that informs Merton's Sophia Christology. The biblical understanding of kenosis finds its roots in Paul's letter to the Philippians: "[He] emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross" (2:7–8, NRSV). Here, Paul advocated for the unity of the Philippians community by calling the congregation to follow Jesus's example of humility, subordinating their own interests to the well-being of the wider community. It may not be Paul's intention to exercise a dogmatic theology; the message at its core implies that the Christian life is a life lived in conformity to the image of Christ.<sup>40</sup> As Christ displayed his identity as the embodiment of God's self-giving love through his incarnation and crucifixion, sacrificial love, selfless service and other-oriented living, these thus become essential aspects of Christian ethics. Spiritual growth as cruciformity in Paul's narrative of spirituality is in accordance with the spiritual paradox Jesus summoned: "losing one's life to save it."<sup>41</sup> A kenotic approach to interreligious dialogue suggests a de-centering of the imperial self that views otherness as a problem to embody openness to religious others in Christlikeness.

In its theological development, kenotic theology was firstly a way to reconcile the two natures of Christ: to affirm Christ's humanity without undermining Christ's divinity. Where theologians differ from each other is in their understanding of what it is that Christ emptied himself of, the extent of this emptying, and what impact this emptying had on Christ's divinity.<sup>42</sup> The rise of psychology raised questions concerning Christ's self-consciousness, personality, and human

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<sup>40</sup> Paul A. Holloway, *Philippians: A Commentary*, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins, Hermeneia, a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 115-117.

<sup>41</sup> M. J. Gorman, "Cruciformity," in *Dictionary of scripture and ethics*, eds. J. B. Green, J. E. Lapsley, R. Miles & A. Verhey (Ada: Baker Publishing Group, 2011).

<sup>42</sup> S. M. Smith, "Kenosis, Kenotic Theology," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell. 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2017).

experience of God's self-development: how can one make sense of Jesus Christ as an omniscient being simultaneously living genuinely as a growing, learning, limited human person? In the twentieth century, the kenotic motif has been extended by some theologians beyond Christology to the internal relations of the Trinity and its relations to the world.<sup>43</sup> The self-giving of God is made known through the gift of creation and rendered concrete in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Kenosis, more than a device for making sense of the event of incarnation, coincides with wisdom theology, and signifies that the self-expression and self-giving of God in creation and incarnation are integral to one another.<sup>44</sup>

Despite acknowledging the long history of how kenotic theology and patriarchal interpretations of have been used to condone oppression and abuse and to perpetuate cycles of violence and suffering, Coakley among other feminist theologians insists that kenosis is “not only compatible with feminism, but vital to a distinctively Christian manifestation of it.”<sup>45</sup> Mary C. Grey stands with Coakley in asserting the idea of power-in-vulnerability and views kenosis at its heart signifies a compassionate solidarity;<sup>46</sup> it is the same “image of a broken Jesus as a co-sufferer and that of the incarnated Emmanuel as a co-human” that occupies the theological imagination of a great number of Asian interpreters regarding Philippians 2.<sup>47</sup> If kenosis is a vital expression of Christianity, it implies that Christian faith stubbornly resists compulsion, imposition or enforcement; in this respect, the feminist perspective goes against self-abnegation or the loss of

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<sup>43</sup> David R. Law, “Kenotic Theology,” in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. Ian A. McFarland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 261-262. Sergei Bulgakov, from Russian Orthodox tradition, is one of the theologians who holds the view of a kenotic Trinity, and whom Thomas Merton was interested in.

<sup>44</sup> Karl Rahner writes, “Creation and incarnation as two moments and two phases of the one process of God's self-giving and self-expression.” Karl Rahner, *Foundation of Christian Faith* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 197.

<sup>45</sup> Sarah Coakley, “Kenosis and Subversion: On the Repression of ‘Vulnerability’ in Christian Feminist Writing” in *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 3.

<sup>46</sup> Mary C. Grey, *Sacred Longings: Ecofeminist Theology and Globalisation* (London: SCM Press, 2003), 76, 79.

<sup>47</sup> Rakesh Peter-Dass, “Asian Interpretations of Philippians 2:5-11,” *International Journal of Asian Christianity* 3, no. 1 (2020): 5. The theme of *kenosis* in the Asian context constitutes the very ground for justice-oriented biblical interpretations addressing exploitation and suffering and interreligious hermeneutics that seek to speak beyond the Christian communities to reach wider human communities.

self-identity that may put the practice of interreligious dialogue at risk to compromise the Christian faith. Anna Mercedes in exploring kenotic power as a feminist term follows Frascati-Lochhead, who brings to contemporary feminist theology Vattimo's *verwindung*. Frascati-Lochhead asks, "Can feminist theology be viewed as a secularization of patriarchal theology? Can feminist theology be viewed as kenotic?"<sup>48</sup> The same is applicable in speaking of the sapiential tradition in relation to the soteriological discourse, or the Christian worldview in relation to other religious traditions. Indeed, Johnson elucidates that the cross as a "kenosis of patriarchy" means to be a subversive act of self-emptying of male authoritarian power or male-dominating rule in hopes for a "new humanity of compassionate service and mutual empowerment."<sup>49</sup> Kenosis in its gentleness empowers us with the spirit of generosity, vulnerability and hospitality that we desire for the Christian practice in the arena of interreligious dialogue. Instead of presenting itself as a pure alternative, a substitute, or a replacement, kenotic power as *verwindung* envisions a quiet breakthrough.

### c. The female face of God

To invoke the feminine figure, divine Sophia, is to liberate our religious imagination from a power-over ruling male image of God so that one might open oneself to the mystery of God. On its deepest level such openness affirms the divine presence in all things, other religious traditions included. Elizabeth Johnson critically questions: "Is this idea of God not the reflection of patriarchal imagination, which prizes nothing more than unopposed power-over and unquestioned

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<sup>48</sup> Frascati-Lochhead is aware that, "If feminism succeeds in replacing the metaphysics of patriarchy with a metaphysics more congenial to the interests of women, will not the 'errors' of patriarchy only be reproduced, albeit in a different form?" Kenotic feminism does not overcome patriarchy by adopting a powerful masculinist attitude. Marta Frascati-Lochhead, *Kenosis and Feminist Theology: The Challenge of Gianni Vattimo* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 158, 208-209 Cf. Mercedes, *Power for*, chap 2.

<sup>49</sup> Johnson speaks of how Jesus in his maleness ironically challenges the natural rightness of male-dominating rule: "The crucified Jesus embodies the exact opposite of the patriarchal ideal of the powerful man [...] The cross thus stands as a poignant symbol of the "kenosis of patriarchy," the self-emptying of male dominating power in favor of the new humanity of compassionate service and mutual empowerment." Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, 25 anniversary ed. (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2017), 161.

loyalty? Is not the transcendent, omnipotent, impassible symbol of God the quintessential embodiment of the solitary ruling male ego...?”<sup>50</sup> Noticing the intrinsic connection between the image of a dominant ruling deity and the male egotism, Johnson finds exclusively literal androcentric speech about God guilty of justifying patriarchal social structures inimical to gender equality.<sup>51</sup> The same holds true for crusading triumphalism and imperial aggression when Christianity claims superiority over others in the face of religious difference. For Johnson, patriarchal speech about God is both oppressive and idolatrous, especially if maleness language and metaphor is perceived to be the only definite insight into the mystery of God.<sup>52</sup> Feminist theology in this sense performs what Walter Brueggemann calls “the prophetic ministry” by stretching our theological language and offering symbols to bring newness into our discourse about God as we communicate the Christian tradition to religious others.<sup>53</sup>

In *Hagia Sophia*, a prose poem penned in 1962, Merton seems to anticipate the concerns of feminist theologies of a female face of God. Wisdom, the term itself, is of feminine grammatical gender—*hokmah* in Hebrew, *sophia* in Greek, *sapientia* in Latin—and is consistently personified as female in the scriptures. Yet, reclaiming the feminine aspects of the divine need not be interpreted in dualistic tension with the divine’s masculine dimension. As Johnson explains: “The combination Jesus Christ/Sophia leads to a healthy blend of female and male imagery [of] one God who is neither male nor female, but creator of both, delighter in both, savior of both, and imaged by both.”<sup>54</sup> Merton writes, “In Sophia, [...] all the greatness and majesty of the unknown that is in

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<sup>50</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, 21.

<sup>51</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, 40.

<sup>52</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, 40.

<sup>53</sup> Brueggemann notes that, “[prophetic imagination] cannot be done by inventing new symbols, for that is wishful thinking. Rather, it means to move back into the deepest memories of [the] community and activate those very symbols that have always been the basis for contradicting the regnant consciousness.” Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 3, 60.

<sup>54</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, “Jesus, the Wisdom of God: A Biblical Basis for Non-androcentric Christology,” *ETL* 61 (1985): 294.

God and all that is rich and maternal in His creation are united inseparably, as paternal and maternal principles, the uncreated Father and created Mother-Wisdom.”<sup>55</sup> Any attempt to speak about the mystery of God is limited by metaphor and analogical language: images and names of God are intended to evoke the whole divine mystery. Our understanding of God should not be restricted by the traditional gender binaries, nor should our ideas of who God is prevent us from experiencing God anew. In the poem “Hagia Sophia,” an allusion is made to Julian of Norwich: “When the recluses of fourteenth-century England heard their Church Bells [...] they spoke in their hearts to ‘Jesus our Mother.’”<sup>56</sup> It was Sophia that had awakened in their childlike hearts.” For Merton, the female face of God might invoke the child-Sophia dwelling in the human heart, a power of creativity and unity. Merton hopes that Sophia might break open our religious imagination to experience the divine love coming alive in all creation, to unveil for us the hidden divine presence that is always near but far from being realized, and most of all, to awaken us to our deepest identity.

## 2. A kenotic Christology

A brief survey of Christian church history reveals our ambiguous attitude towards religious others: at times they are neighbors whom we are summoned to love, at other times their presence is objectified as an evangelistic opportunity or even a threat to “truth.” What is worse is that we in ignorant confidence assume that the person who rejects our witness has rejected Christ.<sup>57</sup> Undoubtedly the communal confession surrounding Jesus Christ is what makes Christian witness utterly distinctive. However, often what seems to occupy the center of our regard for religious

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<sup>55</sup> Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions Book, 2007), 141. Also, gendered pronouns are interchangeable when Sophia is addressed in the prose poem “Hagia Sophia,” for instance, “As Mother His shining is diffused,” or “We call her His ‘glory.’”

<sup>56</sup> Thomas Merton, “Hagia Sophia,” in *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963), 61–69. Cf. Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2009), Kindle.

<sup>57</sup> Emilio Castro reflects that, “what I cannot assume is that all people who reject my preaching are condemned, because I cannot convince myself that my preaching is so clear, so perfect, so faithful as not to be a stumbling block on the road to belief. Emilio Castro, “A Monthly Letter on Evangelism Nr. 112”: 3 (1981). Cf. David J. Bosch, “The Church in Dialogue: From Self-Delusion to Vulnerability,” *Missiology* 16, no. 2 (1988): 138.

others is the “I” who claims to possess the truth about Christ rather than Christ himself. What lurks in the background is indeed our response to the Christological question: “who is Jesus Christ?” which has always informed the posture we adopt towards religious others. Pramuk asks the same question about Merton: “Who is this Christ at the center of Merton’s capacious theological imagination?”<sup>58</sup> The following gives an account of a kenotic Christology, illustrated by Merton’s Sophia Christology and an atonement theology of hospitality.

#### a. Merton’s Sophia Christology

While the sapiential shift in the last decade of Merton’s life is apparent, Merton never developed a formal sophiology himself. To give a give account of Merton’s Sophia Christology, Pramuk traces back to certain Russian Orthodox theologians in whom Merton became interested from the late 1950s until his death in 1968.<sup>59</sup> Sophia, “the unknown and unseen Christ within all things” not only grounded Merton in his commitment of Christian faith but also helped to cultivate a spirituality of contemplation-in-action that catalyzed his outreach in dialogue and friendship toward an extraordinary range of religious others, including Zen Buddhism. Pramuk looks to Merton as a mystic theologian who writes primarily from his experience with God, that is in Pramuk’s own words: “The marriage of Zen and Sophia shines forth most vividly and lyrically not in Merton’s Christology or theology so much as in his life.”<sup>60</sup>

In Pramuk’s analysis, Russian sophiology begins and ends in the ecstasy of love and becomes for Merton a kenotic Christology: “Sophia is compassion without reserve, poverty of spirit. She is, in a word, the loving kenosis of God, coming to birth in all things, and consummately

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<sup>58</sup> Pramuk, *Sophia*, chap 1, Kindle.

<sup>59</sup> Pramuk discusses Merton’s sophianic spirituality largely in the context of the writings of Vladimir Soloviev, Sergius Bulgakov, Nicholas Berdyaev, Boris Pasternak, Paul Evdokimov, and others.

<sup>60</sup> Christopher Pramuk, “‘Something Breaks through a Little’: The Marriage of Zen and Sophia in the Life of Thomas Merton,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 28, no. 1 (2008): 80.

in Jesus Christ and the inner movements of human freedom.”<sup>61</sup> The foundation of Merton’s Christology lies in the integration of sapiential and kenotic theology. As Pramuk illustrates, “Bulgakov [...] envisions Sophia as the eros of God become one with creation, the love between Father, Son, and Spirit that longs for incarnation, that ‘opens room’ in God’s very self for all the world, from the beginning.”<sup>62</sup> The creation of world is the first form of God’s kenosis; God shares the divine life with what is not-God so creation in return testifies God’s ever-present activity with and for another. In other words, creation is established on the same (sophianic) foundation as God’s,<sup>63</sup> wisdom is “the face that God turns towards his creation, and the face that Creation, in humankind, turns towards God.”<sup>64</sup>

For the Christian imagination, Sophia will find her deepest kenotic identity in Jesus Christ, whose incarnation united the human and divine. Pramuk quotes Valliere: “The profound link between divinity and humanity manifested in the creation of human beings and in the incarnation signifies not just the divinity of human beings but also a kind of humanness in God.”<sup>65</sup> Pramuk considers that Merton found himself agreeing with the sophianic theologians: that incarnation does not come about as a result of the Fall but is a representation of God’s loving commitment to and lasting participation in creation from the beginning.<sup>66</sup> Elsewhere, Valliere says, “Christ as Sophia is the humanity which God sees and loves from all eternity.”<sup>67</sup> Even more, the crucifixion is both

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<sup>61</sup> Pramuk, *Sophia*, chap 4, Kindle.

<sup>62</sup> Christopher Pramuk, “Wisdom, Our Sister” in *Spiritus* 11, no. 2 (2011): 181.

<sup>63</sup> Rowan Williams, ed., *Sergeii Bulgakov: Towards a Russian Political Theology* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1999), 169. Cf. Christopher Pramuk, “Sophia: The Hidden Christ,” chap 6, Kindle.

<sup>64</sup> Andrew Louth, *Modern Orthodox Thinkers: From the Philokalia to the Present* (Downer Grove: IVP, 2015), 58.

<sup>65</sup> The Russian term *bogochelovechestvo* is rendered by Valliere rather as “the humanity of God,” both for semantic and theological reasons. Sophiology “assumes that humanity can never reach God... [or] be joined to the divine on the basis of equality; but that God condescends to the human condition, ‘taking the form of a slave’ (Phil. 2:7) [...] The human may be engulfed in the divine, but not the divine in the human. One may therefore speak of the humanity of God [...] but not of the divinity of man.” Paul Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology: Bukharev, Soloviev, Bulgakov: Orthodox Theology in a New Key* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 335-336. Cf. Pramuk, *Sophia*, chap 6, iBooks.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Pramuk. “Wisdom, Our Sister,” 181-182.

<sup>67</sup> Valliere, “Modern Russian Theology,” 159. Cf. Pramuk, *Sophia*, chap 6, iBooks.

the consequence of Christ's kenosis and the most prominent example of that kenosis representing the full extent of God's will to be for others. In Merton's words:

In emptying Himself to come into the world, God has not simply kept in reserve, in a safe place, [...] He has emptied Himself and is all in Christ. Christ is not simply the tip of the little finger of the Godhead, moving in the world, easily withdrawn, never threatened, never really risking anything. God has acted and given Himself totally, without division, in the Incarnation. He has become not only one of us but even our very selves."<sup>68</sup>

In Pramuk's understanding, Merton shares the enthusiasm of the Russian theologians' willingness to say something great and worthy about humanity. Merton speaks about an anthropology informed by a kenotic Christology: "If we believe in the Incarnation of the Son of God, there should be no one on earth in whom we are not prepared to see, in mystery, the presence of Christ."<sup>69</sup> From the point of view that God "has in a certain way united himself with each individual" in Christ, attaining salvation is not simply a negative remission of sins but the recovery of a human being's true identity.<sup>70</sup> In theological terms, *theosis* is closely tied to *imago Dei*, and at its heart is what Merton calls "the human quest of identity."

[God] shows Himself to us within ourselves as our own poverty, our own nothingness [...] and if we receive the humility of God into our hearts, we become able to accept and embrace and love this very poverty, which is Himself and His Sophia. And then the darkness of Wisdom becomes to us inexpressible light. We pass through the center of our own nothingness into the light of God.<sup>71</sup>

Pramuk explains that from God's side Sophia is the Second Person of the Trinity incarnated to be presence with humanity: "Divine Wisdom [...] is the eternal humanity in God—the divine prototype and foundation of being of man."<sup>72</sup> From our side, Sophia is the recovery of the poverty of spirit or the true self. In Pramuk's words: "Who, then, is Hagia Sophia? She is the Spirit of Christ but

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<sup>68</sup> Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life*, The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume 3: 1952-1960, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009), March 25, 1960.

<sup>69</sup> Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 296.

<sup>70</sup> Pramuk, *Sophia*, chap 2, iBooks. And Shannon, William H, Christine M Bochen, and Patrick F O' Connell, "Salvation," in *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), 398.

<sup>71</sup> William H. Shannon ed., *Witness to Freedom: The Letters of Thomas Merton in Times of Crisis* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994), 5. Cf. Bonnie B. Thurston, "'The Tradition Of Wisdom And Spirit:' Wisdom In Thomas Merton's Mature Thought" *The Merton Seasonal* Vol. 20 No.1 (Winter 1995): 8.

<sup>72</sup> Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, July 31, 1957.

more than Christ. She is the Love joining the Father, Son, and Spirit that longs for incarnation from before the very beginning. She is Jesus our mother, and Mary, the Theotokos, [...]and all creation in God from the beginning. Perhaps most of all, Merton's Sophia is our 'true self.'"<sup>73</sup> Merton's anthropology is informed by his kenotic Christology: "If we believe in the Incarnation of the Son of God, there should be no one on earth in whom we are not prepared to see, in mystery, the presence of Christ."<sup>74</sup>

Merton's internalization of the image of Christ as the Wisdom of God, as Sophia, is evidenced in her frequent appearance in Merton's journals and letters from the period of 1957 through 1961. Pramuk situated Merton's vision at the corner of 4th and Walnut in downtown Louisville, Kentucky—what many identify as a turning point in Merton's spiritual journey turning towards the world<sup>75</sup>—in the context of Merton's emerging dream-visions of Sophia-Wisdom.<sup>76</sup> Pramuk notes the timely coincidence. As the prelude of the Louisville incident, on February 28, 1958, there was a young Jewish girl named "Proverb" who came to embrace Merton in a dream. A year before this event, Pramuk found one of the earliest clues as to the impact of Russian sophiological tradition in Merton's journal on April 25, 1957. A year after the event, Merton wrote his initial letter to Suzuki, dated March 12, 1959, beginning their personal relationship and interreligious dialogue. Regarding the importance of the vision in Merton's life, it is best to quote the illuminative experience using Merton's own words:

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. [...] The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream [...] I have the

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<sup>73</sup> Pramuk, *Sophia*, chap 5, Kindle.

<sup>74</sup> William H. Shannon ed., "Witness to Freedom," 5. Cf. Pramuk, chap 5, Kindle.

<sup>75</sup> For example, William H. Shannon notices, "The experience challenged the concept of a separate 'holy' existence lived in a monastery. [Merton] experienced the glorious destiny that comes simply from being a human person and from being united with, not separated from, the rest of the human race." William H. Shannon, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 178.

<sup>76</sup> Pramuk, *Sophia*, chap 1, Kindle.

immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate [...] There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun [...] Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. [...] At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion [...] This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us. [...] It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely.<sup>77</sup>

The sense of oneness with all humanity that Merton experienced is instrumental in forming his more integrated view of himself and the world. Reflecting on his interconnectedness with the world allowed him to recognize the secret beauty of the true self in every person. An explicit connection is made concerning the hidden Christ, the poverty of Spirit, nothingness, and the true self. The occasion represents Merton's maturing mystical expression of incarnational spirituality, while simultaneously crystallizes for him a non-dualist perception of the indwelling Christ and the true self as one, as Sophia. For him, this invisible centre of "nothingness" in each person's inmost being is accessible not by any rational means but only through love.

Upon Merton's reflection on the writings of the Russian theologians, he writes, "If I can unite in myself, in my own spiritual life, the thought of the East and the West of the Greek and Latin Fathers, I will create in myself a reunion of the divided Church [...] We must contain both in ourselves and transcend both in Christ."<sup>78</sup> Although in his reflection Merton only meant to refer to the Eastern and Western forms of Christianity, the pursuit for cosmic harmony within himself included other religious traditions and extended to all humanity. In Merton's life, the outward movement of integrating Christian wisdom and all authentic human insights on the common ground of wisdom is closely affiliated with the inward moment of maturing in wisdom, which is

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<sup>77</sup> Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966), 153-156. Merton recorded the revelatory experience that he had had on March 18, 1958 in his journal the following day and a more reflective version is included in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* when it was published in 1966.

<sup>78</sup> Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, April 28, 1957.

the process of conforming to Christlikeness, also understood as becoming one's true self. The true self as the kenotic identity in Sophia is the fountain of radical hospitality towards others. From this perspective, not only does a commitment to Christian faith and an openness towards those of other religious traditions not in conflict with one another, but it is precisely the commitment to the Christian faith that perdures a genuine openness towards religious others.

b. An atonement theory of hospitality

If incarnation is the full expression of Emmanuel, God with us, crucifixion is both the consequence of Christ's kenosis and the most prominent example of that kenosis represented. The cross of Christ is the embodied reconciliation; atonement theory is thus essential to Christology.<sup>79</sup> Criticism is made against the traditional evangelical view of penal substitution, which suggests sinful humanity deserves God's wrath and Jesus is the perfect scapegoat.<sup>80</sup> Fundamentally, those who are troubled by this retributive sense of justice dismiss the image of a bloodthirsty, male tyrant God, and the kind of dominating and authoritative divine power represented by theory.<sup>81</sup> What if on-the-cross reconciliation does not require the appeasement of God's wrath but, rather, is based upon the unconditional love and hospitality of the Triune God reconciling the world into the divine communion?

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<sup>79</sup> The word "at-one-ment" denotes the state of being at one, and thus means reconciliation. The central question regarding atonement is, "How does Jesus's death bring about reconciliation?" Various possible explanations have been crafted throughout church history but none of them have been recognized as the sole authorized formulation. The suggested models must be distinguished from the reality it points to, which is a mystery itself. K. M. Kapic, "Atonement," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2017). And Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Atonement," in *Mapping Modern Theology: A Thematic and Historical Introduction*, eds. Kelly M. Kapic & Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 138-158.

<sup>80</sup> The concept of penal substitution is widely accepted as one of the classic approaches to understanding the significance of Jesus's death among Protestants. J.I. Packer believes that penal substitution is "at the very heart of the Christian gospel" and "a distinguished mark of the world-wide evangelical fraternity." In defining penal substitution, he comments that the model consists of two ideas: God's justice requires the punishment of sin (penal), and Jesus takes the place of the sinful humanity (substitution). Ironically, the question is, "how is justice served by punishing not the sinner but a perfectly innocent person instead?" J. I. Packer, "What Did the Cross Achieve?" in *In My Place Condemned He Stood: Celebrating the Glory of the Atonement*, eds. J. I. Packer and Mark Dever (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008), 53, 68, 77. And Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas, Arguments of the Philosophers* (London: Routledge, 2005), 428.

<sup>81</sup> One of the classic judgements against the penal substitutionary atonement comes from feminist theologians who view that the model fosters ideas of "cosmic child abuse" that is tantamount to the moral issue of consecrating the suffering of the less-powerful as well as reinforcing female passive submission to abuse and oppression. Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, "For God So Loved the World?" in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, eds. Joanne Carlson Brown & Carole R. Bohn (New York: Pilgrim, 1989), 1-30.

The image of God derived from the penal substitutionary model, with its primarily forensic understanding of the divine-human relationship, looks vindictive and violent. Repulsed by sinners, the model is inconsistent with the compassionate heart of the Father revealed in Christ's life and teachings. Anselm states, "The Father was not willing to rescue the human race, unless man were to do even as great a thing as was signified in the death of Christ."<sup>82</sup> Even if the united will of the Father and the Son is secured by suggesting Christ's death as a voluntary sacrifice rather than the Father's demand,<sup>83</sup> as long as the debt of sin must be paid back in full before God can forgive and show mercy, the Father's wrath is inevitably painted against the Son's sacrificial love.<sup>84</sup> In this model, Jesus's death on the cross is often compared to the blood sacrifices on the Day of Atonement. However, the sacrificial system in OT has never been a means to remove guilt that is prerequisite for entering into a relationship with God; rather it is a gift to sustain the already-established covenant relationship.<sup>85</sup> The parable of the prodigal son in the NT depicts the unconditional acceptance of the Father for the prodigal son. In fact, the Father always loved the prodigal even when he was a lost son.<sup>86</sup> The incarnation of Christ reveals the heart of Father God, who, instead of waiting for the homecoming of the humanity, is willing to go to such lengths that God himself journeys into the far country.<sup>87</sup> Indeed, there is nothing that can prevent God from

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<sup>82</sup> Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo: Why God Became man*, trans. Sidney Norton Deane (Pickerington: Beloved Publishing, 2004), 9. It is commonplace among theologians to identify penal substitutionary atonement as a development built on the satisfaction model, which is generally attributed to Anselm of Canterbury. The significance of Anselm's theory is that, in rejecting the idea that Jesus' death is owed to the devil, it makes humanity directly responsible to God rather than being the victims of a cosmic conflict. R. W. Southern, *Saint Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 210.

<sup>83</sup> Packer, "What Did the Cross Achieve?" 94.

<sup>84</sup> Brad Jersak, "Nonviolent Identification And the Victory of Christ," in *Stricken by God?: Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*, eds. Brad Jersak & Michael Hardin (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2007), 23.

<sup>85</sup> OT scholar Roy Gane explains that the ritual actions of sacrifice are intrinsically meaningless. That is, the sacrificial system of Israel does not provide evidence indicating that the self-sufficient God Yhweh is in need of any satisfaction for his "lost honour." Moreover, Jesus's death was to happen on or near the festival of Passover, not on the Day of Atonement. In the view of Fleming Rutledge, the blood of Christ is more relevant as a sign of deliverance and rescue than an offering of sin, if it is made to equate with the blood of the Passover lamb. Roy Gane, *Cult and Character: Purification Offerings, Day of Atonement, and Theodicy* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 4-5, 47-49. And Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2015), 216-219.

<sup>86</sup> J. Denny Weaver, "The Nonviolent Atonement: Human Violence, Discipline and God," in *Stricken by God?: Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*, eds. Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2007), 354-355.

<sup>87</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 172.

reaching out to his beloved people when he chooses to incarnate into this hostile world and dwell among sinners.

As such, the Father does not need Jesus to satisfy his wrath so that he might change his mind about humanity; Jesus instead came to change the mind of humanity about God.<sup>88</sup> In the parable of the prodigal son, the departure of the younger son signifies a denial of one's identity, as he cuts himself off from the very relations that constituted who he was, as son and brother in the context of a collective culture.<sup>89</sup> Human beings are created in the image of God and by nature dependent upon God for one's own existence. It is not that sin brings estrangement between human and the divine, but the estrangement itself is sin when the creature tries to depart from the Creator who establishes and sustains one's self to set one's own terms of fulfilment.<sup>90</sup> Sin as a state of alienation from God is an ontological problem as well as a relational one. Killing Jesus represents the ultimate rebellion of humanity who rejects God. Even so, Jesus humbly endures the enmity of humankind against God. If the cross is a place of blood and violence, humanity, not God, is to be blamed.<sup>91</sup> Miroslav Volf describes the keenness and intensity of divine love: "The cross is the giving up of God's self in order not to give up on humanity; it is the consequence of God's desire to break the power of human enmity without violence and receive human beings into divine communion."<sup>92</sup> Kenosis is Jesus' giving of everything when he went on the cross and willingly endured suffering. Even then, he prayed: "Father, forgive them..." (Lk 23:24, NRSV).<sup>93</sup> Hanging on the cross, Jesus became the ultimate example of his own

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<sup>88</sup> Richard Rohr, "The Franciscan Option," in *Stricken by God?: Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*, eds. Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2007), 209.

<sup>89</sup> Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 172.

<sup>90</sup> In Augustine's opinion, God does not only possess the attributes of goodness, but God is goodness himself while evil as the absence of good. Unlike goodness, evil is insubstantial but is the parasitic existence that corrupts goodness. Augustine, "Augustine of Hippo on the Relationship between God and Evil," in *The Christian Theology Reader*, eds. Alister E. McGrath (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 172-173.

<sup>91</sup> Weaver, "The Nonviolent Atonement," 352.

<sup>92</sup> Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 126.

<sup>93</sup> Steve Chalke writes, "If the cross is a personal act of violence perpetuated by God towards humankind but borne by his son, then it makes a mockery of Jesus's own teaching to love your enemies and to refuse to pay evil with evil." Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 182-183.

teaching to love the enemy. While one was God's enemy, one was reconciled to God through the death of his Son (Rom 5:10).

The gospel of John captures the sacred scene of Mary, the mother of Christ, who stood by the foot of the cross (Jn 19:25) during the crucifixion. Nothing could be more sorrowful, painful and devastating for Mary than watching such brutality happen to her beloved son. As Mary suffered in her heart the whips, thorns, and nails that Christ's body bore, her heart must have been broken, pierced by a sword (Luke 2:34-35). Yet, the strength of a mother was observed. As Mary gazed upon her defenceless, dying son Jesus, she stood still. In the moment Jesus felt abandonment from his heavenly Father, his mother was unmistakably present with him, and Mary reflected the female face of God towards him. More widely accepted within the Catholic church than the Protestant ones, Mary as the bearer of divine image is understood to be double-edged: she is an example of faithful discipleship, and yet she also symbolizes the fact that God can be perceived in feminine terms.<sup>94</sup> In Johnson's examination, Mary the imagery contains the quest for religious experiences of a female face of God, a desire that was misdirected when the female images of God were overshadowed by masculinized conceptions and suppressed from official formulations.<sup>95</sup>

Besides the presence of Mary by the cross, the presence of the feminine divine in the Passion is also signified through Julian of Norwich's vision of the crucifixion. Julian recognizes Christ as the true Mother of life and of all things, "where the foundation of motherhood begins."<sup>96</sup> When Julian speaks of the motherliness of Christ, she says, "He is our mother."<sup>97</sup> The word "mother" conveys something more inclusive than merely femininity. For Julian, Christ's motherliness is revealed in his character and actions, not in his gender. In the Marian tradition,

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<sup>94</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Mary and the Female Face of God," *Theological Studies* 50 (Sept 1989): 519.

<sup>95</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, 500.

<sup>96</sup> Denise Nowakowski Baker, *Julian of Norwich, Showings* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 298. Cf. Kerry Dearborn, "The Crucified Christ as the Motherly God," 301.

<sup>97</sup> Dearborn, 289.

God as Mother relates closely with divine compassion: “God is the Mother of mercy who has compassionate womb-love for all Her children.”<sup>98</sup> Andrew Purves notes that the Hebrew word for compassion, *rachamim*, is derived the word for womb, *reckem*; the wounded womb is found at the core of the biblical meaning of compassion.<sup>99</sup> Compassion literally means to “suffer with;” the fact that Christ incarnated into this broken world and died on the cross reveals that the suffering God is a God of compassion.

The crucified Christ’s identification with all humanity results in the union of humanity with the Triune God. Volf illustrates the open arms of the crucified as a sign of invitation: when the Trinity turns toward the world, the Son and the Spirit become the open arms of Father.<sup>100</sup> The same sense of welcoming is expressed by Julian in a maternal way: “The mother can lay her child tenderly to her breast, but our tender Mother Jesus can lead us into his blessed breast, through his sweet open side.”<sup>101</sup> On the cross the divine dancing circle opens up for the hostile humanity, in which humanity is adopted into the communion of the Trinity and loved by same mutual love among the divine Persons, no longer an enemy of God. On the cross, Christ identifies with every innocent victim who feels abandoned. At the same time, since Christ was nailed alongside transgressors, Christ also identifies with the oppressors.<sup>102</sup> The double identification of Christ leads to a recognition of the dual identity of being human, as a sinner and one being sinned-against. Both victims and perpetrators are together trapped in the mess of sin and, likewise, together being accepted into the divine embrace. Atonement is the hospitality of the Father in the suffering of the Son offered through the Spirit for the salvation of the whole of humanity. Through the Spirit in the Son, humanity finds themselves on a homecoming journey

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<sup>98</sup> Johnson, “Mary and the Female Face of God,” 521.

<sup>99</sup> J. Patrick Vaughn, “Evangelism: A Pastoral Theological Perspective,” in *The Study of Evangelism: Exploring a Missional Practice of the Church*, eds. Paul Wesley Chilcote & Lacey C Warner (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 266.

<sup>100</sup> Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 128.

<sup>101</sup> Dearborn, “The Crucified Christ as the Motherly God,” 293.

<sup>102</sup> Jerak, “Nonviolent Identification And the Victory of Christ,” 32-33.

back to the Father. God is the God of the cosmos - “the Father of all creation as well as the Mother of all recreated.”<sup>103</sup> Divine love was never meant to be a privatized possession for Christians but a gift for all creation.

The reconciliation of the relationship between God and humanity also means a restoration of identity. Rather than responding to violent humanity in kind, the forgiving love of Christ releases the *liberum arbitrium captivatum* of humanity from its bias against God.<sup>104</sup> At the same time, the pathway of *theosis* is opened up. The crucifixion is the place of our new birth; it is here that one has been both “crucified with Christ” (Gal 2:20) and born again as “new creatures in Christ” (2 Cor 5:17).<sup>105</sup> In Julian’s view, Jesus’s motherly nature is expressed most profoundly through the labor pains Christ endured on the cross to bring forth new life.<sup>106</sup> Julian carries the metaphor of Christ in labor further to lead us more deeply into the ongoing work of nurturing and sustaining as Christ is committed to care for us in the self-giving manner of a mother.<sup>107</sup> In her words, “Our saviour is our true Mother, in whom we are endlessly born and out of whom we shall never come.”<sup>108</sup> Being recreated in and through Christ, we stand with Christ in solidarity with humanity, just like Merton at Louisville who came to recognize the essential oneness he shared with all humanity.

### 3. Kenotic Sophia Christology in interreligious dialogue as a posture of hospitality

The kenosis of God is a progressive movement from creation to incarnation and finally to the cross. The incarnation of Christ is a radical displacement: as the Almighty God reveals himself as a helpless child and as the divine host becomes the stranger who dwells among those whom he

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<sup>103</sup> Johnson, “Mary and the Female Face of God,” 508.

<sup>104</sup> Here Augustine’s concept of God’s grace is adapted to describe the necessity of the work of Christ on the cross to remove the weight of sin, disposing the scales of human free will towards evil, and transforming the *liberum arbitrium captivatum* to the *liberum arbitrium captivatum*. Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 334.

<sup>105</sup> Dearborn, “The Crucified Christ as the Motherly God,” 298.

<sup>106</sup> Jesus alludes to the imagery of a woman in labor to prepare the disciples for his own death: “A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. So with you.” (John 17:20-22). Dearborn, 298.

<sup>107</sup> Baker, “Julian of Norwich,” 304. Cf. Dearborn, 293.

<sup>108</sup> Baker, “Julian of Norwich,” 304. Cf. Dearborn, 294.

created, Jesus Christ is both our greatest host and potential guest.<sup>109</sup> The cross is at the centre and climax of the *missio dei* to reconcile and embrace alien humanity into divine communion. It also represents a radical hospitality that welcomes strangers and even befriends enemies. The resurrected Christ of the empty tomb brings the kenotic model into full circle. Merton illustrates the spiritual journey with the road to Emmaus, “We follow Him, we find Him and then He must vanish and we must go along without Him at our side. Why? Because He is even closer than that. He is ourself.”<sup>110</sup> The unrecognized and elusive presence of the risen Christ suggests that being in expectation to encounter Christ is to be open to others, to the unknown, and to the unexpected.<sup>111</sup> Kenosis is our availability to create space for God and it is through the living One in us that divine hospitality is witnessed.

#### a. Kenotic identity as a relational self

Vulnerability, a character of the kenotic Christ, in Bosch’s opinion, is the best word that describes the Christian church engaging in dialogue with religious others.<sup>112</sup> Kenosis is far from self-denial or self-rejection, rather, it is the formation of self through relinquishing manipulative and abusive power. While the self is stripped away from what hinders the flourishing of genuine relationship with God, oneself, and others, authenticity is cultivated to promote communion. Coakley notes that prayer is the place of the self’s transformation and expansion into God, particularly the wordless prayer in the Spirit. Prayer is the means to reorder and purify our nature’s desire towards intimacy with the Triune God. Coakley grounds her reflections on prayer and Trinity in Romans 8. There, she defines prayer as the “reflexivity in God” in the “answering of God to God in and through the one who prays.”<sup>113</sup> Contemplation is seen as the conscious process of “gentle

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<sup>109</sup> Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality As a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999), 105.

<sup>110</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), “To Daisetz T. Suzuki,” Kindle.

<sup>111</sup> Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*.

<sup>112</sup> Bosch, “The Church in Dialogue,” 139.

<sup>113</sup> Prayer is based on the gracious work of the three divine Persons: “The Father is both the source and ultimate object of divine desire; the spirit is that enabler and incorporator of that desire in creation – that which makes the creation

space-making” for a divine encounter which involves a double-revelation: as one comes to know God, one is simultaneously known by God. Bonhoeffer writes, “Now our question has been turned around. The question we have put to the person of Christ, ‘Who are you?’ comes back at us: who are you, that you ask this question?”<sup>114</sup> To pray is to engage in a dialogue initiated by the divine, and in God we find the authentic humanity as the *imago Dei*. Embracing authentic humanity is to be one’s true self. As Merton indicates, “The Christ we seek is within us, in our inmost self, is our inmost self, and yet infinitely transcends ourselves. We have to be ‘found in Him’ and yet be perfectly ourselves and free from the domination of any image of him other than Himself.”<sup>115</sup> Intimacy with God is crucial for the formation of a kenotic identity.

Incarnation concretizes God’s identification with creation; the kenotic Christ embodied is in relation to others, not in isolation. The kenotic self is the recovery of what some feminist theologians call “a relational self.”<sup>116</sup> In contrast to a model of linear subordination, the quest towards relational selfhood is affirmed by a relational understanding of the Trinity, where each Person of the Trinity is constituted in their correlation with the other two.<sup>117</sup> As Johnson defines, “At the heart of holy mystery is not monarchy but community; not an absolute ruler, but a threefold *koinonia*.”<sup>118</sup> Since the essence of divine mystery is the ground of being, Johnson elaborates that,

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divine; the son is that divine.” Sarah Coakley, “Praying the Trinity: a neglected patristic tradition,” in *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay “On the Trinity”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 113-114.

<sup>114</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Lectures on Christology,” in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Works*, vol. 12 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 305. Cf. Mercedes, *Power for*, chap 3.

<sup>115</sup> Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, “To Daisetz T. Suzuki,” Kindle.

<sup>116</sup> Catherine Keller recognizes that the rejection of kenosis in patriarchal terms reveals the underlying need for the development of a female selfhood, which is described by her as a selfhood “seeking not to overcome self but to experience and to articulate an extensively relational self.” Catherine Keller, “Scoop Up the Water and the Moon Is in Your Hands: On Feminist Theology and Dynamic Self Emptying,” in *The Emptying God*, eds. John B. Cobb, Jr. and Christopher Ives (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990), 107. Cf. Mercedes, *Power for*, chap 3.

<sup>117</sup> Coakley suggests a return to the insight of the Cappadocian ontology, “but more daringly, we would also need to speak of the Father’s own reception back of his status as source from the other two persons, precisely via the Spirit reflexive propulsion and the Son’s creative effulgence.” Sarah Coakley, “The primacy of divine desire: God as Trinity and the ‘apophatic turn,’” in *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay “On the Trinity”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 333.

<sup>118</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is*, 228.

“relatedness rather than the solitary ego is the heart of all reality.”<sup>119</sup> Selfhood is a dynamic becoming, implying openness, rather than a static ego. Concerning the Christian identity, the implications of kenosis is to not be enslaved by our own images and ideas of God, but to cultivate an attentive openness of the whole self to the reality of God and creation. Bosch warns that the church that confines itself to its own organizational structure and programs religious activities “as if it has a monopoly on God’s kingdoms” is in self-delusion.<sup>120</sup> Merton’s early triumphalist appropriation of Christian doctrine slowly gave way throughout the years of living a monastic life of prayer. He was inspired by encountering the living wisdom in the “the voices of strangers” and says, “If I affirm myself as a Catholic merely by denying all that is Muslim, Jewish, Protestant, Hindu, Buddhist, etc., in the end I will find that there is not much left for me to affirm as a Catholic: and certainly no breath of the Spirit with which to affirm it.”<sup>121</sup> Christianity defined by a kenotic identity is not supposed to be entirely indifferent to the world or to other religion traditions. Rather, it should be characterized by a vulnerability that stresses interdependence to draw all people together.

Prayer is the way of coming to both the heart of God and to religious others in interreligious dialogue. Only by emptying the imperialized subject can we listen to religious others speaking in their own right; only then is mutual respect or enrichment possible. Vulnerability in this sense paves way for offering hospitality. Nouwen speaks from his own experience: “If I could have a gentle “interiority” – a heart of flesh and not of stone, a room with spots on which one might walk barefooted – then God and my fellow humans could meet each other there.”<sup>122</sup> It is in God that a secure interior can be created, through which hospitality can then be offered to religious others.

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<sup>119</sup> Johnson, 227.

<sup>120</sup> Bosch, “The Church in Dialogue,” 139.

<sup>121</sup> Merton, *Guilty Bystander*, 129.

<sup>122</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Genesee Diary: Report from a Trappist Monastery* (Garden: Image Books, 1981), 145.

Nouwen uncovers the intimate relationship between being one's true self and witnessing for Christ: "The more fully we have imaged who we truly are and the more our true identity becomes visible, the more we become living witness of Jesus Christ."<sup>123</sup> To be the witness of the presence of God is to witness the God who dwell in us; we have to first be transformed into ongoing Christ-likeness to manifest the presence of Christ in this world. An incarnational approach to bear witness means that "the message, the messenger, and the communication of the message should be seen as a whole."<sup>124</sup> When engaging in religious dialogue, our witness to Christ is not primarily a matter of words or deeds but is the divine presence in us. Simultaneously, we receive others as Christ. Barnes comments that, "It is not simply a matter of my representing Christ to the other; I must also find some way in which the other can be Christ to me. In some way, the two movements have to be held together."<sup>125</sup> By recognizing the image of Christ in others, interreligious dialogue becomes a means of grace for Christians through which Christ comes and ministers to us.<sup>126</sup>

#### b. A kenotic conception of truth as aesthetics appreciation

Dorothee Soelle views that "asceticism is most often associated with relinquishing and egolessness;" "to step out of oneself means to know amazement." In this sense, "the self that forgets its ego dives deep into the universe."<sup>127</sup> Beauty is capable of fully capturing our attention because beauty addresses us from a place beyond.<sup>128</sup> From a Christian perspective, the aesthetic dimension of truth throws us back upon the very core of knowing God as the Creator-Artisan.<sup>129</sup> Divine

<sup>123</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Gracias!: A Latin American Journal* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 31.

<sup>124</sup> Darrell L. Guder, "Incarnation and the Church's Evangelistic Mission," in *The Study of Evangelism: Exploring a Missional Practice of the Church*, eds. Paul Wesley Chilcote & Lacey C. Warner (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 176.

<sup>125</sup> Michael Barnes, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 242.

<sup>126</sup> George R. Hunsberger, "Is There Biblical Warrant for Evangelism?" in *The Study of Evangelism: Exploring a Missional Practice of the Church*, eds. Paul Wesley Chilcote & Lacey C. Warner (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 70.

<sup>127</sup> Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, trans. Barbara & Martin Rumscheidt (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), chap 12, eBooks.

<sup>128</sup> John O'Donohue, *The Invisible Embrace* (New York: HarperPerennial, 2005), 218.

<sup>129</sup> Kessler, *Old Testament Theology*, 124.

wisdom is woven in creation; creation order not only speaks of truth and goodness but also beauty. The recurring formulaic structure—“God saw that it was good” (Gen 1, NRSV) and subsequent symmetry—embodies how the correspondence of created objects in the first six days of creation “mirrors the balance and order of the created cosmos itself.”<sup>130</sup> The notion of symmetry, observed by John O’Donohue, “is central to the beauty of mathematics and science;” when physicists study various theories, it seems as though “the more symmetrical one, generally, is more beautiful and the truer.”<sup>131</sup> In other words, we experience divine wisdom not only as truth but also as beauty. As human beings are “fashioned from clay, we carry the memory of the earth” and the memory of earth is the memory of divine wisdom woven in creation. When we are drawn to divine wisdom as beauty, the experience of beauty draws us towards divine mystery. From this point of view, discovering the beauty in other religions is like an appreciation of a mediated communication of the creative expression of God; we can appreciate other religious traditions not simply as a means to truth but beautiful in themselves.

Hans Urs von Balthasar speaks about the need for Christian theology to be illuminated by aesthetics as a corrective to the theological methodology and rationalism that blinds humanity from the beauty of revelation.<sup>132</sup> For Balthasar, beauty is divine glory; the glory of God in its fullest sense is the love of God,<sup>133</sup> and it is “love alone that can reach God in this life, and not knowing.”<sup>134</sup> Balthasar, in asserting the cross as God’s self-manifestation, is beautiful, and reconciles the ugliness of the crucifixion with the beauty of divine splendor.<sup>135</sup> In evoking Beauty, the experience of awe and desire conveys divine manifestation as both attractive and transformative and reminds

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<sup>130</sup> Arnold, *Genesis*, 30.

<sup>131</sup> O’Donohue, *Beauty*, 15.

<sup>132</sup> Richard Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 35.

<sup>133</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, Joseph Fessio & John Riches, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics, vol 1 Seeing the Form* (London: T & T Clark, 2019), 33, 122.

<sup>134</sup> Emilie Griffin ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing* (New York: HarperOne, 2004), 27.

<sup>135</sup> Balthasar, Fessio, and Riches, *The Glory of the Lord*, 33.

us that theology is rooted in adoration. Often, divine wisdom revealed in creation awakens our sense of reverence: “We can participate in beauty; we can never possess it. If we attempt to own beauty, we corrupt it.”<sup>136</sup> Without wonder and contemplative receptivity, grasping knowledge can become mastery, domination and exploitation. Accompanied by beauty, truth gains graciousness and compassion.<sup>137</sup> The most hostile thing a Christian can do is to impose one’s faith and one’s worldview onto religious others. As Volf observes, “Jesus who claimed to be the Truth, refused to use violence to persuade those who did not recognize his truth.”<sup>138</sup> Christian triumphalism can occupy our mind with judgement and fill our heart with prejudices; preoccupied thoughts and emotions are stumbling blocks to making space for interreligious dialogue.<sup>139</sup>

Kenosis does not empty our capacity to share our Christian perspectives; it makes a difference how we extend ourselves toward others and, most importantly, how we come to know. The kenotic way of knowing does not seek to possess truth as an emphatic idea. Rather, we value the disclosure of truth as we grow into greater wisdom, in creation as well as in other religious traditions. Merton’s own encounter with religious others led him to affirm that “God speaks, and God is to be heard, not only on Sinai, not only in my own heart, but in the voice of the stranger [...] We must, then, see the truth in the stranger, and the truth we see must be a newly living truth, not just a projection of a dead conventional idea of our own – a projection of our own self upon the stranger.”<sup>140</sup> Hospitality implies a way of humility that will not impose change on others but embraces the attitude of “learned ignorance” to appreciate and learn from other religious traditions,<sup>141</sup> and to seek to understand religious others to the extent that they might touch us,

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<sup>136</sup> O’Donohue, *Beauty*, 49.

<sup>137</sup> O’Donohue, 57.

<sup>138</sup> Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 271.

<sup>139</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (Garden: Image Books, 1986), 51.

<sup>140</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), 384–85. Cf. Pramuk, *Sophia*, chap 3, Kindle.

<sup>141</sup> Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 75.

somehow tempting us to reinterpret our own faith with the insight received.<sup>142</sup> In fact, when we open ourselves up to the beauty of other religious traditions and when our vision and awareness expands, we have already come into dialogue, in which we give over our attention to the other.<sup>143</sup>

The processes of interreligious engagement can be understood in aesthetic terms. Such beauty is not defined by the objectifying gaze but is a close attention given to something other than oneself: “attention [...] requires the suspension of one’s self as the center of the world, making oneself available to another person, being open to another reality.”<sup>144</sup> The ground of authentic dialogue is found in this “proximate space of relation-through-difference between self and other,” in which oneself and religious others are experienced as intersubjective.<sup>145</sup> As illustrated, “When I look at an object—the lamp, a table, a person—I perceive, not the lamp or table as an isolated entity, but the relation between that object and myself. The distance between myself and an other, our relation, is the real object of my perception.”<sup>146</sup> In fact, the foundational question theological aesthetics is concerned with is: “what moves the human heart?”<sup>147</sup> In his reading of Karl Barth, Merton showed interest in Barth’s remark on Mozart’s place in theology. Merton perceives Barth playing Mozart as “unconsciously seeking to awaken, perhaps, the hidden sophianic Mozart in himself.”<sup>148</sup> He goes so far as to suggest that Barth “will be saved more by Mozart in himself than

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<sup>142</sup> Fredericks remarks, “Christians need to open themselves to other religious believers in such a way that the other religion comes to be seen as a genuine spiritual resource for living more faithfully the path of Christ.” James Fredericks, *Buddhists and Christians: Through Comparative Theology to Solidarity* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), 112. Cf. Peter Feldmeier, *Experiments in Buddhist-Christian Encounter: From Buddha-Nature to the Divine Nature* (Maryknoll: OrbisBooks, 2019), chap 1.

<sup>143</sup> Susan A. Ross, *For the Beauty of the Earth: Women, Sacramentality, and Justice* (New York: Paulist Press, 2006), 83. Cf. Alison Downie, “A Spirituality of Openness: Christian Ecofeminist Perspectives and Inter-Religious Dialogue,” *Feminist Theology* 23, no. 1 (2014): 66.

<sup>144</sup> Ursula King, *The Search for Spirituality: Our Global Quest for a Spiritual Life* (New York: Bluebridge, 2008), 13. Cf. Downie, “A Spirituality of Openness,” 65.

<sup>145</sup> Mary Anderson, “Art and Inter-Religious Dialogue,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*, ed. Catherine Cornille (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 110.

<sup>146</sup> Anderson, 110.

<sup>147</sup> Alejandro García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful: A Theological Aesthetics* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 9.

<sup>148</sup> Merton, *Guilty Bystander*, 3-4.

by his theology.”<sup>149</sup> Beauty is experiential; so, as love, in this way, theological aesthetics and the sapiential spirituality are related, in the sense that “keep[ing] the Infinite before our eyes...remind[s] us that it ever dwells within our souls.”<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Merton, 3-4.

<sup>150</sup> Philip Novak, “Foreword,” in Rabindranath Tagore, *The Religion of Man* (Rhinebeck: Monkfish Book Publishing, 1961), xi. Cf. Anderson, “Art and Inter-Religious Dialogue,” 99.

## **Chapter two: Zen's influence on Thomas Merton's view of self-identity and self-emptying**

In this chapter, we will turn to Merton's appropriation of Zen insight regarding his understanding of self-identity, a prominent and recurring theme that weaves its way through Merton's writings. James Finley, who lived with and studied under Merton, indicates that Merton's whole spirituality pivots on the human search for self-identity.<sup>151</sup> Being aware that who we appear to be is often inconsistent with who we really are, transformation for Merton is our letting go of the false self that exists in egocentric desires to discover the true self that is only found in God. In other words, the spiritual journey Merton speaks of is a kenotic one. After outlining Merton's view of the false self and true self, and inspecting Merton's understanding of Zen with a careful study of the author's notes in his book *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, this chapter will come to examine the influence of Zen on Merton in terms of self-emptying. Questions about the comparability between kenosis in Christianity and *sunyata* in Buddhism are raised, and the space is opened up for interreligious dialogue.

### 1. Thomas Merton's view of self

#### a. False self

According to Merton, the false self as the ego is a self-constructed illusion that we wish to present to the world. This self is presented with qualities and characteristics we think we have and to which we are attached, yet exists beyond the reach of God's will and God's love.<sup>152</sup> Our reluctance to root our identity in Christ leaves us no alternative but to create our own self and to live out of a false center.<sup>153</sup> Our individual ego then becomes the pure source and end of our own acts.<sup>154</sup> Striving for control of our lives and determined for autonomy and independence from God,

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<sup>151</sup> James Finley, *Merton's Palace of Nowhere: A Search for God through Awareness of the True Self* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1978), 14.

<sup>152</sup> Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 34.

<sup>153</sup> David G. Benner, *Sacred Companions: The Gift of Spiritual Friendship & Direction* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002), 38.

<sup>154</sup> Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 34. And Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (Garden: Doubleday, 1969), 70.

our false self tends to cling to achievement, success, and power because we are obsessed with a kind of verification of our self-proclaimed reality. Considering ourselves as completely autonomous self-serving units, the false self creates a false world where we are at the center, reconstructing the entire universe in our own image and likeness rather than God's.<sup>155</sup> As James Finley elaborates on Merton's writings, he recognizes that the whole process of self-identity making leads us to fashion a god who fits our falsity: "Instead of acknowledging God as the source of our identity and existence, we make ourselves the self-proclaimed source of God's identity. God then becomes the one made in our image and likeness [...] We give God a name. We then equate God with the name we have given him, and in doing so we make ourselves, in effect, God's God."<sup>156</sup> Any God we have in our life on our terms is an idol, and the self that wants to have God in our life on our terms is a religious false self.<sup>157</sup> It is often easier for Christians to reproach religious others for idolatry rather than acknowledge the reality of our own religious false self.

Merton's disapproval of the false self may mislead us to form an impression that the false self is wicked or hateful. Richard Rohr, who adopts the idea of true-self-and-false-self from Merton, remarks, "Your False Self is not your bad self [...] The False Self is bogus more than bad, and bogus only when it pretends to be more than it is."<sup>158</sup> A lot of time, the false self is the desirable and presentable mask that we wear to get through an ordinary day, allowing us to hide our vulnerability from others who are trying to find our flaws. With a little reflection, many can become aware of the masks that we have adopted. Tragically, most of us are drawn to the pretense or spend our whole lives living up to it, even at the cost of our authentic self.

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<sup>155</sup> Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (London: Burns & Oates, 1985), 116-117.

<sup>156</sup> Finley, *Palace of Nowhere*, 67.

<sup>157</sup> M. Robert Mulholland Jr., *The Deeper Journey: The Spirituality of Discovering Your True* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2016), 49.

<sup>158</sup> Richard Rohr, *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2013), 27-29

## b. True self

In contrast to the false self, we do not create, earn, or obtain our true self; rather, the true self is first and foremost a received self.<sup>159</sup> The true self is characterized by contentment. When we come to realize that life and everything else are gifts from God, the gift of God is revealed to be the ground and root of our very existence. In each moment and each breath, we live as we receive life from God who is life. We do not find our true self by seeking it; we find it by seeking God. We can know ourselves only when we view our essential identity as intimately related to God. Theologically speaking, the true self is the *imago Dei*.

This true self is always identified with Christlikeness. Jesus Christ is regarded as the ultimate reality of human wholeness.<sup>160</sup> David Benner says it well: “Genuine self-knowledge begins by looking at God and noticing how God is looking at us [...] paradoxically, as we become more and more like Christ we become more uniquely our own true self.”<sup>161</sup> In Christ, we share his identity as the Son loved by the Father in the Spirit. Merton writes, “To say I am made in the image of God is to say that love is the reason for my existence for God is love. Love is my true identity.”<sup>162</sup> As Finley understands, “it is our love for God that makes us most like God.”<sup>163</sup> The true self is the beloved.

The true self is also in union with God: “Lover and Beloved are ‘one spirit.’”<sup>164</sup> Merton explains the true self has its own way of knowing, loving and experiencing which transcends the dichotomy of subject and object. As long as our experience of God is the kind which says, “I love” or is one we approach to “receive love” from Him, we are still far from the most intimate union.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Finley, *Palace of Nowhere*, 72, 91.

<sup>160</sup> In James Finley’s analysis, he frames Merton’s discussion of false self with the Fall narrative and associates it with Adam. Thus, Christ is the last Adam and the beginning of a new humanity in whom the true self is found.

<sup>161</sup> David G. Benner, *The Gift of Being Yourself: The Sacred Call to Self-Discovery* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 48.

<sup>162</sup> Finley, *Palace of Nowhere*, 95, 102.

<sup>163</sup> Finley, 29-30.

<sup>164</sup> Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 193.

<sup>165</sup> Merton, 193.

The experience of love cannot be possessed; in the same way, we cannot possess the true self but can only become aware of it. The only way to live as our true self is to dwell in the love of God as God dwells in us. This mystical oneness is always reflected in the way Merton illustrates the spiritual journey: “If I find Him I will find myself and if I find my true self I will find Him [...] Our discovery of God is, in a way, God’s discovery of us [...] God Himself begins to live in me not only as my Creator but as my other and true self.”<sup>166</sup>

### c. The monk in search of a home

Merton, the man who dedicated his life to an intense search for his identity, describes the spiritual dynamic he was in: “For me to be a saint means to be myself.”<sup>167</sup> Yet, all the while, he was aware of the unsatisfactory condition of humanity: “To say I was born in sin is to say I came into the world with a false self.”<sup>168</sup> Therefore, he claims that, “Here is only one problem on which all my existence, my peace and my happiness depend: to discover myself in discovering God.”<sup>169</sup> The personal articulation with the frequent usages of the “I” and “my” reflects Merton’s preference for talking about spiritual things from the point of view of experience rather than using concise terms of dogmatic theology or metaphysics. Elsewhere, Merton stresses the importance of experience: “It seems to me that the first responsibility of a man of faith is to make his faith really part of his own life, not by rationalizing it, but by living it.”<sup>170</sup> For Merton, experience was always more primary in relation to theological formulation; it is precisely Merton’s lifelong search for the authentic self-identity that led him to write on the issues of true self and false self.

True self for Merton is always a becoming. Merton says, “Home is not a place. To be really at home you have to stop looking for a place called home and accept the ‘no-place’ where you are

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<sup>166</sup> Merton, 36, 38-39.

<sup>167</sup> Merton, 33.

<sup>168</sup> Merton, 33.

<sup>169</sup> Merton, 33.

<sup>170</sup> Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2002), prologue, Kindle.

as home.”<sup>171</sup> Even towards the end of his life, this longing and restlessness was still noticeable: two months before his journey to Asia, on July 29, 1968, Merton wrote in his personal journal: “In eight weeks I am to leave here. Who knows, I may not come back.”<sup>172</sup> Again on September 9, 1968, he expressed a similar idea: “I am not starting out with a firm plan never to return or with an absolute determination to return at all costs. [...] Whether or not I will end my days here, I don’t know.”<sup>173</sup> The day Merton flew out of San Francisco for Asia, October 15, 1968, he wrote, “I am going home, to the home where I have never been in this body.”<sup>174</sup> Where was home for Merton? Robert Giroux, Merton’s publisher-friend comments, “I don’t think he ever found a home.”<sup>175</sup> However, Merton trusted the journey: “I have become very different from what I used to be. The man who began this journal is dead, just as the man who finished *The Seven Storey Mountain* when this journal began was also dead [...] Thus I stand on the threshold of a new existence.”<sup>176</sup> Along the journey of transformation, the self that begins is never the self that arrives.

#### d. On the matter of sin, ego and false self

Steindl-Rest observes that the distinction between light and darkness is sharply defined in the Christian tradition; God blesses the righteous and the wicked are punished.<sup>177</sup> Often when Christians try to live up to the standards of a God who is understood to be absolutely good and purely light, we are ashamed of the darkness within us. Does the true self and false self dichotomy reinforce this duality? That evil stands in opposition to goodness is not without implications on how men and women have been defined in their aptitudes, according to some feminists. With

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<sup>171</sup> Thomas P. McDonnell, “An Interview with Thomas Merton,” *Motive* 28/1 (October 1967): 33.

<sup>172</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), 205.

<sup>173</sup> Merton, 205.

<sup>174</sup> Merton, 205.

<sup>175</sup> Paul Wilkes ed., *Merton, By Those Who Knew Him Best* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), 24-25.

<sup>176</sup> Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, 328.

<sup>177</sup> Brother David Steindl-Rest, “The shadow in Christianity,” in *Meeting the shadow: The hidden power of the dark side of human nature*, ed. Jeremiah Abrams and Connie Zweig (Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher, 1991), 132.

reference to Aristotle's table of Pythagorean opposites and the dimension of body-mind or physical-spiritual division added by Plato, what is "male" is associated with implicitly good qualities and what is "female" is associated with all that is considered bad.<sup>178</sup> Patriarchal control was then made legitimate; as derived from an interpretation of the role Eve played in the biblical narrative of the Fall, the essence of femaleness was said to be "a defective male."<sup>179</sup> Patriarchy is a tragedy that demonstrates how a total rejection or repression of what is perceived to be "evil" or "weak" does not lead to liberation. Not to mention, we are blind to the limitations of our self-knowledge and self-interest, particularly in discerning the weeds from the wheat.<sup>180</sup>

For Merton, the question of one's identity in God is a matter of salvation. Merton draws a direct comparison between the false self and sin: "All sin starts from [...] my false self, [...] I use up my life in the desire for pleasures and the thirst for experiences, for power, honor, knowledge and love, to clothe this false self and construct its nothingness into something objectively real [...] as if I were an invisible body that could only become visible when something visible covered its surface."<sup>181</sup> That the false self distorts reality is what Merton came to understand as original sin. Finley points out the significance of how Merton shifts the focus of sin from the realm of morality to that of ontology. The sense of sin, Merton expresses, "springs directly from the evil that is present in me: it tells me not merely that I have done wrong, but that I *am* wrong, through and through. That I am a false being."<sup>182</sup> In the light of sin as an ontological issue, Merton makes a

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<sup>178</sup> Justin P. McBrayer and Daniel Howard-Snyder, "Feminism and the Problem of Evil," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 328.

<sup>179</sup> McBrayer and Howard-Snyder, 329-330.

<sup>180</sup> Richard Rohr admits that, "I'm certain of one thing at this point in my life: that a great many things I thought were weeds when I first started my journey have turned out to be my wheat [...] Conversely, much that I thought was my wheat, my true gifts, have turned out to be the source of my greatest and most denied faults. Only time and suffering sorted them out a bit." Richard Rohr, *Job and the Mystery of Suffering: Spiritual Reflections* (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 171. And Monty Williams SJ, *The Gift of Spiritual Intimacy: Following the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius* (Toronto: Novalis, 2009), 76.

<sup>181</sup> Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 33.

<sup>182</sup> Thomas Merton and William H. Shannon, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), 123.

distinction between sin and guilt: the feeling of guilt is “a sign of moral alienation” that possibly springs from reflection on the action of wrongdoing or “when we interiorize a reproof suggested by [the authority of God] whose edicts we have violated and yet sinfulness.”<sup>183</sup> In short, guilt signifies that sin exists.

Even though Western theology, the Protestant tradition in particular, has often equated sin with guilt and salvation as justification, whereby the guilt of sin is removed, the universal appropriateness of sin has come into question. For example, there is growing awareness that experiences of sin are described using shame vocabulary within honour-and-shame cultures.<sup>184</sup> John A. Forrester recognizes shame as disgrace, at heart, is the experience of being exposed; shamefulness is a sense of diminished worth relating to our very sense of identity, a defective personhood.<sup>185</sup> He elaborates that “what guilt seeks is forgiveness,” and “overcoming guilt results in righteousness, i.e. right behaviour.” Whereas “what shame seeks is acceptance,” the kind of acceptance that is “in spite of guilt and anticipates forgiveness” and “results in a clear sense of identity.”<sup>186</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor identifies the core experience of sin as the “experience of being cut off from life,”<sup>187</sup> which takes many forms. Although there are a variety of metaphors or models that communicate the understanding of sin in relation to salvation, Western theology is mainly concerned with providing an explanation—“why do we need salvation?”—rather than the experience—“what is the kind of salvation we are looking for?”<sup>188</sup> W. Paul Jones describes guilt

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<sup>183</sup> Merton and Shannon, *The Inner Experience*, 118.

<sup>184</sup> The concept of shame is not straightforward; its complexity must be understood within the context of a dynamic relational system, in contrast to personal feelings of guilt. Besides, the function of healthy shame in society should not be neglected. For example, in Confucianism, not only does shame stand for an innate moral sense that restrains a person’s behavior but it also brings forth virtues: “to know shame is akin to courage.”

<sup>185</sup> John Forrester, *Grace for Shame: The Forgotten Gospel* (Toronto: Pastor’s Attic Press, 2001), 20-24.

<sup>186</sup> John Forrester, 24-28.

<sup>187</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Speaking of Sin: The Lost Language of Salvation* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 2000), 62.

<sup>188</sup> Jones identifies the spiritual dynamic that operates in people’s lives in five ways: from alienation (being separated) to reunion, from conflict (being oppressed) to vindication, from empty (rendered invisible) to fulfillment, from condemned (being guilty) to forgiveness, and from suffering (refugee) to endurance. W. Paul Jones, *The Art of Spiritual Direction: Giving and Receiving Spiritual Guidance* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2002), 35-36.

among alienation, conflict, emptiness, and suffering as one of the five ways sin is experienced in the human life, and each of these ways speaks of salvation as a specific gift that meets the deepest quest of human heart.<sup>189</sup> After all, sin needs not to be seen as a problem to be solved or fixed, rather, it is more of a relationship to be mended. Because our identity is our relationship with God, the answer to Merton's ontological question is indeed a relational one. Merton's reframing of salvation as the human search of self-identity encourages us to attend to the knowledge of self and our image of God by giving a personal account of the salvation story in our own lives.

## 2. Merton's understanding of Zen

### a. Merton's reception of Zen Buddhism<sup>190</sup>

Merton's primary knowledge about Zen Buddhism came from D.T. Suzuki. It is not the task of this thesis to verify or justify the legitimacy of Merton's knowledge of Buddhism because of his reliance on Suzuki.<sup>191</sup> However, it is from Suzuki that Merton comes to understand Zen as fundamentally the transcendental experience. Although Zen is developed from and within Buddhism, it is not confined to Buddhism or its religious structure. Zen as "a trans-religious, trans-cultural, and trans-formed consciousness" can shine through any system as neutral light shines through glass.<sup>192</sup> Zen is considered a direct and pure experience that comes to direct grasp of reality beyond words, thus, in Merton's judgement, Zen is compatible with Christianity.

Walter Coan observes that the area most clearly influenced by Zen is Merton's ongoing reflections on self-identity.<sup>193</sup> The distinction between the false self and the true self that Merton

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<sup>189</sup> Jones, 32.

<sup>190</sup> Buddhism is a living tradition that originated from the life and teachings of Siddhattha Gotama, the historical Buddha. Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana are its three main branches. Zen is a school of Mahayana Buddhism and co-mingles with thoughts of Taoism and Confucianism.

<sup>191</sup> Dadosky indicates that critics of Merton's knowledge of Buddhism are more of a residual effect from backlash against the scholarship of Suzuki. He emphasizes Merton's contributions as well as D.T. Suzuki's in building bridges of dialogue. Dadosky, "Merton's Dialogue with Zen," 53-75.

<sup>192</sup> Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1968), 3-4.

<sup>193</sup> Walter E. Conn, "Merton's religious Development: The Monastic Years," *Cistercian Studies* 22 (1987): 285. Cf. Ekman P. C. Tam, *Christian Contemplation and Chinese Zen-Taoism: A Study of Thomas Merton's Writings* (Hong Kong: Tao Fong Shan Christian Centre, 2002), 176.

touches on briefly in *Seeds of Contemplation* (1949) receives fuller expression in *New Seeds of Contemplation* (1961). During the intervening years, one of the significant changes in Merton's theology would be his encounter with Eastern spirituality. By comparing the two books, we might gain insight into the evolution of his spiritual theology, especially the influence of Zen on his view of self. Merton's understanding of self is inseparable from his view on contemplation, that is to say, one discovers oneself in discovering God.<sup>194</sup> Zen leads Merton to a more radical perception of self-emptying in light of a non-dualist worldview. *The Inner Experience*, written in 1959, where Merton first begins to write about Eastern spirituality, can be seen as a "bridge" to better explain the changes between Merton's early years and his later years.

Originally, Merton did not hold the same kind of openness towards other religious traditions. Thus, one of the most prominent changes observed in the later publications is that the negative references comparing non-Christian spiritual experiences with Christian contemplation in *Seeds of Contemplation* are removed from *New Seeds of Contemplation*.<sup>195</sup>

For outside the magisterium directly guided by the Spirit of God we find no such contemplation and no such union with Him – only the void of nirvana or the feeble intellectual light of Platonic idealism, or the sensual dreams of the Sufi. But the first step to contemplation is faith; and faith begins with an assent to Christ teaching through His Church. (*Seeds of Contemplation*, p.87)

(omitted) But the first step to contemplation is faith; and faith begins with an assent to Christ teaching through His Church. (*New Seeds of Contemplation*, p.146)

While Merton affirms that the beginning of Christian contemplation is marked by faith, he no longer passes judgement on religious experiences rooted in other traditions. Merton's change in attitude towards non-Christian religious experiences is largely related to the development of his interest in wisdom. There is no description of wisdom is found in *Seeds of Contemplation*; in the

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<sup>194</sup> Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 33.

<sup>195</sup> Ruth Fox, "Merton's Journey from Seeds to New Seeds." *The Merton Annual* 1 (1988): 268.

revised version, however, Merton placed a new chapter titled “From Faith to Wisdom” after the chapter “Faith,” which belongs to the original *Seeds of Contemplation*. In *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton does affirm that “the beginning of contemplation is faith,”<sup>196</sup> yet he expends his idea in the newly added chapter, writing that “faith is what opens us to this higher realm of unity, [...] of sophianic love [...] Our full spiritual life is life in wisdom, life in Christ. The darkness of faith bears fruit in the light of wisdom.”<sup>197</sup> It is clear for Merton that wisdom is understood to be the deepening of faith, which also lays the foundation for a comparison between Christian contemplation and Zen awakening. The influence of Zen is made clear when the Christian theological terminology is replaced with some Zen-like wordings in *New Seeds of Contemplation*:

OUR discovery of God is, in a way, God’s discovery of us [...] We become contemplatives when God discovers Himself in us. At that moment the point of our contact with Him opens out and we pass through the center of our own souls and enter into eternity. (Seeds of Contemplation, 26)

OUR discovery of God is, in a way, God’s discovery of us. [...] We become contemplatives when God discovers Himself in us. At that moment the point of our contact with Him opens out and we pass through the center of our own nothingness and enter into infinite reality, where we awaken as our true self. (New Seeds of Contemplation, 38)

In the quote above, Merton clearly sees parallels between the Christian true self and Zen Buddhism’s no-self. He also understands eternity to be the eschatological presence of God to infinite reality. In fact, Shannon considers that many of the statements Merton makes about contemplation in *New Seeds of Contemplation* could be used to describe the Zen experience.<sup>198</sup> The comparison raises fundamental questions regarding the compatibility of Christianity and Zen: Does Merton simply find that the language of Zen gives him adequate vocabularies to describe the experience of Christian contemplation? Or does he consider Christian contemplation and Zen

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<sup>196</sup> Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 126.

<sup>197</sup> Merton, 141.

<sup>198</sup> Merton, *Birds of Appetite*, 4.

Buddhism awakening to be the same experience but articulated differently because each religious system uses its own framework of expressed belief? Are Christian kenosis and Zen Buddhist *sunyata* for the same ends? Ultimately, this discovery leads us to the question of whether we can equate Christianity's Triune God with Emptiness while remaining true to both traditions.

b. An Analysis of the author's note<sup>199</sup>

The author's note in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* gives an exquisite overview of Merton's understanding of Zen. The way it is written is an imitation of a *koan*. Koan, in Chinese, literally means "a public record," which takes the form of a story, a dialogue or a question to illuminate one to recognizing the inadequacy of logical reasoning. The purpose of solving a koan is not to acquire an answer, but to provoke the awakening of the mind.<sup>200</sup> In general, a koan features a paradox and negation which serve to "[break] down concepts to the point where the practitioner comes to rid [one]self of all discrimination and penetrates undiscriminated reality."<sup>201</sup>

Referring to the title *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* Merton introduces us to the central image of the piece: "Where there is carrion lying, meat-eating birds circle and descend." A common characteristic of Merton's writings, multiple synonyms are applied to describe these creatures: the birds of appetite, the meat-eating birds, the buzzards, and the scavengers. Merton associates the birds of appetite with life and carrion with death: "The living attacks the dead." The dualistic perception is made obvious: "life and death are two." What follows, however, are layers of deconstruction. First, when the birds of appetite consume the carrion, death becomes part of life; life is no longer separated from death. Dualism remains true if the relationship between the living and the dead is understood as gain and loss. Thus, Merton further describes that while "the living

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<sup>199</sup> Full text see appendix 1.

<sup>200</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Zen Keys* (Garden: Anchor Press, 1974), 12, 53.

<sup>201</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, 124.

attacks the dead, to their own profit,” the dead lose nothing. In fact, by way of losing – “being disposed”—the dead again gain life. Nevertheless, Merton refutes this view: “Or they seem to, if you must think in terms of gain and loss.” The utilitarian perception of gain and loss is only a constructed reality of one’s thinking and not necessarily real. If neither gain nor loss exists, gain and loss are one; such is life and death. Zen repudiates any dichotomy such as life and death, gain and loss, subject and object, being and non-being to awaken us from the obsession with the forms and structures that often blind us from seeing the ultimate reality.<sup>202</sup> The notion of nonduality is central to Zen.

The question that follows is one that the author’s note revolves around: “Do you approach the study of Zen with the idea that there is something to be gained by it?” The answer to this rhetorical question is beyond yes or no, but forces us to realize the uselessness of approaching Zen with ambition – why must we only speak of profit? This question reveals Merton’s skepticism towards those who strive towards Zen for superficial nourishment as some kind of achievement, attainment or possession. It is a mistake to think that one can possess Zen or contemplation in the way we possess everything else.<sup>203</sup> This too is part of Merton’s birds of appetite imagery, where the birds hover hungrily around a corpse. These birds of appetite are large in number, characterized by an endless hunger. They are meat-eating, aggressive and impatient, encircling where they think “spiritual riches” would be found. Merton’s response to their quest is ruthless: “There is no body to be found.” It is of no use for the birds of appetite to hover around: their hope to acquire what they seek is in vain. What they find instead is nothingness and emptiness, which is not the kind of prey the birds want. The paradox is that the moment the birds leave, disappointed with what they have (not) found, Zen “suddenly appears.” The birds of appetite are doomed to miss Zen not

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<sup>202</sup> Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1999), 13.

<sup>203</sup> Merton, *Birds of Appetite*, 31.

because Zen is absent – in fact, Zen is there the whole time– but because Zen has nothing to do with what they are looking for to begin with.

Zen as “nothing” and “no-body” is in contrast to the visible and tangible carrion. Merton’s illustration is consistent with what is famously stated in The Heart Sutra—one of the most important sutras in Mahayana Buddhism: “Form does not differ from emptiness; emptiness does not differ from form. Form itself is emptiness; emptiness itself is form.”<sup>204</sup> Zen as emptiness appears only in the eyes of the enlightened; awakening is seeing, and true seeing is when there is no seeing or seeing nothing.<sup>205</sup> Zen seeing is compared to a mirror: “The mirror is thoroughly egoless and mindless. If a flower comes it reflects a flower, if a bird comes it reflects a bird. It shows a beautiful object as beautiful, an ugly object as ugly. [...] If something comes, the mirror reflects; if it disappears the mirror just lets it disappear.”<sup>206</sup> The non-discriminatory wisdom of Zen is that in emptiness, “everything is revealed as it is.”

When speaking of Zen as emptiness, Merton does not mean it negatively. Rather, “Zen enriches no one. There is no body to be found.” Zen is a form of negation and negation is used to guard against misunderstanding; by no means does it refer to a negative experience.<sup>207</sup> To quote Merton, “The convenient tools of language enable us to decide beforehand what we think things mean and tempt us all too easily to see things only in a way that fits our logical preconceptions and our verbal formulas.”<sup>208</sup> By contrast, the “whole aim of Zen is not to make foolproof

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<sup>204</sup> Thich Nhat Han translates this as “this Body itself is Emptiness and Emptiness itself is this Body. This Body is not other than Emptiness and Emptiness is not other than this Body.” Thich Nhat Hanh, “The Insight that Brings us to the Other Shore,” (2014). <https://plumvillage.org/about/thich-nhat-hanh/letters/thich-nhat-hanh-new-heart-sutra-translation/>

<sup>205</sup> In reference to a koan: “The disciple asks: When it is nothing, what can it see? The master replies: Seeing is not like something you can call a thing. The disciple asks: If it is not like anything one can call a thing, what does it see? The master replies: it sees no-thing. That is the true seeing. It always sees.” Yanagita Seizan, *Inquiry into Nothing: Chinese Zen Buddhism* (Tokyo: Kadokawa shoten, 1974). Cf. Shigenori Nagatomo, “Japanese Zen Buddhist Philosophy” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2020), ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford: Stanford University, 2020). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/japanese-zen/>

<sup>206</sup> Merton, *Birds of Appetite*, 6.

<sup>207</sup> Merton, 85.

<sup>208</sup> Merton, 48.

statements about experience but to come to direct grips with reality without the mediation of logical verbalizing.”<sup>209</sup> To say “Zen enriches no one” is to say “Zen teaches nothing; it merely enables us to wake up and become aware. It does not teach, it points.”<sup>210</sup> When “there is no body to be found,” there is no form; when there is no form, there is no limit. Emptiness is non-being as well as fullness of being.

Finley rightly observes that the illustration Merton uses to describe Zen is also relevant to false self and true self. In fact, what is presented in the author’s note of *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* is very similar to what Merton speaks elsewhere of self-identity:

If such an “I” one day hears about “contemplation” he will perhaps set himself to “become a contemplative.” That is, he will wish to admire in himself, something called contemplation. And in order to see it, he will reflect on his alienated self. [...] And the fact that his busy narcissism is turned within and feeds upon itself in stillness and secret love will make him believe that his experience of himself is an experience of God. [...] But the exterior “I,” [...] is alien from the hidden, interior “I” who has no projects and seeks to accomplish nothing, even contemplation. [...] The inner self [...] is like a very shy wild animal that never appears at all whenever an alien presence is at hand, and comes out only when all is perfectly peaceful, in silence [...] Sad is the case of that exterior self that imagines himself contemplative, and seeks to achieve contemplation as the fruit of planned effort and of spiritual ambition [...] and try to fabricate for himself a contemplative identity: and all the while there is nobody there.”<sup>211</sup>

It is not hard to recognize the parallel between the false self and the ambitious birds of appetite, or the true self and Zen, which are both hidden like wild animals, only appearing spontaneously. Unlike the false self, which is known by its content and form, the true self has no inherent content other than a quality of spontaneity and realness. We may think that true self as an identity and Zen as an experience are an unidentical pair; however, Zen understands that we cannot divest ourselves from our experiences. The distinction made between I who experience and the experience itself is

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<sup>209</sup> Merton, 37.

<sup>210</sup> Merton, 49-50.

<sup>211</sup> Merton and Shannon, *The Inner Experience*, 16-17.

a division between subject and object which needs to be overcome, or, more accurately, understood as an illusion that never existed.

### 3. Zen's influence on Merton's understanding of self-identity and self-emptying

#### a. Nonduality

Nonduality as reflected in the analysis of the author's note above is essential to Merton's understanding of Zen. The non-separation between subject and object in the Zen experience makes Merton more aware of the influence of Cartesian subjectivism on how self-identity is perceived in the West. Only in Merton's later writings do we see him relate the false self with Cartesian *cogito*. In one of the new chapters Merton added to *New Seeds of Contemplation*, he writes: "Nothing could be more alien to contemplation than the *cogito ergo sum* of Descartes [...] This is the declaration of an alienated being [...] compelled to seek some comfort in a proof for his own existence based on the observation that he "thinks."<sup>212</sup> After Cartesian doubt, the human thinking subject claims to be the only one subject of experience of which we are certain – everything else including persons, creation, and even God, have now become objects of our thought, not subjects in their own right. The Cartesian self, in Merton's opinion, is a major obstacle to the union with God. Merton explains, "Cartesian thought began with an attempt to reach God as object by starting from the thinking self. But when God becomes object, he sooner or later 'dies.'<sup>213</sup> On the other hand, the attentive awareness in Zen or contemplation is about closing the gap between "I" and that which I am aware of. Merton writes, "In the depth of contemplative prayer there seems to be no division between subject and object, and there is no reason to make any statement either about God or about oneself. He IS and this reality absorbs everything else."<sup>214</sup> As a result, we can say

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<sup>212</sup> Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 22.

<sup>213</sup> Merton, *Birds of Appetite*, 23.

<sup>214</sup> Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 183.

that “for the contemplative there is *no cogito* (“I think”) and *no ergo* (“therefore”) but only SUM, I AM.”<sup>215</sup>

Merton’s view of a true self that sees the interbeing of all things also has an impact on his concept of God. Merton describes God in paradoxical terms: “For if God is immanently present He is also transcendent, which means that he is completely beyond the grasp of our understanding. The two (absence and presence) merge in the loving knowledge that ‘knows by unknowing’. The sense of absence is not a one-sided thing: it is dialectical, and it includes its opposite, namely presence.”<sup>216</sup> The presence of God as both presence and absence in our awareness is very close to Merton’s understanding of Zen as expressed in terms of Being: “Zen insight is not our awareness, but Being's awareness of itself in us.”<sup>217</sup> Not that our awareness makes God’s presence (and absence) known to us, but God in us is our awareness of His presence. The path that leads to this union, or awakening in Zen terms, is self-emptying, which is another area of insight drawn from Merton’s engagement with Zen Buddhism.

#### b. Emptiness

Emptiness (*sunyata*) is a central concept in Zen Buddhism but the term carries multiple meanings and is used in divergent ways. Bret W. Davis sketches out six basic forms the notion of emptiness is understood in Zen.<sup>218</sup> Even though it is not meant to be comprehensive, the rubrics provide a good basis for observing how Merton engages with the concept of emptiness in his writings. The earliest references to emptiness are related to Buddha’s instructions on meditation: to empty and quiet the mind in the sense of purifying it of defilements, just like removing the layers

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<sup>215</sup> Merton, 22.

<sup>216</sup> Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 63.

<sup>217</sup> Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, 17.

<sup>218</sup> Bret Davis, “Forms of Emptiness in Zen,” in *Blackwell Companions to Philosophy: A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy*, ed. Steven M. Emmanuel (Somerset: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 191.

of dust from a mirror.<sup>219</sup> This purified consciousness, which Davis describes as a psychological sense of emptiness, involves (1) a non-dualistic awareness that was discussed in the previous section, and (2) a radical openness of mind and heart. In short, emptiness implies living moment-to-moment free from distractions and attachments.

Merton understands that Christianity and Zen Buddhism agree in their view of how “man is somehow not in his right relation to the world and to things in it.”<sup>220</sup> The birds of appetite speak of the opposite as an illustration of the false self-identity that centers on itself and refers to everything else as its prey, either as objects of desire or of repulsion. Hence, Christianity and Zen Buddhism are alike in recognizing that the true self or no self comes forth at the cost ego death. As stated in Buddhist literature: “By oneself the evil is done, by oneself one suffers; by oneself evil is left undone, by oneself one is purified” (Dhammapada, Chapter 10, Verses 165). Yet, “to study self is to forget the self; to forget the self is to be at one with all things” (The Genjo koan in Dogen’s *Shobogenzo* Fascicle No. 1). This is not far from the words of Jesus: “Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it” (Matt. 10:39). Self-emptying as kenosis in Christianity and *sunyata* in Zen Buddhism share a similar paradoxical nature: arriving by negation, by what it is not, the process of self-emptying transcends duality between life and death, gain and loss.

The fruit of self-emptying is recognised in the change of the person’s perception of the experience of emptiness. Merton reflects: “The man who has truly found his spiritual nakedness, who has realized he is empty, is not just a self that has acquired emptiness or become empty. He just is empty from the beginning.”<sup>221</sup> Tracing the way Merton uses the word emptiness in his

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<sup>219</sup> Davis, 198-204.

<sup>220</sup> Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 82. And Bonnie Bowman Thurston, “The Conquered Self: Emptiness and God in a Buddhist-Christian Dialogue,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 12, no. 4 (1985): 343-353.

<sup>221</sup> Merton, *Birds of Appetite*, 109.

writings, we can see from his autobiography that Merton was in desolation with his initial experience of emptiness, as loneliness, abandonment, and moral and spiritual vacuity is understood to be desolation.<sup>222</sup> It is not that Merton no longer felt the sense of nothingness or helplessness later in his life, but he went to God in and through the recognition of his own emptiness and the experience of emptiness became consolation. Again, in recognizing the paradox of emptiness Merton writes, “We accept our emptying because we realize that our very emptiness is fulfillment and plenitude. In our emptiness the One Word is clearly spoken.”<sup>223</sup> Emptiness as a dynamic idea does not refer to a static status but requires day-to-day practice. Thus, both *kenosis* and *sunyata* is better understood in their verbal form, self-emptying, rather than in their noun form, emptiness.

Living in this mindful meditative state means that one is allowed to see things as they are or in their suchness per se, which ties to the two other forms of *sunyata* in the ontological sense: (3) the nature of ultimate reality as emptiness, and (4) its association with dependent arising, in the sense that all things are empty of a separate existence.<sup>224</sup> Since the beginning of Mahayana thought, *sunyata* has always been closely related to unlimitedness of space. In Chinese language, the character for emptiness (空) literally means “vacant” as well as “sky;” this void of infinite space implies unlimited potentials and possibilities.<sup>225</sup> The dependent orientation (*pratityasamutpada*) will be explored further in the next chapter through Thich Nhat Hanh’s notion of interbeing. Here we first turn to Merton’s perspective: considering true self is no self in the sense that there is no

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<sup>222</sup> Earlier use of emptiness in Merton’s writings refer to a feeling of abandonment or being somewhat in despair due to loneliness. Merton recalls his experience at age 11: “When I lay awake at night in the huge dark dormitory [...] and heard through the darkness and the emptiness of the night the far screaming of the trains [...] I knew for the first time in my life the pangs of desolation and emptiness and abandonment.” Emptiness also expresses moral and spiritual vacuity: “what’s wrong with this place, with all these people? Why was everything so empty? [...] For those who had nothing but this emptiness in the middle of them, no doubt the things they had to do and to suffer during the war filled that emptiness with something stronger and more resilient than their pride – either that or it destroyed them utterly. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998), 54, 139.

<sup>223</sup> Thomas Merton, “Thoughts in Solitude,” in *Thomas Merton: Introductions East and West.*, ed. Robert Daggy (Greensboro: Unicorn Press, 1981), 96-97. Cf. Thurston, “The conquered self,” 345.

<sup>224</sup> Davis, “Forms of Emptiness in Zen,” 192-198.

<sup>225</sup> Davis, 196.

one or no thing left in us but God. Merton quotes and interprets the work of Meister Eckhart: “Eckhart believes: only when there is no self left as a “place” in which God acts, only when God acts purely in Himself, do we at last recover our “true self” (which is in Zen terms “no-self”).”<sup>226</sup> This radical self-emptying aligns with the non-dualist understanding of self-identity as “I” and God are One, that is “I” would no longer be aware of oneself as one is entirely absorbed in God. On the experiential level true self is no self.

Notice that the experience of God in this case is to be understood in the apophatic tradition, which is to know God by unknowing or to find God in not finding Him. Merton writes, “Now while the Christian contemplative [...] is mainly called to penetrate the wordless darkness and apophatic light of an experience beyond concepts, and here he gradually becomes familiar with a God who is “absent” and as it were “non-existent” to all human experience.”<sup>227</sup> What Merton quotes from Eckhart—“Seek God so as never to find Him”<sup>228</sup>—is expressed more radically in Zen: “If You Meet the Buddha on the road [to awakening], kill him.”<sup>229</sup> As explained in Eckhart’s words, “To leave God for the sake of God means to relinquish a figure of God, a way of God, a mode or manner of speaking of God.”<sup>230</sup> Because any concepts of God or experience with God is not God, we must be emptied of them so that our understanding of God will not turn into obstacles that prevent us from coming to Him with poverty as openness.

In Merton’s judgement, “Zen is perfectly compatible with Christian belief and indeed with Christian mysticism (if we understand Zen in its pure state, as metaphysical intuition),”<sup>231</sup> even though we may wonder whether “pure experience” exists or whether all experiences are perceived

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<sup>226</sup> Merton, *Birds of Appetite*, 10.

<sup>227</sup> Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 7.

<sup>228</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Merton Tapes/ Series III* (Chappaqua: Electronic Paperbacks, 1983), tape 4, “The Ways of God”, side 1. Cf. James Conner, “The Experience of God and the Experience of Nothingness in *Thomas Merton*” *The Merton Annual* 1 (1988): 104.

<sup>229</sup> Merton, *Birds of Appetite*, 77.

<sup>230</sup> Cf. Soelle, *The Silent Cry*, chap 4, iBooks.

<sup>231</sup> Merton, *Birds of Appetite*, 47.

through interpretation. That being said, we must be aware that Merton makes no attempt at giving a theological explanation on ultimate reality nor does he ask us to rethink the Christian God as Emptiness in the Zen Buddhist tradition. Merton recognizes that Christianity and Zen Buddhism as belief systems are fundamentally different: “Nevertheless, studied as structures, as systems, and as religions, Zen and [Christianity] don’t mix any better than oil and water. [...] One can assume that from one side and the other, persons might convene for polite and informed discussion. But their differences would remain inviolate.”<sup>232</sup> To say that we cannot compare Christianity and Zen as religions is to say we cannot compare them at the level of doctrine. The crux of the matter here is that while Christianity believes that there is no true self outside God, there is no concept of God in Zen Buddhism even though Zen Buddhism neither affirms nor denies the existence of God. Kenosis is absolute voluntary poverty before God where one becomes nothing so that God may be everything. From the Christian perspective, in Zen there seems to be no effort to get beyond the inner self. On the contrary, from the perspective of Zen Buddhism, however much the self is emptied into union with God, the dualism between the concept of God and a self remains. *Sunyata* is nothingness in which all concepts, including self or no self, being or non-being, experience and even emptiness is to be emptied. At this point we are leaning far into theological speculation of the experience rather than focusing on the actual experience itself, a place where, for Merton, the dialogue between Christianity and Zen Buddhism becomes futile.

Regarding the dialogue between Christianity and Zen Buddhism, Merton writes: “We keep returning to one central question in two forms: the relation of objective doctrine to subjective mystic (or metaphysical) experience, and the difference in this relationship between Christianity and Zen. In Christianity, the objective doctrine retains priority both in time and in eminence. In

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<sup>232</sup> Merton, 2-3.

Zen, the experience is always prior to, not in time but in importance.”<sup>233</sup> The point where Merton sees the two religious traditions departing from each other is also where the dialogue of religious experience and theology come into tension, recalling the limitation of theological language when speaking about God or verbal formulas and linguistic preconceptions in talking about pure consciousness or experience. In the same spirit of acknowledging that experiences are inexpressible in words, the remaining two forms of emptiness in Zen concerns the self-negating nature of emptiness, which are (5) the emptying of emptiness, and (6) the emptiness of words.<sup>234</sup> Because words are meant to be means of awakening, Zen stresses the emptiness of words, especially words purporting to indicate ultimate truth. Just as emptiness implies non-attachment to any view, the idea of emptiness should also be discarded once we come to see things as they really are. In fact, as Davis points out, “For Zen, silence can be just as problematic as speech, and speech just as effective as silence.”<sup>235</sup> He explains that considering the emptiness of words is not “to be free from the use of language, but rather to be free in one’s use of language,” that is, “to participate in a circulating movement between the emptying of language into silence and the emptying of silence back into language.”<sup>236</sup> Soelle puts it another way: “The authenticity of mystical texts arises from its proximity to the boundary between speech and speechlessness.”<sup>237</sup> Long before his engagement with Zen Buddhism, the ascetic and apophatic approach to spirituality was already a part of Merton’s spirituality. Yet, the language of Zen significantly enriched Merton’s expression of his spiritual experience. On the other hand, Merton’s attempt to articulate his experience of self-emptying in an acceptable manner from the view of both the traditions of

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<sup>233</sup> Merton, 45.

<sup>234</sup> Davis, “Forms of Emptiness in Zen,” 204-208.

<sup>235</sup> Davis, 208.

<sup>236</sup> Davis, 208.

<sup>237</sup> Soelle, *The Silent Cry*, chap 5, iBooks

Christianity and Zen Buddhism reflects his effort in cultivating spaces to reach out to religious others on the ground of dialogue around religious experience.

What Merton identifies as the point of conflict between Zen Buddhism and Christianity—the relation of objective doctrine to subjective mystical experience—reveals, for the most part, his discontent with Christian traditions. As Merton writes to D. T. Suzuki,

The Christ we seek is within us, in our inmost self, is our inmost self, and yet infinitely transcends ourselves. We have to be “found in Him” and yet be perfectly ourselves and free from the domination of any image of Him other than Himself. You see, that is the trouble with the Christian world. It is not dominated by Christ (which would be perfect freedom), it is enslaved and ideas of Christ that are creations and projections of men way of God's freedom. [...] Oh my dear Dr. Suzuki, I know you will understand this so well, and so many people do not, even though they are “doctors in Israel.”<sup>238</sup>

Merton presumes that Suzuki the Zen master would understand the incomparable significance of religious experience better than many of the Christian theologians. Merton observes that given how divine revelation is the word of God, Christians have always been preoccupied with the accuracy of its transmission from the original sources, understanding the exact meaning of the scriptures, and keeping out any false interpretations. But for him, God's self-revelation is first and foremost calling the people of God to experience Him in Christ through the Spirit. Merton questions:

Can man honestly give his life meaning merely by adopting a certain set of explanations which pretend to tell him what the world began and where it will end, why there is evil and what is necessary for a good life? [...] Perhaps in my solitude I have become as it were an explorer for you, a search in realms which you are not able to visit. I have been summoned to explore a desert area of man's heart in which explanations no longer suffice, and in which one learns that only experience counts.<sup>239</sup>

The apophatic focus allows Merton to be more comfortable with the unknown than the known in the realm of spirituality. Because of his integrity towards his Christian faith, Merton would not deny that self-emptying is to create space for God; likewise, he would not deny the possibility that

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<sup>238</sup> Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, “To Daisetz T. Suzuki,” Kindle.

<sup>239</sup> William H. Shannon, *Thomas Merton's dark path—The inner experience of a contemplative* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1981), 220-221. Cf. H.C. Steyn, “The Influence of Buddhism on Thomas Merton,” *Journal for the Study of Religion* 3, no. 2 (1990): 5.

the experience of the presence of God can happen to people who do not know God or who do not articulate their religious experience in Christian terms. Merton considers, “There is always a *possibility* that what an Eastern mystic describes as Self is what the Western mystic will describe as God.”<sup>240</sup> There is nothing better that confirms Merton’s accomplishments in interreligious engagement than the remarks from leading figures of other religions. In February 1959, D.T. Suzuki claimed that “no one in America understands Zen.”<sup>241</sup> However, after much dialogue with Merton, Suzuki remarked that no Westerner had ever understood Zen as well as Merton.<sup>242</sup> Interestingly, Dalai Lama said of Merton, “This was the first time that I had been struck by such a feeling of spirituality in anyone who professed Christianity [...] It was Merton who introduced me to the real meaning of the word ‘Christian.’”<sup>243</sup> Merton’s life modeled a commitment to the Christian faith that went hand-in-hand with a genuine openness to religious others.

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<sup>240</sup> Merton and Shannon, *The Inner Experience*, 24.

<sup>241</sup> D. T. Suzuki, “A Dialogue on Zen in America,” *Zen Bunka* 14 (1 February 1959): 22. Cf. Kirita Kiyohide, “D.T. Suzuki on Society and the State,” in *Rude Awakenings: Zen, the Kyoto School, and the Question of Nationalism*, trans. Richard Szimpl and Thom as Kirchner (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994), 73. The same year Merton wrote his initial letter to Suzuki, dated March 12, 1959, beginning their personal relationship and interreligious dialogue.

<sup>242</sup> “Thomas Merton was ‘the most skillful interpreter of Zen Buddhism in the West’ [...] Daisetz Suzuki, the greatest scholar of Zen Buddhism in Japan, once remarked that no Westerner had ever understood Zen as well as Merton.” This comment from Franche du Plessix Gray is printed on the back of a collection of Merton's essays entitled *Thomas Merton Thoughts on the East* (New York: New Directions, 1995).

<sup>243</sup> Dalai Lama made this comment about twenty years after their meeting in Dharamsala. Dalai Lama, *Freedom in Exile: The Autobiography of the Dalai Lama* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 189. Cf. Pramuk, *Sophia*, chap 1, Kindle.

**Chapter three: Thich Nhat Hanh implores, “Please Call Me By My True Names.” Thomas Merton answers, “Hagia Sophia.”**

Drawing from the feminist theologians’ insights on a relational self in chapter one and from Thomas Merton’s appropriation of no-self in Zen Buddhism in his inquiry of self-identity in chapter two, chapter three examines an account of transformation from the false self to the true self that is relevant to the Asian feminist’s understanding of selfhood. Buddhism, which originated from Asia and is shaped by its collectivist culture, reflects an understanding of selfhood that differs from Merton’s anthropology, which has been shaped by Western individualism.<sup>244</sup> To contextualize the Christian journey of transformation from false self into true self, understanding how selfhood is perceived by other religions is a valuable alternative for those from other cultures who wish to go beyond the Western understanding of selfhood and embrace their own cultural traditions in reimagining the meaning of *imago Dei* and their quest for self-identity. A comparative reading of the prose poem “Hagia Sophia”<sup>245</sup> by the Christian monk Merton and the poem “Please call me by my true names”<sup>246</sup> by Thich Nhat Hanh is my attempt to engage in interreligious dialogue itself. Adapting Monty Williams’s interpretation of the Beatitudes as a framework for the kenotic path of the spiritual journey, this chapter gives an analysis of the two poems under the common themes of self-identity, awakening, and compassion.

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<sup>244</sup> Markus’s and Kitayama’s theory accounts for two divergent construals of selfhood: independent and interdependent. A Western individualistic culture is unusual in promoting an independent view of the self, which is in contrast to an interdependent self in the collectivist cultures of non-Western parts of the world. Hazel Rose Markus and Shinobu Kitayama, “Culture and the Self: Implications for Cognition, Emotion, and Motivation,” *Psychological Review* 98, no. 2 (1991): 224–53.

<sup>245</sup> The poem “Hagia Sophia” (1962) was inspired by a question from Merton’s friend Victor Hammer, who created a painting depicting Christ as a child being crowned by the Virgin Mary but could not explain its implication. Merton wrote to Victor suggesting that the woman represented Hagia Sophia, the ancient persona of Wisdom, the eternal “feminine principle in the divine,” who is at the same time Mary. Pramuk, *Sophia*, chap 5, Kindle. Full text see appendix 2.

<sup>246</sup> The poem “Please call me by my true names” (1978) was Thich Nhat Hanh’s response to the tragedy of a twelve-year-old girl refugee who threw herself into the ocean and drowned after being raped by a sea pirate. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing*, “The Sixth Mindfulness Training, Taking Care of Anger” iBooks. Full text see appendix 3.

## 1. Self identity

### a. Thich Nhat Hanh: “Even today I am still arriving”

From the poem’s beginning, already the poet suggests the impermanence of life: “Don’t say that I will depart tomorrow—/ even today I am still arriving.” Self, as understood in Buddhism, is made up of five aggregates: body, feelings, perceptions, mental states, and consciousness.<sup>247</sup> The formation of self is a moment-by-moment construction of dynamics among these aggregates. The self is in continuous becoming and thus in a state of “still arriving.” In this case, the self is that perceived as permanent, substantial and autonomous is as empty as an illusion. What follows is an illustration of the spring season, rendering a sense of freshness, newness, and hidden liveliness: something like a bud that is not yet fully grown into blossom, or a bird whose wings are “still” fragile, not yet ready to fly but just beginning in its “learning to sing.” Life is very fragile and yet consists of unpredictable strength and unmeasurable capacity to grow into something lively and beautiful. This life is also found in “I;” every second, “I” am arriving with the potential to grow, to change, and to be transformed. Life comes forth at the cost of death: the passing of the bud comes forth as the blooming flower and the butterfly flies only when the caterpillar is dead. Impermanence is the nature of life. For Thich Nhat Hanh, impermanence of life is what allows for continuous creation and growth. Only in its mortality is life possible.<sup>248</sup> The poet refuses a linear movement from birth to death; rather, he believes that at every moment we are living and dying at the same time.

In the next stanza, the poet turns from the external movement in nature to the inner movement of feeling and emotion. Thich Nhat Hanh specifies the correlation between the rhythm of one’s heartbeat and the cosmic order of the universe: “The rhythm of my heart is the birth and

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<sup>247</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Awakening of the Heart*, “Exercises for Observing the Mind,” iBooks.

<sup>248</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Awakening of the Heart*, “Long Live Emptiness,” iBooks.

death/ of all that are alive.” Everything works and happens interdependently, following the invisible rhythm of one’s heartbeat which is itself corresponding to the cycle of life and death – to inhale or to exhale, to laugh or to cry, to fear or to hope, to give life or to drain life. The stanza evokes the notion of interbeing in a poetic way. The term “interbeing” is coined by Thich Nhat Hanh, refreshing the Buddhist teaching of emptiness by stressing the interpenetration, interdependent and interconnected relationship of all things in the world. For explanation, Thich Nhat Hanh refers to the example of seeing a cloud floating in a sheet of paper: “Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow, and without trees we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either. So we can say that the cloud and the paper inter-are.”<sup>249</sup> This sheet of paper cannot be a separate, independent existence because its existence is dependent on the cloud, the sunshine, the soil, the forest, the logger, the mind conceptualized it, and others. In Thich Nhat Hanh’s own words, “This sheet of paper is, because everything else is.”<sup>250</sup> Reality is not built of separate entities; rather, each being is inextricably connected to the rest of all other beings. Every part of the world has mutual influence on every other part. The way to recognize this reality of interbeing is to “look deeply,” which is to wake up or to awaken.

#### b. Thomas Merton: “Now the Blessed Virgin Mary”

Considering our discussion about Thomas Merton’s prose poem “Hagia Sophia” in relation to his understanding of self-identity, we also recall what Christopher Pramuk stated in his research on Merton's Sophia Christology: “Perhaps most of all, Merton’s Sophia is our ‘true self.’”<sup>251</sup> The poem opens with a vision of the unutterable divine who is present within the core of being and is

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<sup>249</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life* (New York: Bantam Books, 1992), 95.

<sup>250</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace is Every Step*, 96.

<sup>251</sup> Pramuk, *Sophia*, chap. 5, Kindle.

the very nature of the narrator himself, that is Merton: “There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness.[...] This is at once my own being, my own nature, and the Gift of my Creator’s Thought and Art within me, speaking as Hagia Sophia, speaking as my sister, Wisdom.” While “Hagia Sophia in all things is the Divine Light reflected in them,” Merton insists that the light of Sophia is reflected most clearly in Mary: “Now the Blessed Virgin Mary is the one created being who enacts and shows forth in her life all that is hidden in Sophia. Because of this, she can be said to be a personal manifestation of Sophia.” In fact, the connection between Sophia and Mary is hinted at the beginning of the poem through its setting: “Let us suppose I am a man lying asleep in a hospital [...] It is July the second, the Feast of Our Lady's Visitation. A Feast of Wisdom.”

Merton’s portrayal of Mary reflects his anthropology, especially his vision of the true self. Throughout the first three sections of “Hagia Sophia,” the presence of Sophia is often associated with light until Mary shows up in the last section. This is no coincidence but instead reveals the perfect oneness of Mary as she comes into union with God, as Merton perceives. Merton says, “No one has ever more perfectly contained the light of God than Mary who by the perfection of her purity and humility is, as it were, completely identified with truth like the clean windowpane which vanishes entirely into the light which it transmits.”<sup>252</sup> The image of the clean window symbolizes Mary’s humility and her total availability to God, through whom the light of life is able to shine forth without obstruction. The analogy integrates the central Christian paradox of dying to live; Mary’s humility enables her to “die” to God in the same way that a clear window allows the light to pass through it without calling attention to itself.<sup>253</sup> By becoming one with the light, Mary comes

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<sup>252</sup> Cf. Kenneth M. Voiles, “The Mother of All the Living: The Role of the Virgin Mary in the Spirituality of Thomas Merton,” *The Merton Annual* 5 (1992): 299.

<sup>253</sup> Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 168-169. The same idea is expressed in another poem of Merton: “The Blessed Virgin Mary Compared to a Window.”

into in union with Sophia, and thus fully communicates the grace of the infinitely selfless God. Mary's desire for absolute emptiness, perfect poverty and total availability for God underlies Merton's devotion of Mary.<sup>254</sup>

From Merton's point of view, what makes Mary the most perfect expression of the mystery of the Wisdom of God is that she is empty of all egoism. As described, "She crowns [Christ] not with what is glorious, but with what is greater than glory: the one thing greater than glory is weakness, nothingness, poverty," that is "His Human Nature." Portraying Mary crowning Christ, on one hand, Merton stands in the tradition of Theotokos to affirm Christ's humanity; on the other hand, he honors Mary by crowning her with the qualities of the kenotic Christ. In Mary, Merton envisions a real possibility for "one created being" to be in perfect union with God. He insists, "And we will most truly possess Him when we have emptied ourselves and become poor and hidden as [Mary] is, resembling Him by resembling her [...] The ones she desires to share the joy of her own poverty and simplicity, the ones whom she wills to be hidden as she is hidden, are the ones who share her closeness to God."<sup>255</sup> Merton attempts to illustrate non-duality and inseparable union with God while respecting the metaphysical distinctions between Creator and creature. Returning to the analogy of Mary as a window, though the window itself is not the light, when light passes through the window, we experience light and the window as one, indistinguishable from each other. As William Shannon observes, "Merton realized that it is not a question of talking yourself out of duality or reasoning your way into unity; rather you must take the time to open yourself to experience—the experience of oneness with God and in God, oneness with all that is."<sup>256</sup> In fact, not once did Merton emphasize Mary to be "a personal manifestation of Sophia," or

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<sup>254</sup> Merton comments that "what people find to say about her sometimes tells us more about their own selves than it does about Our Lady." This statement is as true of others as it is of Merton himself. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 167.

<sup>255</sup> Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 173.

<sup>256</sup> William Shannon, Christine M Bochen, and Patrick F O'Connell, "Nondualism," in *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), 330.

“who in God [is] Ousia rather than Person;” she is “not a Creator, and not a Redeemer, but perfect Creature, perfectly Redeemed.” But it is through her that “God enters into His creation.” In this sense, *theosis* is indeed the result of God’s identification with humanity, not vice versa.

c. The Authentic self: A relational autonomy

Thich Nhat Hanh’s no-self as interbeing functions in a non-theistic context and Merton’s true self, defined in relationship with God as Mary on the conceptual level, are far apart. Nevertheless, emptiness marks the beginning of an awakening journey for both Christian transformation and Buddhist enlightenment – to be disentangled from egoism and to be detached from false notions of self-identity that foster attachment.<sup>257</sup> Nonattachment is at the heart of interbeing that brings together the key Buddhist concepts of impermanence, *dukkha*, and the non-self: for everything to be inter-be means that everything is empty of an independent existence, a separate self. In identifying himself with so many different beings, Thich Nhat Hanh affirms the interconnectedness between his own existence and all other beings. At the same time, none of these beings on their own or together define his true identity. The title “Please call me by my true names” reveals the desire for authenticity: “who am I really?” In the view of Thich Nhat Hanh, true names are multiples, or precisely, empty: it is open-ended for redefinition and deconstruction.<sup>258</sup> The self is always in process: “Every second I am arriving.” Observing Christian kenosis in the light of *sunyata*, kenosis goes beyond the false self as an individualistic, autonomous, separate being, but

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<sup>257</sup> Nonattachment is the very first precept in the fourteen mindfulness trainings developed by Thich Nhat Hanh. The Buddha talks of the reality of suffering (*dukkha*) as the first noble truth, and the second noble truth points to thirst or craving as the key origin or cause of suffering. Craving is understood as both the dimensions of craving to hold onto or the craving to get rid of something. Clinging or grasping leads to suffering for “whatever is impermanent, that is painful;” even happiness, since the passing of a happy feeling may lead to a subtle sense of limitation and imperfection. Peter Harvey, “Dukkha, Non-Self, and the Teaching on the Four ‘Noble Truths,’” in *Blackwell Companions to Philosophy: A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy*, ed. Steven M. Emmanuel (Somerset: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 26-45.

<sup>258</sup> Nancy McCagney suggests *sunyata* is better translated as “openness” instead of “emptiness” as it implies “the open-endedness of events, their openness to change, their nonfixedness, their impermanence.” Nancy McCagney, *Nagarjuna and the Philosophy of Openness* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), 62. Cf. Davis, “Forms of Emptiness in Zen,” 194.

points to any harmful or sinful modes of being as either pride or self-rejection, or any sense of self that restricts our openness to respond to the ever-new possibilities of and invitations into Christ.

The spiritual journey paradigm of transformation, proposed by Merton, from an individualistic false self to a communal true self is built on a sharp rejection of the Cartesian consciousness that lies at the very center of Western philosophical conceptualization of personal identity. This Cartesian consciousness is not shared by most of the non-Western parts of the world, which are predominantly characterized by a more collectivist culture. Not only does conversion from an individualistic self being incongruent with the experiences of those who prize relationality in their sense of identity, it also fails to address the risk of erosion in authenticity, particularly in contexts where self-identity is overly emphasized to be a relational construct. Self-identity is defined by who one knows, the connection one has, and the popularity and attention one receives:<sup>259</sup> “pain, and suffering are not the opposite of connection, but are manifestations of it.”<sup>260</sup> Collectivist cultures, where the self is embedded in interpersonal relationships and obligation to the community, reveal the downsides of attachment, lack of freedom, or even the absence of self. Alice A. Keefe rightly observes that traditionally the Buddhist teaching of interconnectedness is understood to “bring liberation from the root of suffering” (*dukkha*) and tends to “valorize solitude and aloneness as the *sine qua non* of the path to enlightenment.”<sup>261</sup> Relationality and autonomy are in tension but not in opposition. Nonattachment is not the denial of relationship but is being in *right* relationship with all things. After all, interconnectedness is the way things are.

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<sup>259</sup> This is meant to imitate what Henri Nouwen says, “You are not what others, or even you, think about yourself. You are not what you do. You are not what you have.” Henri J.M. Nouwen., *You Are the Beloved: Daily Meditations for Spiritual Living* (New York: Convergent Books, 2017), “January 4,” Kindle.

<sup>260</sup> Rita Nakashima Brock, “Interstitial integrity: reflections toward an Asian American woman’s theology,” in *Introduction to Christian Theology: Contemporary North American Perspectives*, ed. Roger Badham (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 193. Cf. Downie, “A Spirituality of Openness,” 60.

<sup>261</sup> Alice A. Keefe, “Visions of Interconnectedness in Engaged Buddhism and Feminist Theology,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, Vol. 17 (1997): 63, 68.

The notion of interbeing brings out a way or wisdom to imagine the self-identity not necessarily defined as over-against but in-relation-to, a connectedness-with another in a non-obsessive manner. Amos Yong in light of such interconnectedness recognizes that the biblical creation narrative where human beings are composed from the dust of the ground and the breath of God is largely shaped by the lenses of a Platonic and neo-Platonic soul-body framework. Instead, human constitution can be explicated in terms of relational networks: the divine-human relationship as a gift of life through the breath of God, the human-nature relationship as the formation of Adam from the dust of the ground, and the interpersonal relationship as Eve is created from Adam's rib.<sup>262</sup> The Buddhist and Hebraic traditions share a view of self that is embodied, cooperative or social, relational, and holistic; a parallel can be drawn between the five aggregates composed the Buddhist self and the reification (as a literary device) of the Hebrew self in the forms of at least five main constituents.<sup>263</sup> The self is to be formed by its *right* relationship with others and its interaction with its surroundings, including one's memories of the past and hopes for the future, one's failures and achievements, and all the complexities of an embodied human life.

In considering the Beatitudes to map out a path of spiritual pilgrimage towards deep intimacy with God,<sup>264</sup> Williams sees the journey to Christ beginning with the discovery of our poverty of spirit.<sup>265</sup> He relates the poverty of spirit with the second beatitude: "poverty of spirit sentences us to death" and "mourning brings life."<sup>266</sup> In the same way Thich Nhat Hanh calls for attention to the interrelatedness between life and death with the series of Springtime imagery, Williams speaks of the importance of paying attention to the presence of death and its effect in our

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<sup>262</sup> Amos Yong, *Pneumatology and the Christian-Buddhist Dialogue Does the Spirit Blow through the Middle Way?* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 42-43.

<sup>263</sup> Nicholas F. Gier and Johnson Petta, "Hebrew and Buddhist Selves: A Constructive Postmodern Study," *Asian Philosophy* 17, no. 1 (2007): 47-64.

<sup>264</sup> Williams considers, "The Beatitudes, which embody the Christian vision, are a powerful way of opening ourselves to conversion." Williams, *Spiritual Intimacy*, 66, 91-92.

<sup>265</sup> Williams, 67.

<sup>266</sup> Williams, 67, 71.

lives; in mourning, we hand to the transforming love of Christ the dead we carry with us. Only then “we will see death as part of life, rather than living life as part of death.”<sup>267</sup> Integration requires the ongoing task of discerning the life-giving parts of life from the dead, navigating the boundaries between our inner and outer terrains. Whereas clinging to any one view of who we were may prevent us from arriving at a deeper, more profound understanding of self-identity,<sup>268</sup> kenosis gives way to a fuller, more empowered sense of self that is grounded in the openness towards fluid identity construction.

Regarding the use of self-emptying, Rosemary Radford Ruether is aware that “many spiritual traditions have emphasized the need to ‘let go of the ego’ but in ways that diminished the value of the person, undercutting particularly those, like women, who scarcely have been allowed individuated personhood at all.”<sup>269</sup> If the false self should be equated with pride as generally perceived by the Christian West, it is not surprising that selflessness must be cultivated. Beginning with Valerie Saiving, however, the dominant Christian formulation of sin as pride has often been questioned by feminist theologians, since theology often stems from the male experience within a patriarchal society, thus betraying an androcentric bias.<sup>270</sup> Instead, feminist theologians suggest that the kind of problems and temptations faced by women are not the same. Soelle observes that, “every patriarchal culture assigns sacrificial roles to women and burdens them with self-denial.”<sup>271</sup> When “ego-lessness is commended as a virtue to those who are not permitted to develop an ego on account of societal constraints,” the overemphasis on self-sacrifice as a virtue prevents women from “developing their own capabilities” and causes what might be called “female sins:” allowing

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<sup>267</sup> Williams, 70.

<sup>268</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing*, “The second mindfulness training, Nonattachment to views,” iBooks.

<sup>269</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (New York: HarperOne, 1994), 251. Cf. Mercedes, *Power for*, chap 2.

<sup>270</sup> Valerie Saiving, “The Human Condition: A Feminine View,” in *Readings in Ecology and Feminist Theology*, ed. M.H. MacKinnon and M. McIntyre: 3-18 (Kansas: Sheed & Ward, 1960). Cf. McBrayer and Howard-Snyder, “Feminism and the Problem of Evil,” 332.

<sup>271</sup> Soelle, *The Silent Cry*, chap. 12, iBooks.

[themselves] succumb to passivity, triviality, and the definitions of others.”<sup>272</sup> With this understanding, Ruether advocates for a kind of kenosis that “[affirms] the integrity of our personal center of being.”<sup>273</sup>

Taking a deeper look into the issues of self-emptying, Soelle further notes the subtle dynamic between ego and ego-lessness: “Where one is striving for ego-lessness there has to be an ego.”<sup>274</sup> Moreover, “it is often in the very experience of losing or forgetting oneself that there grows a kind of ego-inflation, a narcissistic super-elevation that believes it can satiate itself by losing the ego.”<sup>275</sup> Soelle identifies ego as “God-forgetfulness;” it is not self-abnegation but remembrance of God that dissolves dependency on the ego.<sup>276</sup> Soelle’s insight throws doubt on the patriarchal interpretation of Mary’s poverty and her total availability for God through silent obedience.<sup>277</sup> In agreement with Johnson who considers that “the image of Mary as a virgin [...] symbolizes the independence of the identity of women,”<sup>278</sup> Chung Hyun Kyung, an Asian female theologian, states that “Asian women are beginning to view the virginity of Mary, not as a biological reality, but as a relational reality.”<sup>279</sup> Mary the Virgin is a complete human being herself, not subject to any of the male figures in the household. Ellen Clark-King rightly observes that Mary was in a place of transition – more than just a daughter but not yet a wife or mother of another man. It is at this point of fluidity and ambiguity in her social position that Mary is thus free to

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<sup>272</sup> Saiving, “The Human Condition,” 15. Cf. McBrayer and Howard-Snyder, “Feminism and the Problem of Evil,” 332.

<sup>273</sup> Mercedes, *Power for*, chap. 2.

<sup>274</sup> Soelle, *The Silent Cry*, chap. 12, iBooks.

<sup>275</sup> Soelle, chap. 12, iBooks.

<sup>276</sup> Soelle, chap. 12, iBooks.

<sup>277</sup> Craig Helms relates Mary’s humility to her silent obedience: “Mary also manifests her humility through her contemplative concealment of the marvelous things revealed to her concerning Jesus [...] Mary does not announce her divine maternity to the world. Instead, she remains silent and meditates upon the magnitude of these events in the solitude of her heart. Craig Helms, “Mary as the New Eve in Thomas Merton’s Poetry,” *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 31, no. 4 (1996): 482-483.

<sup>278</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, “The Marian Tradition and the Reality of Women,” *Horizons* (Villanova) 12, no. 1 (1985): 133.

<sup>279</sup> Chung Hyun Kyung, “Who is Mary for Today’s Asian Women?” in *Religion Today: A Reader*, ed. Susan Mumm (London: Routledge, 2016), 74-76.

answer for herself.<sup>280</sup> Her answer to give herself over to God: “let it be to me according to your will” is paradoxically an assertion of her right to decide for herself. In Merton’s “Hagia Sophia,” Mary remains the subject of action: “She crowns Him...;” “She sends the infinitely Rich and Powerful One forth...;” and “with the full awareness of what she is doing.” The creation of new humanity is not merely passive obedience (i.e., the submission of Mary to a male God) but a conscious choice. Ironically enough, in Clark-King’s words, “A new order begins with a socially insignificant woman saying yes to God without consulting with father or husband.”<sup>281</sup> Mary as the true self is the God-defined liberated woman who boldly expressed herself and advocated for all those who suffer in the Magnificat—“the most passionate, the wildest, the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung” to express herself and to advocate for all those who suffer.<sup>282</sup>

## 2. Awakening to the hidden wholeness

### a. Thich Nhat Hanh: “Look closely”

“Look closely” is an invitation from the poet for us to awaken from our illusion of separateness to see the interbeing nature of life and selfhood. Since it takes careful observation to notice the quiet caterpillar in the heart of a flower or to discover a hidden jewel inside a stone, interbeing can only be realized if we look closely, look deep enough, and look within ourselves. Stanzas four to eight make up the second section of the poem and each stanza begins with the phrase “I am.” Beginning with the evocation of life and death in the predatory cycles of nature—from the mayfly swallowed by the bird, to the happy frog hunted by the aggressive grass-snake unknowingly—the poet moves away from more neutral phrase “swallow” to more self-centered and aggressive one, “feeds itself.” The phrase can be seen as a subtle insinuation against the “arms

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<sup>280</sup> Ellen Clark-King, “Mary: A Revolutionary Virgin (Advent 4).” *Expository Times* 118, no. 2 (2006): 85.

<sup>281</sup> Clark-King, 85.

<sup>282</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Mystery of Holy Night*, ed. Manfred Weber, tran. Peter Heinegg (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 6.

merchant” in the following stanza who feed themselves on many innocent lives; as opposed to wild animals who act out of instinct, there are people make a living off the arms industry by selling weapons to developing countries, where people need food, not guns, tanks, or bombs. However, Thich Nhat Hanh understands that “the responsibility for this situation does not lie solely with the workers in the arms industry” but “all of us.”<sup>283</sup> Injustice and violence in our society and the world manifest in the anger, hatred, ignorance and fear that is present in all of us. Thich Nhat Hanh indicates that, “to see into the true nature of the world’s wars and weapons is to see into our own true nature.”<sup>284</sup> The nature of our self and the nature of suffering, and the inner world of our mind and the external world around us are not separate but belong to the same reality.

To look closely also means to recognize the Buddha nature in all beings or, in other words, the life-giving potential in everyone. Looking deeply, the poet sees the pirate who raped the twelve-year-old girl as also a victim of the socioeconomic conditions that breed violence. Looking more deeply, he discovers the heartless sea pirate was once a poor boy with a pure heart.<sup>285</sup> Since we will naturally feel for the tragedy of the little girl, it is significant that the empathetic voice of the poet speaks for the sea pirate. In the face of this sorrow and cruel incident, the poet lightens the spark of hope: maybe one day, this pirate who was “not yet” capable of seeing and loving will also be awakened. Thich Nhat Hanh then likens himself to the member of the politburo, who defines the accusation of their defeated rival at the same time: its victim “dying slowly in a forced labor camp.” Between the lines, we hear the guilt and responsibility the poet bears: as “the man who has to pay/ His ‘debt of blood’ to my people,” “I” am in debt to world peace, yet, “with plenty of power in my hands,” “I” am also accountable for bringing changes to the world. Awakening to

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<sup>283</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing*, “The Eleventh Mindfulness, Training Right Livelihood,” iBooks.

<sup>284</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing*.

<sup>285</sup> Kyeongil Jung, “Just Peace: A Buddhist-Christian Path to Liberation,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, Vol. 32 (2012): 4.

the nature of life as interbeing is thus a double-edged burden in recognizing how we have contributed to injustice, violence and suffering in the world. Likewise, we can become part of the solution as we come into awareness how our choices and our livelihood affect others. Transformation is rooted in the understanding of oneself in all beings and of all beings in oneself; to “look closely” indeed is the way to compassion.

b. Thomas Merton: “When a soft voice awakens me from my dream”

“Hagia Sophia” too is a poem about awakening: “I am awakened, I am born again...” Awakening, for Merton, speaks of the transition from the state of false self to becoming the true self. Through and through, the dialectic between true self and false self undergirds the dynamic tension of the poem. Merton puts into contrast the true self as “the helpless man who lies asleep in his bed without awareness and without defense [...] entrust himself each night to sleep” with the egocentric false self that lives “for himself”: “he who has defended himself, fought for himself [...] planned for himself, guarded himself, loved himself alone.” Again, poverty, emptiness, and weakness define the true self and signifies one’s humility and total availability for God. Merton brackets the part of false self that seems to create a mirror effect to show that two opposite views of self coexist. Is not the false self unknown to Sophia just the illusionary reflex? Or does Merton imply that his internal struggle of the true self is Christ confronting his ego? Who am I? Merton does not make the answer easy for himself nor for us. No one knows better than him that only through looking deeply into the false self brings upon the true self while simultaneously knowing that the true self means meeting the light that shines in darkness. The paradox between dying and living is made clear: the man that exposed his vulnerability was awakened, refreshed and made whole, while he who has defended himself died in exhaustion. As a matter of fact, when the helpless one entrusts himself to sleep, the one who then awakes is no longer himself but the Sophia in him: “The helpless one, abandoned to sweet sleep, him the gentle one will awake: Sophia.”

The differences between wholeness and fragmentation are another expression of the dialectic of true-self-and-false-self: “It is like the One Christ awakening in all the separate selves that ever were separate and isolated and alone in all the lands of the earth.”<sup>286</sup> Here Merton affirms, as Thich Nhat Hanh will, that self-identity is an inter-be rather than an independent existence. Regardless of the fragmentation, brokenness, and division of humanity, Merton believes “the One Christ” is fundamentally more real and experiences a deeper sense of oneness in Sophia, who is the “hidden wholeness,” the “life as communion,” “one Wisdom, one Child, one Meaning, one Sister” and “the Bride and the Feast and the Wedding.” Divine presence is the foundation of everything in existence: this is the most profound of all truths that lies in one’s inmost being as one’s true self. “[Sophia] does in us a greater work than that of Creation: the work of new being in grace, the work of pardon;” alienation has been overcome once and for all. In short, Sophia is at play in the heart of the cosmos as well as in the heart of each of us.

Awakened to Sophia who dwells in our inmost being enables us to recognize the presence of Sophia in all things. The presence of Sophia is both transcendent and immanent, “obvious” yet “unseen,” who “speaks everywhere” but with the language of silence. While the true self hears the gentle call of Sophia, the false self is distracted by “conquest and dark pleasure.” The poet who says, “I am awakened” also says, “We do not hear.” This reminds us of the voice of the guilty bystander who is awakened and looks back into the world, thus able to notice what others do not hear. The use of “we” instead of “they” signifies the poet’s determination to remain in identification with those whose “heart[s] not yet capable of seeing and loving.” As “the feminine child, playing in the world [and] playing at all times before the Creator,” when under the delusion

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<sup>286</sup> Closely linked with the contrast between wholeness and fragmentation is the comparison made between the one who lives in community—with its values of human dignity, human freedom, solitude and contemplation—and the individual who drowned in nameless isolation and the unredeemed alienation of the collectivity. William H. Shannon, *Thomas Merton: An Introduction* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2005), 94-98.

of false self, Sophia presents as one “who is prisoner in all the people [but] does not understand imprisonment.” Despite the blindness and disregard of humanity, the presence of Sophia within all of us is undeniable. This feminine child, according to Merton, is the light of life in each of us: “Hagia Sophia in all things is the Divine Light reflected in them” and “He shines not on them but from within them.” In many ways, the description of Sophia as the light of life resonates with Merton’s poetic expression of his experience at Louisville, where he refers to the common humanity we all share as “the secret beauty of [people’s] hearts” that “shines like the sun” or “a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven.”<sup>287</sup> Each person possesses a deep and intimate connection to Sophia and awakening is to experience the divine core within oneself in union with the hidden wholeness.

c. The integrated self: acceptance is the way

Thich Nhat Hanh’s notion of interbeing is similar to Merton’s understanding of the hidden wholeness in Sophia. In spite of the common ground Thich Nhat Hanh and Merton share, the way Thich Nhat Hanh likens himself to two apparently contradictory sides challenges Merton’s dualistic way of perceiving the false self as an opposition to the true self. In the meditation that his poem stems from, Thich Nhat Hanh shares that, “In it, there are three people: the twelve-year-old girl, the pirate, and me. Can we look at each other and recognize ourselves in each other? The title of the poem is ‘Please Call Me by My True Names,’ because I have so many names.”<sup>288</sup> The many names can be seen as the many parts of the self and Thich Nhat Hanh embraces them all as true names: the life-giving parts and the violent deadly parts are possibly who he was or is or could

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<sup>287</sup> Merton also speaks of the vision he received at Louisville as an awakening experience, like “waking from a dream of separateness.” Merton, *Guilty Bystander*, 156.

<sup>288</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace is Every Step*, 122-123.

become. Thich Nhat Hanh he reminds us that reconciliation begins within oneself who insists, “Only by being peace can we hope to make peace in the world,”<sup>289</sup>

Again, Williams’s perspectives on the Beatitudes as a kenotic journey illuminates the comparison between Merton and Thich Nhat Hahn. Williams says that the third beatitude of being gentle signifies our vulnerability.<sup>290</sup> Poverty of spirit strips us from our illusion in the sense that “we do not need to defend ourselves, or sacrifice ourselves to maintain false images.”<sup>291</sup> Here we can almost recognize the voice of Merton in “Hagia Sophia.” “Gentleness comes to him when he is most helpless and awakens him...” versus “he who has defended himself [...] is killed at last by exhaustion.” Hiding from our brokenness or suppressing our sinfulness does not result in real goodness; instead, the persona of a religious false self is formed out of our self-righteousness. For Williams, it is in our poverty of spirit and mourning that we discover certain liberation, allowing us to feel vulnerable.<sup>292</sup> To be vulnerable is to be exposed, regardless of the feeling of guilt or shame. The process of being formed in the image of Christ takes place primarily in the parts of our lives that are most alienated from God;<sup>293</sup> God meets us at the places of our resistance. Perfection or union comes as we embrace an integrated wholeness instead of eradicating our false selves or rejecting our shadow. Shadow refers to the part of self that is repressed for the sake of the ego ideal.<sup>294</sup> Unlike the ego that lies about its real motives akin to “the father of lies,” the shadow does not lie.<sup>295</sup> The true self comes to God with radical openness. Jesus on the cross, stripped of his

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<sup>289</sup> Cf. King, *Thomas Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh*, 22.

<sup>290</sup> Williams, *Spiritual Intimacy*, 73.

<sup>291</sup> Williams, 67-68.

<sup>292</sup> Williams, 72.

<sup>293</sup> M. Robert Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 45.

<sup>294</sup> Edward C. Whitmont, “The evolution of the shadow,” in *Meeting the shadow: The hidden power of the dark side of human nature*, ed. Jeremiah Abrams and Connie Zweig (Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher, 1991), 12.

<sup>295</sup> D. Patrick Miller, “What the shadow knows: An interview with John A. Sanford,” in *Meeting the shadow: The hidden power of the dark side of human nature*, ed. Jeremiah Abrams and Connie Zweig (Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher, 1991), 20-21.

garments, was not ashamed of his exposed self. He was crucified naked before the world and in this way we can also come to him uncovered.

For Williams, the third beatitude leads us to the fourth: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.” Hungering and thirsting for righteousness communicates the desire for change, the cry for a different reality. Yet, Williams understands that true justice comes from the recognition of the love God has for all, “even when we were unloving, even when we were violent in our inability to love.”<sup>296</sup> This absurdity of love is what means of being merciful,<sup>297</sup> which is the fifth beatitude. Divine mercy allows us to experience God in a safe and gentle space where we can explore our brokenness and woundedness. It is from there that healing begins. Internal transformation takes place when we trust in the acceptance of God for us: when we accept ourselves the way God accepts us, when we learn to befriend the troublesome parts of ourselves, to extend grace and relate to the parts of ourselves that are in need of attention, and to guide and help the wild and magnificent parts of ourselves to grow.<sup>298</sup> Coakley believes that the divine desire is most fundamental human longing, the caveat is that the desire for God is often misguided and displaced in a fallen world of disorder.<sup>299</sup> Our false selves are fragments of a true desire that need to be acknowledged. By cultivating the capacity to acknowledge what we notice about ourselves without opposing, judging, or fixing them, we are also learning to acknowledge what we do notice simply as they are, thus engaging with our desires and emotions by receiving them with hospitality and presence.<sup>300</sup> Reflecting on the event that prompted him to write “Please call me by my true names,” Thich Nhat Hanh admits that “when I heard of the rape and suicide of a twelve-year-old

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<sup>296</sup> Williams, *Spiritual Intimacy*, 77.

<sup>297</sup> Williams, 78.

<sup>298</sup> Alison K. Cook and Kimberly Miller, *Boundaries for Your Soul: How to Turn Your Overwhelming Thoughts and Feelings into Your Greatest Allies* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2018), 12, 42-43.

<sup>299</sup> Sarah Coakley, “Prelude: the arguments of this book,” in *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay “On the Trinity”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 6-13.

<sup>300</sup> Cook and Miller, *Boundaries for Your Soul*, 71-72.

girl and the drowning of her father, my first response was anger.” But then by looking deeply, he realized that, “if I had been born and raised in the same social conditions along the coast of Thailand as these pirates, I would be a pirate now. A variety of interdependent causes has created the pirate [...] with society as a whole [...] each of us shares some responsibility for the existence of pirates.”<sup>301</sup> When violence is touched by mercy, anger melts into pain. The poet writes: “My pain is like a river of tears,/ so vast it fills the four oceans.”<sup>302</sup>

Keefe finds Thich Nhat Hanh’s understanding of self and the enemy to illustrate the most profound and challenging application of interbeing in the sense that “we need to experience not only the suffering of others as our own suffering, but also and most painfully, to see the violence of others as our own violence.”<sup>303</sup> From this perspective, Keefe signifies that no room seems to be left for righteous anger or passing judgment on those who inflict suffering on other people.<sup>304</sup> To make sense of it, she indicates how Thich Nhat Hanh’s teaching is applicable in two ways: the first is the practice of mindfulness that “focuses upon the anger itself rather than upon its object could help [us] to work creatively with the energy contained in anger.” The second is that perceiving the enemy as the evil “other” prevents us from coming to resolution since we cannot address the problem at its root of violence.<sup>305</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh says,

’Where is our enemy? I ask myself this all the time. [...] we are not facing a pirate, but we are facing the destruction of the earth where our small boat has been. [...] We think that the enemy is the other, and that is why we can never see him. [...] we seem to believe that our daily lives have nothing to do with the situation of the world. But if we do not change our daily lives, we cannot change the world.’<sup>306</sup>

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<sup>301</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing*, “The Sixth Mindfulness Training, Taking Care of Anger,” iBooks.

<sup>302</sup> “Simone Weil says that when we follow false gods, suffering is transformed into violence; a true God transforms suffering into pain.” Cf. Williams, *Spiritual Intimacy*, 69.

<sup>303</sup> Keefe, “Engaged Buddhism and Feminist Theology,” 64.

<sup>304</sup> Keefe, 65.

<sup>305</sup> Keefe, 67, 73.

<sup>306</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, “Please Call Me by My True Names 1988,” in *True Peace Work: Essential Writings on Engaged Buddhism*, ed. Parallax Press (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2019), 115-116.

If personal transformation is not separate from the social transformation, “then even the smallest of action,” like to attain internal harmony through prayer or meditation, “generates a ripple effect of change that reaches to every corner of the universe.”<sup>307</sup> In fact, Soelle unambiguously confirms that “the division of I and non-I, in other words, the delimitation of the self from others, is the onset of violence.”<sup>308</sup> She comments as she reflects on Thich Nhat Hanh’s poem, “If I ‘am’ not the fly—in the changed mystical sense that the word “to he” gains here—then I can also kill it. If I “am” not the trader of arms to Uganda, [...] the trader remains for me an accomplice in murder and I remain a spectator.”<sup>309</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh’s initial point is that once we admit our own complicity in the violent ways of the world, we will begin to see that those whom we do identify as enemy, villain, or perpetrator suffer too; this is what it means to see with eyes of compassion.

Interbeing deepens our reflections on the commandment “to love the neighbor as oneself,” most of all, to love the enemy. When the other is experienced as oneself, the disappearance of such division contributes to realizing that all persons share the same nature, whether it is the nature of emptiness or of being created in the image of God. The identity of “friend”, “stranger” and “enemy” are labels that have been placed on others in order to protect our own mistaken sense of self. Williams reminds us that, for Christians, we have compassion for others not only because “we know what it is to be lost and lonely and unloved” but “we also do it because the one who loves us, and we desire to be one with the beloved in the ways that the beloved deals with the world.”<sup>310</sup> In short, divine mercy renders us to be merciful.<sup>311</sup> Reordering and purifying our desires is not the only way to wholeness but is also the way of union with Christ. God’s indwelling presence in the person becomes the inner light that allows one to see God’s indwelling presence in everyone and

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<sup>307</sup> Keefe, “Engaged Buddhism and Feminist Theology,” 64.

<sup>308</sup> Soelle, *The Silent Cry*, chap 14, iBooks

<sup>309</sup> Soelle, *The Silent Cry*, chap 14, iBooks

<sup>310</sup> Williams, *Spiritual Intimacy*, 179.

<sup>311</sup> Williams, 78.

everything that exists. Meister Eckhart describes, “The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which He sees me. Mine eye and God’s eye are one eye and one sight and one knowledge and one love.”<sup>312</sup> In the eyes of God, every person is the beloved who is inseparable from God and who, at the deepest level of being, are one with God, the Hidden Ground of love of all that is.<sup>313</sup> Merton sets his own awakening in the context of the awakening of Adam in the first morning of the world as well as in the awakening of all beings at the resurrection, “return[ing] from death at the voice of Hagia Sophia” and “coming forth from primordial nothingness and standing in clarity, in Paradise. Awakening in and to Sophia breaks open our limitations of self and brings about the transformation and expansion of the self identity as the inter-be.

### 3. Compassion

#### a. Thich Nhat Hanh: “So the door of my heart could be left open”

Thich Nhat Hanh’s poem lands on the theme of compassion: “Please call me by my true names,/ so I can wake up/ and so the door of my heart/ could be left open,/ the door of compassion.” For Thich Nhat Hanh, to be compassionate to others is simply a logical conclusion of being awakened to the nature of interbeing. Interbeing entails one’s experiencing pain with those who suffer as well as sharing the joy of those who experience life as spring. The poet links his emotions to season of spring to illustrate the understanding of oneness in interbeing: “My joy is like Spring, so warm/ it makes flowers bloom all over the Earth/ My pain is like a river of tears,/ so vast it fills the four oceans.” A person can be both life-giving and life-taking to the world. Thich Nhat Hanh considers, “If we wish to share joy and happiness with others, we must have joy and happiness within ourselves. If we wish to share calmness and serenity, we should first realize them within

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<sup>312</sup> William Ralph Inge, *Light, Life and Love* (London: Aeterna Press, 2015), Kindle. Cf. David G. Benner, *The Gift of Being Yourself*, 89.

<sup>313</sup> Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 77

ourselves. Without a calm and peaceful mind, our actions will only create more trouble and destruction in the world.”<sup>314</sup> As illustrated, we become more compassionate to those who are suffering by first looking at our own pain and sorrow. Not only do we learn that the way we think, speak, do, or live has repercussions for ourselves and for others, but compassion leads to embracing the joy and pain in this world as ours. Where we may experience joy and calmness through the first song of a newborn bird or the pleasant surprise of hidden treasure within an ordinary rock, the tragedies of starving children, refugees, and wars cause great pain and so many tears that even the oceans might be filled with our sorrow. Only when we learn to listen and hear ourselves will we be able to listen and hear others with the same attentiveness.

Compassion is from within; the door of compassion is the door of the heart. Both one’s true names and one’s heart are related to the understanding of one’s identity. My joy and my pain are not only *my* joy and *my* pain, but they take into account the joy and pain of all beings; the “I” who says this is speaking for more than just oneself but is speaking as a self of interbeing. The realization that everyone is intrinsically interconnected leads to a selfhood of fluidity that sees how others are quite literally a part of us. Christina Feldman states, “You come to know that your willingness to be present with pain is the midwife to compassion. Turning toward sorrow in your own life opens your eyes to the immense suffering in the world.”<sup>315</sup> The more we accept and understand our own suffering, the more we realize that the sameness we share is in the common bond of suffering and our wanting to be free from it. Our interdependence means that one cannot wish for one’s liberation without wishing the same for others; one cannot be liberated unless all are liberated. From this vision of interbeing comes the wish to help others to be freed from their situations of suffering. The representative figure of this thought in Buddhism is Ksitigarbha

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<sup>314</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing*, “The Meaning of Tiep Hien,” iBooks.

<sup>315</sup> Christina Feldman, *Compassion: Listening to the Cries of the World* (Berkeley: Rodmell Press, 2005) 23-24.

Bodhisattva, who out of compassion took a vow not to attain Buddhahood until all hells are emptied and all beings are free from suffering (*The Sutra of Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha's Fundamental Vows*). This is the path of one who chooses to attain enlightenment not just for themselves but for the sake of all beings who are ultimately undivided from oneself. For Thich Nhat Hanh, suffering and transformation are both rooted in the vision of oneself in all beings and of all beings in oneself.<sup>316</sup>

b. Merton: “Sophia is the mercy of God in us”

Although the word “compassion” is not found in Merton’s poem “Hagia Sophia,” we witness compassion as the gift of life in Sophia. The poem starts by speaking of the Sophia’s transcendence as the hidden wholeness of all beings: “this mysterious Unity and Integrity is [...] the Mother of all, Natura naturans.” The same title, Mother of all, is used in the book of Genesis to refer to Eve: “Adam named his wife Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living.” (Gen. 3:20, NIV). Mary, specifically in the Catholic tradition, is the new Eve, the Mother of the Second Adam, the Mother of Christ, the *Theotokos*. Merton undoubtedly plays with these connections to draw a new, intuitive and somewhat perilous parallel; in fact, Merton not only identifies Sophia as Eve or as Mary but also as the gentle voice and caring hand of a nurse: “in the cool hand of the nurse there is the touch of all life, the touch of Spirit.” Having multiple figures of speech prevents the fixation and idolization of one single image. When contradicting descriptions eliminate one another, Sophia remains as a mystery; all metaphors are meant to fall. Nevertheless, the commonality between the various images of Sophia is the tenderness of life. As Merton describes: “The core of life that exists in all things is tenderness [...] Sophia is Gift, is Spirit, Donum Dei. She is God-given and God Himself as Gift.” Sophia is the very life found in all beings:

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<sup>316</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Creating True Peace: Ending Violence in Yourself Your Family, Your Community and the World* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 62.

“She is life as communion, life as thanksgiving, life as praise, life as festival, life as glory.” To render a sense of gentleness and warmth, Merton applies a wide range of words, phrases and images that implies life-giving qualities: sweetness, purity, joy, welcome, mercy, loving-kindness, generosity, childlikeness, spontaneity, simplicity, clarity, timelessness and others. Natural beings are used to bring a sense of newness, freshness, spaciousness, or calming peace. The poet seemingly wants to create an atmosphere of safety for those who enter the poem such that they might feel as though they are resting and nurtured within the embrace of Sophia. To be awakened by Sophia, our childlike hearts must first recognize her compassion in her motherhood and in her giving and nurturing of life. The inherited value of life is the reason compassion, because life itself is compassion, and Sophia is life.

Fundamentally, compassion is the love of Sophia: “Sophia is God’s sharing of Himself with creatures. His outpouring, and the Love by which He is given, and known, held and loved.” Sophia in the person of Christ comes into the world and fully identifies with humanity: “A homeless God, lost in the night, without papers, without identifications, without even a number, a frail expendable exile lies down in desolation under the sweet stars of the world and entrusts Himself to sleep.” The willingness of God to be identified with humanity is represented by the imagery of entrusting oneself to sleep, which makes “the homeless God” identical with the poor, helpless, sick man lying in the hospital that appears in the first section of the poem.

It is through the incarnation, the total identification with humanity that salvation comes forth: “Sophia is the mercy of God in us. She is the tenderness with which the infinitely mysterious power of pardon turns the darkness of our sins into the light of grace.” The fact that “Sophia is the mercy of God in us” makes us the channel of divine mercy, just as “Christ has appeared in the midst of the poor as one of them, and has taken them to Himself so that they are, in a most special

way, Himself.”<sup>317</sup> Sonia Petisco summarizes the two movements she observes in the poem: “We are confronted with a process of deification or *theosis* of Wisdom as the feminine maternal side of God. This gradual process of deification of Sophia is in fact accompanied by a process of humanization, which culminates in the last part of the poem.”<sup>318</sup> Compassion is being human, which is no small thing. As Merton affirms, “to be human in this most inhuman of ages, to guard the image of man for it is the image of God.”<sup>319</sup>

### c. The transcendent self: for the sake of others

Emptiness and compassion, for both Thich Nhat Hanh and Merton, are never two separate realities. We are reminded of another significant illumination that occurred in Merton’s life when he visited Polonnaruwa in 1968:

I am able to approach the Buddhas barefoot and undisturbed, my feet in wet grass, wet sand. Then the silence of the extraordinary faces. The great smiles. Huge and yet subtle. [...] I was knocked over with a rush of relief and thankfulness at the obvious clarity of the figures, the clarity and fluidity of shape and line, the design of the monumental bodies composed into the rock shape and landscape, figure, rock, and tree. [...] Looking at these figures, I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tired vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious. [...] All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear. The rock, all matter, all life is charged with dharmakaya [...] everything is emptiness and everything is compassion.<sup>320</sup>

It is possible that compassion is emptiness, and emptiness is compassion. Merton’s true self in its fullest is realized as a transcendent self,<sup>321</sup> supporting “the gospel’s paradoxical view that authentic

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<sup>317</sup> Thomas Merton, *Seasons of Celebration: Meditations on the Cycle of Liturgical Feasts* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 98.

<sup>318</sup> Sonia Petisco, “Sophia the Unknown, the Dark, the Nameless: Questioning the Male-Female Dichotomy through Thomas Merton’s Poetry,” in *Universal Vision: A Centenary Celebration of Thomas Merton European Perspectives from the Merton Journal*, eds. Fiona Gardner, Keith Griffin & Peter Ellis (Farnborough: The Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 2014), 103.

<sup>319</sup> Cf. Christopher Pramuk, “Hagia Sophia: The Unknown and Unseen Christ of Thomas Merton.” *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (2006): 171.

<sup>320</sup> Merton, *The Asian Journal*, 235-236. This experience of Merton’s has been given a great deal of attention and has been arguable for many because it took place at Gal Vihara, a Buddhist temple. In addition, his account of the experience was without explicit references to the Christian tradition. Donald Grayston, “Thomas Merton in Asia: The Polonnaruwa Illumination,” in *Thomas Merton: Monk on the Edge*, eds. Ross Labrie, Angus Stuart, and Thomas Merton Society of Canada (Vancouver: Langara College, 2013), 138-140.

<sup>321</sup> Robert Waldron frames Merton’s Polonnaruwa illumination with Sufi’s final integration. He cites Merton describing that as “the man who [...] apprehends his life fully and wholly from an inner ground that is at once more universal than the empirical ego and yet entirely his own. He is in a certain sense “cosmic” and “universal man.” He

self-realization results not from a self-centered effort to fulfill one's every wish, but from a movement beyond oneself in an attempt to realize the good of others."<sup>322</sup> In "Hagia Sophia," Merton adopts a third-person perspective mostly describing himself as "he," a "he" that is situated among all things, only appearing occasionally as the narrator in "I" form and reminding us that "he" is indeed Merton himself. Contrastingly, the subject "I" is probably the most repeated word in Thich Nhat Hanh's "Please call me by my true names;" even so, we experience this "I" as a separate being that transcends the self as an inter-be. Walking the kenotic path, both Thich Nhat Hanh and Merton recognize the kenotic identity as a hospitable space of compassion. As stated, "kenosis does not lead through an act of emptying towards fullness, but it leads towards a state where emptiness and fullness cannot be distinguished."<sup>323</sup>

To illustrate the notion of compassion, Thich Nhat Hanh and Merton both adopt the image of an open door. Williams as well analogizes leaving the door of the heart open through the beatitude of the "pure in heart."<sup>324</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh explicitly relates the open door with one's heart: "and so the door of my heart/ could be left open,/ the door of compassion." The heart is closely related to a person's identity; openness of the heart thus represents the fluidity of identity, the interbeing, the emptiness. In contrast, Merton associates the open door with Mary: "her consent opens the door [...] God enters into His creation. Through her wise answer, through her obedient understanding, through the sweet yielding consent of Sophia..." Merton does not directly equate Mary's consent, "wise answer," or her obedient understanding with the door opening, instead, it is "through" all of those responses that the door is opened. The open door in all likelihood is best understood as Mary's poverty, her emptiness, her total availability for God. She made room for

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has attained a deeper, fuller identity than that of his limited ego-self, which is only a fragment of his being. Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 225. Cf. Grayston, "The Polonnaruwa Illumination," 145.

<sup>322</sup> Walter E. Conn, "Self-Transcendence, the True Self, and Self-Love," *Pastoral Psychology* 46, no. 5 (1998): 324.

<sup>323</sup> Botz-Bornstein, "Kenosis, Dynamic Sunyata and Weak Thought," 377.

<sup>324</sup> Williams, *Spiritual Intimacy*, 81.

God and in her Christ the Sophia incarnated, which then opened the door to the kingdom of God for all the world. Compassion is universal; it is inclusive, inviting all and welcoming all.

The pure of heart makes a peacemaker. Williams says, “We stand in those places simply, and humbly, as open doors, in our poverty of spirit. As open doors, we allow the mercy of God to enter the world and allow the pain of the world to pass through us to be held by that transforming love of God.”<sup>325</sup> Purity of heart makes a person live in alignment with Sophia, who inhabits all of creation and who is one’s true self. The interconnectedness between personal wholeness and the well-being of the larger world is made explicit in the seventh beatitude. Holding onto the principles of non-violence, Thich Nhat Hanh and Merton refuse to vilify the opponent while simultaneously extending compassion to the oppressed. They both that the hope for breaking the spiral of violence lies in breaking the dichotomy between “us” and “them,” or in a more radical sense, “to love of enemy.” Is nonviolence just an impractical ideal? Would nonviolence intensify the suffering of the oppressed if forgiveness or even loving the enemy is imposed as an obligation? Would nonviolence then encourage self-imposed silencing of the victims and thus undermine justice? Is violence acceptable in self-defence? What if nonviolent submissive behaviours only hold a candle to the devil and leaves the real violence of structural evil untouched?

While there are no easy answers to these questions, we might consider the view of Soelle who interprets nonviolence in the sense of ego-lessness: “ego and ego-lessness are connected. They are paired in the same way as [...] violence and nonviolence. [...] It is not a matter of an either/or choice. Instead, it is a growth process that always develops new forms.”<sup>326</sup> For Soelle, ego-lessness and nonviolence belong together and means “to forego the desire to win and to avoid

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<sup>325</sup> Williams, 84.

<sup>326</sup> Soelle, *The Silent Cry*, chap 12, iBooks.

the defeat of enemies, which always includes their humiliation.”<sup>327</sup> She indicates that, “victory brings forth hatred and that to be conquered creates suffering. The wise desire neither victory nor defeat.”<sup>328</sup> Reading the poem “Please call me by my true names,” she notices the tension:

Friends and foes are distinguished and named but not separated into classes, races, genders, or ideologies. Victims and perpetrators are distinguished; perpetrators such as the rapist are judged to be blind but not excluded on them too does God’s sun shine, as Jesus put it. That life has horrible, violent enemies is not denied. But this realism of naming is overcome into the mystical sense of being one.<sup>329</sup>

Any justification of violence is apparently too costly for Soelle, who along with many Germans wrestled with a sense of collective guilt in the aftermath of WWII; at the same time, upholding nonviolence as the only way to peace does not, for her, mean to give way to evil. Even more, Soelle is conscious of the violence involved in submitting to unjust laws and systems of exploitation. A commitment to nonviolence must be more than just the avoidance of violent behaviors. Nonviolence is concerned with the question of structural evil. Nonviolence is not without resistance but it is precisely that persistence in nonviolence, a power in vulnerability, radically defies the world of hostility and suffering.

The peacemaker, according to Williams, is to be the prophetic presence in places of destruction and despair, implying the possibilities of suffering and persecution. The kenotic path ends with the beatitudes for those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake. In the Christian West, the spiritual journey is often described as the three-fold path of purgation, illumination, and union. Rather than a state of unsurpassed ecstasy, the eighth beatitude puts union with God into perspective as fellowship in Christ’s suffering. Soelle approves John of the Cross, writing: “darkness and highest bliss as one [...] ‘and the more it darkens the soul the more it also gives it its light.’”<sup>330</sup> In her understanding, “the dark night of the soul does not fall outside the historical

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<sup>327</sup> Soelle, chap 14, iBooks.

<sup>328</sup> Soelle, chap 14, iBooks.

<sup>329</sup> Soelle, chap 14, iBooks.

<sup>330</sup> Soelle, chap 8, iBooks.

world in an allegedly pure encounter of God and the individual soul;” the “dark night of the soul” is to be experienced in the context of the “dark night of the world.”<sup>331</sup> The togetherness of love and suffering is compassion. In solidarity with those who suffer, we are in communion with Christ who in his kenosis suffers for us. He is who Merton refers to as “the homeless God,” whom Mary the Sophia crowned “with what is greater than glory: [...] weakness, nothingness, poverty.” Identifying with people in suffering breaks our heart, not shattering but breaking it open as a door to compassion.<sup>332</sup> Compassion as the tenderness of life wells up from suffering, which Merton illustrates:

What is my new desert? The name of it is compassion. There is no wilderness so terrible, so beautiful, so arid and so fruitful as the wilderness of compassion. It is the only desert that shall truly flourish like the lily. It shall become a pool, it shall bud forth and blossom and rejoice with joy. It is in the desert of compassion that the thirsty land turns into springs of water, that the poor possess all things.<sup>333</sup>

From the heart of compassion—the broken, opened heart, the desert within—flows the love of Sophia that nourishes all beings. As Thich Nanh Hnah describes, “My joy is like Spring, so warm/ it makes flowers bloom all over the Earth./ My pain is like a river of tears,/ so vast it fills the four oceans.” Compassion is the lived expression of discovering that our wounds, the wounds of others, and the wounds of God are one wound.<sup>334</sup>

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<sup>331</sup> Soelle, chap 8, iBooks.

<sup>332</sup> Parker J. Palmer, *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), chap 1, Kindle.

<sup>333</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 334.

<sup>334</sup> M. S. Laird, *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 118.

### **Conclusion: The unfinished journey towards the altar in the world**

A kenotic sapiential Christology lies at the theological foundation of the practice of hospitality in interreligious engagement. This Christology fosters the formation of a kenotic identity that is capable of retaining one's integrity to the commitment of Christian faith while also creating space for religious others. Informed by his mature Sophia Christology, Merton comes to name the creative tension in his life as a result of a decentering: "My ideas are always changing, always moving around one centre, and I'm always seeing that centre from somewhere else. Hence I will always be accused of inconsistency. But I will no longer be there to hear the accusation."<sup>335</sup> The centre Merton moved around can be understood as the place where he grounds his identity, that is, the Christian contemplative. Nonetheless, he was more than willing, perhaps earnestly so, to move beyond the boundary of Christianity in order to reflect on this center with renewed perspectives enriched by the other religious traditions, including the Zen Buddhism. His engagement with Zen Buddhism can be aptly categorized within the dialogue of religious experience.

Where the two traditions (Zen Buddhism and Christianity) appear to depart, in Merton's view, is also where the dialogue of religious experience and theology come into tension. The dialogue of religious experience stretches the limits of theological language when speaking about God, which includes the use of verbal formulas and linguistic preconceptions of pure conscious or experience. Is there a way for us to communicate our experience of God that goes beyond doctrinal frameworks to make our knowledge of God comprehensible to those who do not share the same commitment to the Christian faith and its language? Soelle describes that words are like "dust," "too small, too narrow, too dusty, too unexpressive, and too misleading" to be of theological

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<sup>335</sup> Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (Sydney: HarperCollinsAustralia, 2007), January 25, 1964, Kindle.

importance, though “no one can ever really settle for ineffability, [...] the soul cannot renounce speaking of it.”<sup>336</sup> The mystical language in its notable forms, negation, paradox, and silence<sup>337</sup> potentially opens up revelatory space; our talk about God creates space for people to come to encounter God. Pramuk believes that Merton’s words open up for others a pivotal realm of communion and presence, “not through the reason, but through the imagination, by means of direct impressions [...] by description.”<sup>338</sup> Granting space for a poetic dimension in theological literature or religious discourse is searching for a way of apprehending truths that take the whole person into account. The cultivation of a more holistic method for doing theology is embodied in the turn to theopoetics or in Coakley’s *théologie totale*. Pramuk affirms a mystical or sapiential approach to theology in that it engenders a posture of openness “to break itself open linguistically, metaphysically, kenotically, to the wisdom and presence of God in every natural and naturally human landscape, where Wisdom ever plays, beckons, provokes, and finds us.”<sup>339</sup>

Two emerging issues concerning Christian spirituality are brought out through the dialogue of religious: the use of spiritual practices from other religious traditions and multiplicity of religious belonging.<sup>340</sup> Today, “a traditional spirituality of inhabiting sacred spaces has given way to a new spirituality of seeking.”<sup>341</sup> Rather than being attached to a formal structure or secured by a sense of belonging that is rooted in a particular religious heritage, more and more people identify as nomadic explorers and sojourners looking for wisdom, drinking from more than one religion tradition, and are weary of “rigid religious boundaries, authoritarian teachings, and the hypocrisy

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<sup>336</sup> Soelle, *The Silent Cry*, chap 4, iBooks.

<sup>337</sup> Soelle, chap 4, iBooks.

<sup>338</sup> John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press), 89. Cf. Pramuk, *Sophia*, chap 2, Kindle.

<sup>339</sup> Pramuk, chap 2, Kindle.

<sup>340</sup> Kwok, Pui-Lan, “Interfaith Encounter,” 540.

<sup>341</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 3. Cf. Kwok, Pui-Lan, “Interfaith Encounter,” 543.

of religious leadership.”<sup>342</sup> We should remember that all spiritual practices have specific contexts and religious meanings; in order to be respectful to other religious traditions, we cannot merely follow their techniques and use them for our own purposes but we must honor their integrity in order to learn from them.<sup>343</sup>

What is more controversial is the question of multiple religious identities: one’s participation in more than one religious tradition fully and simultaneously. Despite the uneasiness and fear of syncretism this issue causes in the Christian West, multiplicity of religious participation is a much more complex matter in the multicultural and multireligious context of Asia. On one hand, for those who grew up in a religiously pluralistic context, participating in certain spiritual practices does not necessarily equate to an exclusive claim of belonging to one particular religious system.<sup>344</sup> On the other hand, a religious identity like Islam is almost inextricable from one’s family, cultural and even national identity (Muslim). The issue is complicated further by the fact that there are few today who would even answer to titles like “Father” as a priest or “Sister” or “Roshi” as a Zen teacher.<sup>345</sup> Devotion to Christianity and Zen are acknowledged by both communities respectively. The religious experience dialogue will always be in tension with the theological dialogue as one navigates between a real sense of oneness and the doctrinal boundaries that ensure their religion’s integrity.

Interreligious engagement brings insight but more importantly it builds relationship. Merton once commented on his relationship with Suzuki, saying, “The fact that you are a Zen Buddhist and I am a Christian monk far from separating us makes us most like one another.”<sup>346</sup>

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<sup>342</sup> Kwok, Pui-Lan, 543.

<sup>343</sup> Karen Lebacqz and Joseph Driskill, *Ethics and Spiritual Care: A Guide for Pastors, Chaplains, and Spiritual Directors* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 92. Cf. Kwok, Pui-Lan, 546.

<sup>344</sup> For example, a Chinese person may go to a different temple depending on the festival, event and life circumstance. Kwok Pui-Lan explains that, “many of the world’s cultures have no equivalent term for ‘religion’ as if there are some religious systems that can be externalized and objectified, abstracted from the persons who live them.” Kwok, Pui-Lan, 541.

<sup>345</sup> For example, Robert F. Kennedy is a Jesuit priest and a roshi, and Elaine MacInnes is a Catholic nun and a roshi.

<sup>346</sup> Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, “To Daisetz T. Suzuki,” Kindle.

This dynamic was evident when the two met in December of 1964, Merton describes, “I did feel that I was speaking to someone who, in a tradition completely different from my own, had matured, had become complete and found his way.” He continued, “One cannot understand Buddhism until one meet it in this existential manner, in a person in whom it is alive.”<sup>347</sup> As they celebrated their meeting with a tea ceremony performed by Suzuki's secretary, Merton reflects “the tea ceremony to have features in common with the Eucharist, that those who participate in the ceremony experienced a spirit of communion.”<sup>348</sup> As Merton recalled his last words with Suzuki, he adds, “I must say that as a Christian I was profoundly moved [by Suzuki’s statement: The most important thing is Love.] Truly Prajna and Karuna are one (as the Buddhist says), or Caritas (love) is indeed the highest knowledge.”<sup>349</sup> Their interreligious dialogue led them both to realize that what mattered was not the conceptual similarities nor the differences of their respective religions but that their relationship was deepened simply by being fully present to the other.

Merton speaks of the need for all interreligious communication to originate from communion: “The deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words, and it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept. Not that we discover new unity. We discover an older unity.”<sup>350</sup> This sense of spiritual unity across confessional lines is perhaps observed and articulated most memorably in his statement on behalf of Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk exiled from his war-torn country:

I have said Nhat Hanh is my brother, and it is very true [...] I have far more in common with Nhat Hanh than I have with many Americans, and I do not hesitate to say it. It is vitally important that such bonds be admitted. They are the bonds of a new solidarity and a new brotherhood which is beginning to be evident on all the five continents and which cuts across all political, religious and cultural lines [...] I appeal for Nhat Hanh [...] do

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<sup>347</sup> Thomas Merton, *Birds of Appetite*, 60-62.

<sup>348</sup> Serran-Pagan y Fuentes, Cristobal, “Deep Ecumenism in the Mystical Thought of D. T. Suzuki and Thomas Merton,” *Merton Seasonal* 31.3 (Fall 2006): 24-25.

<sup>349</sup> Merton, *Birds of Appetite*, 60-62.

<sup>350</sup> Merton, *The Asian Journal*, 308.

what for Nhat Hanh whatever you would do for me if I were in his position. In many ways I wish I were.<sup>351</sup>

Merton's radical hospitality for the religious other is demonstrated through a profound level of solidarity with those who are from a different culture or faith and especially with those who suffer. In his view, a transcendental communion is essential in facilitating loving our neighbors as ourselves and healing the divided and broken world. Social engagement across religious boundaries is recognized as the dialogue of action; genuine dialogue should not end with the exchange of ideas. What actually brings together religious traditions and the divided world is the collaborative effort with the other in order to minimize suffering and to promote world peace and justice. Remembering Hans Kung's words "No World Peace without Religious Peace,"<sup>352</sup> we find that we are still far from the profound level of solidarity that Merton desires. Maybe we are still too confident in our knowing. But it is unknowing that opens us to mystery, God and religious others. Maybe we are still being too careless in filling our communication to others with words. But it is in silence that we will begin to hear each other more attentively. Maybe we are still too easily satisfied with superficial convergence. But it is only by looking closely at our differences that misunderstandings can be overcome. Then, respectfully, we might come into true communion with others and ourselves.

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<sup>351</sup> Thomas Merton, "Nhat Hanh Is My Brother," in *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 108.

<sup>352</sup> Hans Kung, "No World Peace without Religious Peace," in *Christianity and the World Religions: Paths of Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism* (Garden: Doubleday, 1986), 440.

Appendix 1: Author's Note in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*<sup>353</sup>  
by Thomas Merton

When there is carrion lying, meat-eating birds circle and descend. Life and death are two. The living attack the dead, to their own profit. The dead lose nothing by it. They gain too, by being disposed of. Or they seem to, if you must think in terms of gain and loss. Do you then approach the study of Zen with the idea that there is something to be gained by it? This question is not intended as an implicit accusation. But it *is*, nevertheless, a serious question. Where there is a lot of fuss about “spirituality,” “enlightenment,” or just “turning on,” it is often because there are buzzards hovering around a corpse. This hovering, this circling, this descending, this celebration of victory, are not what is meant by the Study of Zen – even though they may be a highly useful exercise in other contexts. And they enrich the birds of appetite.

Zen enriches no one. There is no body to be found. The birds may come and circle for a while in the place where it is thought to be. But they soon go elsewhere. When they are gone, the “nothing,” the “no-body” that was there, suddenly appears. That is Zen. It was there all the time but the scavengers missed it, because it was not their kind of prey.

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<sup>353</sup> Thomas Merton, “Birds of Appetite,” ix.

Appendix 2: "Hagia Sophia"<sup>354</sup>  
by Thomas Merton

I. Dawn. The Hour of Lauds.

There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness. This mysterious Unity and Integrity is Wisdom, the Mother of all, *Natura naturans*. There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence that is a fount of action and joy. It rises up in wordless gentleness and flows out to me from the unseen roots of all created being, welcoming me tenderly, saluting me with indescribable humility. This is at once my own being, my own nature, and the Gift of my Creator's Thought and Art within me, speaking as Hagia Sophia, speaking as my sister, Wisdom.

I am awakened, I am born again at the voice of this my Sister, sent to me from the depths of divine fecundity.

Let us suppose I am a man lying asleep in a hospital. I am indeed this man lying asleep. It is July the second, the Feast of Our Lady's Visitation. A Feast of Wisdom.

At five-thirty in the morning I am dreaming in a very quiet room when a soft voice awakens me from my dream. I am like all mankind awakening from all the dreams that ever were dreamed in all the nights of the world. It is like the One Christ awakening in all the separate selves that ever were separate and isolated and alone in all the lands of the earth. It is like all minds coming back together into awareness from all distractions, cross-purposes and confusions, into unity of love. It is like the first morning of the world (when Adam, at the sweet voice of Wisdom awoke from nonentity and knew her), and like the Last Morning of the world when all the fragments of Adam will return from death at the voice of Hagia Sophia, and will know where they stand.

Such is the awakening of one man, one morning, at the voice of a nurse in the hospital. Awakening out of languor and darkness, out of helplessness, out of sleep, newly confronting reality and finding it to be gentleness.

It is like being awakened by Eve. It is like being awakened by the Blessed Virgin. It is like coming forth from primordial nothingness and standing in clarity, in Paradise.

In the cool hand of the nurse there is the touch of all life, the touch of Spirit.

Thus Wisdom cries out to all who will hear (*Sapientia clamitat in plateis*) and she cries out particularly to the little, to the ignorant and the helpless.

Who is more little, who is more poor than the helpless man who lies asleep in his bed without awareness and without defense? Who is more trusting than he who must entrust himself each night to sleep? What is the reward of his trust? Gentleness comes to him when he is most helpless and awakens him, refreshed, beginning to be made whole. Love takes him by the hand, and opens to him the doors of another life, another day.

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<sup>354</sup> Thomas Merton, "Hagia Sophia." Cf. Pramuk. "Sophia: The Hidden Christ," Kindle.

(But he who has defended himself, fought for himself in sickness, planned for himself, guarded himself, loved himself alone and watched over his own life all night, is killed at last by exhaustion. For him there is no newness. Everything is stale and old.)

When the helpless one awakens strong at the voice of mercy, it is as if Life his Sister, as if the Blessed Virgin, (his own flesh, his own sister), as if Nature made wise by God's Art and Incarnation were to stand over him and invite him with unutterable sweetness to be awake and to live. This is what it means to recognize Hagia Sophia.

## II. Early Morning. The Hour of Prime.

O blessed, silent one, who speaks everywhere!

We do not hear the soft voice, the gentle voice, the merciful and feminine.

We do not hear mercy, or yielding love, or non-resistance, or non-reprisal. In her there are no reasons and no answers. Yet she is the candor of God's light, the expression of His simplicity.

We do not hear the uncomplaining pardon that bows down the innocent visages of flowers to the dewy earth. We do not see the Child who is prisoner in all the people, and who says nothing. She smiles, for though they have bound her, she cannot be a prisoner. Not that she is strong, or clever, but simply that she does not understand imprisonment.

The helpless one, abandoned to sweet sleep, him the gentle one will awake: Sophia.

All that is sweet in her tenderness will speak to him on all sides in everything, without ceasing, and he will never be the same again. He will have awakened not to conquest and dark pleasure but to the impeccable pure simplicity of One consciousness in all and through all: one Wisdom, one Child, one Meaning, one Sister.

The stars rejoice in their setting, and in the rising of the Sun. The heavenly lights rejoice in the going forth of one man to make a new world in the morning, because he has come out of the confused primordial dark night into consciousness. He has expressed the clear silence of Sophia in his own heart. He has become eternal.

## III. High Morning. The Hour of Tierce.

The sun burns in the sky like the Face of God, but we do not know his countenance as terrible. His light is diffused in the air and the light of God is diffused by Hagia Sophia.

We do not see the Blinding One in black emptiness. He speaks to us gently in ten thousand things, in which His light is one fullness and one Wisdom.

Thus He shines not on them but from within them. Such is the loving-kindness of Wisdom.

All the perfections of created things are also in God; and therefore He is at once Father and Mother. As Father He stands in solitary might surrounded by darkness. As Mother His shining is diffused, embracing all His creatures with merciful tenderness and light. The Diffuse Shining of God is Hagia Sophia. We call her His “glory.” In Sophia His power is experienced only as mercy and as love.

(When the recluses of fourteenth-century England heard their Church Bells and looked out upon the wolds and fens under a kind sky, they spoke in their hearts to “Jesus our Mother.” It was Sophia that had awakened in their childlike hearts.)

Perhaps in a certain very primitive aspect Sophia is the unknown, the dark, the nameless Ousia. Perhaps she is even the Divine Nature, One in Father, Son and Holy Ghost. And perhaps she is infinite light unmanifest, not even waiting to be known as Light. This I do not know. Out of the silence Light is spoken. We do not hear it or see it until it is spoken.

In the Nameless Beginning, without Beginning, was the Light. We have not seen this Beginning. I do not know where she is, in this Beginning. I do not speak of her as a Beginning, but as a manifestation.

Now the Wisdom of God, Sophia, comes forth, reaching from “end to end mightily.” She wills to be also the unseen pivot of all nature, the center and significance of all the light that is in all and for all. That which is poorest and humblest, that which is most hidden in all things is nevertheless most obvious in them, and quite manifest, for it is their own self that stands before us, naked and without care.

Sophia, the feminine child, is playing in the world, obvious and unseen, playing at all times before the Creator. Her delights are to be with the children of men. She is their sister. The core of life that exists in all things is tenderness, mercy, virginity, the Light, the Life considered as passive, as received, as given, as taken, as inexhaustibly renewed by the Gift of God. Sophia is Gift, is Spirit, Donum Dei. She is God-given and God Himself as Gift. God as all, and God reduced to Nothing: inexhaustible nothingness. *Exinanivit semetipsum*. Humility as the source of unfailling light.

Hagia Sophia in all things is the Divine Life reflected in them, considered as a spontaneous participation, as their invitation to the Wedding Feast.

Sophia is God’s sharing of Himself with creatures. His outpouring, and the Love by which He is given, and known, held and loved.

She is in all things like the air receiving the sunlight. In her they prosper. In her they glorify God. In her they rejoice to reflect Him. In her they are united with him. She is the union between them. She is the Love that unites them. She is life as communion, life as thanksgiving, life as praise, life as festival, life as glory.

Because she receives perfectly there is in her no stain. She is love without blemish, and gratitude without self-complacency. All things praise her by being themselves and by sharing in the Wedding Feast. She is the Bride and the Feast and the Wedding.

The feminine principle in the world is the inexhaustible source of creative realizations of the Father's glory. She is His manifestation in radiant splendor! But she remains unseen, glimpsed only by a few. Sometimes there are none who know her at all.

Sophia is the mercy of God in us. She is the tenderness with which the infinitely mysterious power of pardon turns the darkness of our sins into the light of grace. She is the inexhaustible fountain of kindness, and would almost seem to be, in herself, all mercy. So she does in us a greater work than that of Creation: the work of new being in grace, the work of pardon, the work of transformation from brightness to brightness *tamquam a Domini Spiritu*. She is in us the yielding and tender counterpart of the power, justice and creative dynamism of the Father.

#### IV. Sunset. The Hour of Compline. *Salve Regina*.

Now the Blessed Virgin Mary is the one created being who enacts and shows forth in her life all that is hidden in Sophia. Because of this she can be said to be a personal manifestation of Sophia, Who in God is Ousia rather than Person.

Natura in Mary becomes pure Mother. In her, Natura is as she was from the origin from her divine birth. In Mary Natura is all wise and is manifested as an all-prudent, all-loving, all-pure person: not a Creator, and not a Redeemer, but perfect Creature, perfectly Redeemed, the fruit of all God's great power, the perfect expression of wisdom in mercy.

It is she, it is Mary, Sophia, who in sadness and joy, with the full awareness of what she is doing, sets upon the Second Person, the Logos, a crown which is His Human Nature. Thus her consent opens the door of created nature, of time, of history, to the Word of God.

God enters into His creation. Through her wise answer, through her obedient understanding, through the sweet yielding consent of Sophia, God enters without publicity into the city of rapacious men.

She crowns Him not with what is glorious, but with what is greater than glory: the one thing greater than glory is weakness, nothingness, poverty.

She sends the infinitely Rich and Powerful One forth as poor and helpless, in His mission of inexpressible mercy, to die for us on the Cross.

The shadows fall. The stars appear. The birds begin to sleep. Night embraces the silent half of the earth.

A vagrant, a destitute wanderer with dusty feet, finds his way down a new road. A homeless God, lost in the night, without papers, without identification, without even a number, a frail expendable exile lies down in desolation under the sweet stars of the world and entrusts Himself to sleep.

Appendix 3: "Please Call Me by My True Names"<sup>355</sup>  
by Thich Nhat Hanh

Do not say that I'll depart tomorrow—  
even today I am still arriving.

Look deeply: every second I am arriving  
to be a bud on a Spring branch,  
to be a tiny bird, with still-fragile wings,  
learning to sing in my new nest,  
to be a caterpillar in the heart of a flower,  
to be a jewel hiding itself in a stone.

I still arrive, in order to laugh and to cry,  
to fear and to hope.  
The rhythm of my heart is the birth and death  
of all that are alive.

I am the mayfly metamorphosing  
on the surface of the river.  
And I am the bird  
That swoops down to swallow the mayfly.

I am the frog swimming happily  
in the clear water of a pond.  
And I am the grass-snake  
that silently feeds itself on the frog.

I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones,  
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks.  
And I am the arms merchant,  
selling deadly weapons to Uganda.

I am the twelve-year-old girl,  
refugee on a small boat,  
who throws herself into the ocean  
after being raped by a sea pirate.  
And I am the pirate,  
my heart not yet capable  
of seeing and loving.

I am a member of the politburo,  
with plenty of power in my hands.  
And I am the man who has to pay  
His "debt of blood" to my people  
dying slowly in a forced labor camp.

My joy is like Spring, so warm  
it makes flowers bloom all over the Earth.  
My pain is like a river of tears,  
so vast it fills the four oceans.

Please call me by my true names,  
so I can hear all my cries and laughter at once,  
so I can see that my joy and pain are one.

Please call me by my true names,  
so I can wake up  
and so the door of my heart  
could be left open,  
the door of compassion.

Remark at the end: This poem was written in  
1978, during the time of helping the boat  
people. It was first read a retreat in Kosmos  
Center in Amsterdam, Holland, organized by  
Niko Tiderman. Daniel Berrigan was there.

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<sup>355</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, "Please Call Me by My True Names," in *Call Me by My True Names: The Collected Poems* (Berkeley, Calif: Parallax Press, 1999), 72-73.

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