



## **SPIRITUALITY TODAY**

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***A Hidden  
Wholeness: Thomas  
Merton and  
Martin Luther  
King, Jr.***

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AT the time of his assassination, plans were underway for Martin Luther King, Jr., to make a retreat with Thomas Merton at Our Lady of Gethsemani Abbey. We shall never know what might have resulted from a dialogue between this Roman Catholic monk and this black Baptist preacher whose lives still fascinate and inspire us twenty years after their deaths. But the act of recalling their common struggle against the evils of racism, materialism, and militarism, may enable us to recover what they would have brought to such an encounter and to imagine the joint "word" they might have left those who strive to live out their legacy.[\(1\)](#)

They came, of course, from two very different backgrounds. A quick comparison

of their biographies would seem to demonstrate that the only thing that Fr. Louis Merton, O.C.S.O. and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., held in common was the year of their deaths -- 1968. Merton was born in Prades, France in 1915, the son of Owen Merton, an artist from New Zealand and Ruth Jenkins Merton, an artist from the U.S. His mother died when Merton was only six and his father when he was fifteen. His childhood and adolescence were unsettled. Shuttling between France, England, Bermuda, and Long Island, N.Y., Merton experienced the homelessness of the expatriate, the rootlessness of the transient adrift in an uncaring world, and the longing of the orphan for family stability. Educated at European boarding schools, at Cambridge, and at Columbia, between the two World Wars, Merton experienced the disillusionment with the modern world that many of the intellectuals of his generation felt. His conversion to Roman Catholicism incorporated him into a firmly established system of values and doctrines that countered the anomie and hedonism he deplored in modern society. "Leaving the world," he would find both a home and a family in the monastic enclosure and the community life of a Cistercian monastery in Kentucky. (2)

From his parents, Merton absorbed the temperament of the artist, though his talent expressed itself in writing, not painting. This artistic perspective tended to nurture in him a critical distance from the world. Fortunately, Merton's superiors recognized and encouraged his vocation as a writer and throughout his years in the monastery he remained an amazingly prolific one, publishing over forty-eight books of poetry, essays, biography, autobiography, journals, fiction, meditations, and social criticism. Writing requires discipline and solitude. The strictly regulated life of a contemplative monk offered the disciplined structure he needed. And Merton himself helped persuade his order to recover the value of solitude in its own tradition by reinstating the practice of allowing some monks to retire to the more complete solitude of the hermit life. His own request for greater solitude granted, he lived the last years of his life in a hermitage.

Illustrating the old theological adage, "grace builds on nature," Merton's distanced perspective upon the world and his need for disciplined solitude derived from his "expatriate" past and from his sensibilities as a literary artist, were deepened, fulfilled, and -- as we shall see - transformed by the contemplative tradition in which he immersed himself.

Martin Luther King, Jr., was born in Atlanta, in 1929, the son of Alberta Williams King and M. L. King, Sr., pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church. King's middle-class childhood was emotionally as well as economically secure, though, like most black children, his awareness of racism came early: a white friend who suddenly refused to play with him, a white shoe salesman who insisted that black customers wait in the rear of the store, a policeman who insulted his father by

calling him "boy," a bus driver who forced him and his teacher to stand in the aisles for a ninety-mile trip in order to seat whites. King was shocked and hurt by these incidents, and he never forgot them. [\(3\)](#)

As the son, grandson, and great grandson of Baptist ministers, King was deeply rooted in the Afro-American religious tradition. Though he briefly considered careers in medicine and law, he decided as a teenager to accept what must have seemed inevitable: he too would enter the ministry. Already, it was apparent that he was, as his father proudly remarked, "a magnificent preacher." Throughout the years of his leadership in the civil rights Movement, King would remain a preacher, who drew instinctively upon the black church tradition in which he was formed for both the style and content of his message. Courses in philosophy, ethics, and theology at Morehouse College, Crozier Seminary, and Boston University provided King with the opportunity to develop an intellectual framework for systematic analysis of the relationship between Christianity and society, but the existential base for King's commitment to social action was already established in the tradition of black religious protest. Certainly the intellectual sources commonly credited with influencing King's development -- Thoreau's doctrine of non-cooperation with evil, Rauschenbusch's social gospel, Gandhi's non-violence, and the philosophical school of personalism at Boston University -- were important, but so was the example of his father and maternal grandfather. In 1935, Martin Luther King, Sr. had led several thousand black demonstrators on a march from Ebenezer Baptist Church to Atlanta's city hall in support of voting rights for black citizens. A decade earlier, Reverend Adam Daniel Williams, King's maternal grandfather, organized rallies at Ebenezer to protest a municipal bond issue that contained no provisions for high-school education for black youth. [\(4\)](#)

Strongly attracted to the intellectual life, King might very well have followed the example of Benjamin Mays or Howard Thurman by combining ministerial and academic careers. He could have taught in a seminary in the North and we might today be reading his texts in social ethics, but he decided instead that the place for his was a pastorate in the South. And so he accepted that fateful call to pastor the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in the shadow of the capitol of the old Confederacy in Montgomery Alabama.

Our Lady of Gethsemani Abbey and Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Catholic monasticism and Black Protestantism, two very different locations and two very different traditions and yet, they did share a common trait -- marginality. Monks were marginal by profession; they had rejected the "world." Blacks were marginalized by discrimination; they were rejected by the dominant white society. Both monasticism and the black church were profoundly extraneous to the

priorities and to the values of America in the 1950s. Marginality provided Martin and King with the critical consciousness necessary for radical dissent from the religious and political status quo. Moreover, the contemplative tradition within monasticism, and the prophetic tradition within Afro-American religion, furnished Merton, the contemplative, and King, the prophet, with the spiritual insight necessary to articulate convincing critical analyses of society and the religious experience necessary to ground their prescriptions for social change in personal authenticity.

And yet, it was not the traditions, per se, but what King and Merton took from them, or better, the ways in which King and Merton were transformed by them which made all the difference. Initially, neither Merton or King set out to "save the soul of the nation," as King's SCLC would later put it. There was in the young Merton, the enthusiasm of the convert, which led him to espouse in his earlier works, like *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948), a world-rejecting attitude that he later came to recant:

The contemplative life is not [he wrote in 1964], and cannot be, a mere withdrawal, a pure negation, a turning of one's back on the world with its suffering, its crises, its confusions and its errors. First of all, the attempt itself would be illusory. No man can withdraw completely from the society of his fellow men; and the monastic community is deeply implicated, for better or for worse, in the economic, political, and social structures of the contemporary world.

[\(5\)](#)

We are all, according to Merton, in the fine phrase he used to entitle one of his published journals, "Guilty Bystanders." The Merton who had written a series of widely read "modern spiritual classics," *Seeds of*

*Contemplation* (1949), *The Ascent to Truth* (1951), *Bread in the Wilderness* (1953), *The Living Bread* (1956), *Thoughts in Solitude*

(1958) was suddenly turning out volumes of essays on civil rights, nuclear weapons, the Vietnam War, and expressing radical views on social and political issues. No doubt the change in Merton came about due to maturity, the deromantization of monastic life, the recovery of earlier concern about race and peace, but also due to a deepening understanding of the vocation of the monk and the meaning of contemplation. The change was probably gradual, but, Merton interpreted it in his journals as a revelatory experience. 'One of the most

famous passages in Merton's writing, it is worth quoting extensively:

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 these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream. Not that I question the reality of my vocation, or of my monastic life: but the conception of "separation from the world" that we have in the monastery too easily presents itself as a complete illusion .... [W]e are in the same world as everybody else, the world of the bomb, the world of race hatred, the world of technology, the world of mass media, big business, revolution, and all the rest .... This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud .... To think that for sixteen or seventeen years I have been taking seriously this pure illusion that is implicit in so much of our monastic thinking .... I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun. [\(6\)](#)

Merton went on to assert that it was precisely the task of the monk to speak out of his silence and solitude with an independent voice in order to clarify for those who were "completely immersed in other cares" the true value of the human person, amidst the illusions with which mass society surrounds modern man at every turn. The contemplative then has a responsibility to dissent lest by his forgetfulness, ignorance, and silence he actually complies with what he thinks he has left behind in the world. And then in a profoundly paradoxical statement Merton claims: "My solitude, however, is not my own, for I see now how much it belongs to them -- and that I have a responsibility for it in their regard, not just in my own. It is because I am one with them that I owe it to them to be alone, and when I am alone they are not 'they' but my own self. There are no strangers!" [\(7\)](#)

King's life, like Merton's, was turned from its expected trajectory by an unexpected event. That event was the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott which King had neither started nor suggested, but which irrevocably changed him from the

successful pastor of a moderately comfortable church to the leader of a national movement for racial justice. He later recalled, "When I went to Montgomery as a pastor, I had not the slightest idea that I would later become involved in a crisis .... I simply responded to the call of the people for a spokesman." (8) As spokesman for the boycott, King was overwhelmed with a load of back-breaking responsibilities and frightened by serious threats against his life and his family's safety. Reaching the end of his endurance, King sat at his kitchen table one night over a cup of coffee, trying to figure out how to get out of the movement without appearing a coward.

And I discovered then that religion had to become real to me, and I had to know God for myself. And I bowed over that cup of coffee. I never will forget it .... I prayed a prayer, and I prayed out loud that night. I said, "Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think the cause that we represent is right. But Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now. I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage. And I can't let the people see me like this because if they see me weak and losing my courage they will begin to get weak. And it seemed at that moment that I could hear an inner voice saying to me, "Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And to I will be with you, even until the end of the world." ...I heard the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone. No never alone. No never alone. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone. Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. (9)

King's kitchen table experience and Merton's Fourth and Walnut vision were breakthrough events in the lives of each man. King committed himself to the movement completely despite his growing realization more certain as the years went by -- that it would cost him his life. Merton grasped with his heart a truth that he had only known with his head, the monk left the world for the sake of the world. These events confirmed each in the path he had already started.

Both paths converged on the issue of civil rights. Merton, as well as King, perceived civil rights as a moral and religious struggle, indeed as the religious cause of the day, a view disputed by many Christians who saw it as basically a political struggle with extremists on both sides. Merton and King had a profound sense that they and the nation were living through a *kairos*, a "time of urgent and providential election." Merton stated it plainly when he announced,

In the Negro Christian non-violent movement, under Martin Luther King, the kairos, the "providential time," met with a courageous and enlightened response. The non-violent-Negro civil rights drive has been one of the most positive and successful expressions of Christian social action that has been seen anywhere in the twentieth century. It is certainly the greatest example of Christian faith in action in the social history of the United States. [\(10\)](#)

According to King, the struggle for civil rights presented the nation with an unprecedented historical opportunity. "The problem of race and color prejudice remains America's greatest moral dilemma. When one considers the impact it has on our nation, internally and externally, its resolution might well determine our destiny. History has thrust upon our generation an indescribably important task -- to complete a process of democratization which our nation has too long developed too slowly ...." [\(11\)](#) But, both men warned, the moment could be lost and if it were, the consequences would be dire. The "moment of grace," according to Merton, "will pass without effect. The merciful kairos of truth will turn into the dark hour of destruction and hate." Or, as King put it, "The Negro may be God's appeal to this age -- an age drifting rapidly to its doom." [\(12\)](#)

The concept of kairos gave a sense of urgency to their calls for a national renewal, a renewal that could only come about through nonviolence. For both men, non-violence was not simply a political tactic, it was a way of life. As King outlined it, nonviolence required active resistance to evil instead of passivity; it sought to convert, not to defeat the opponent; it was directed against evil, not against persons; it avoided internal violence, such as hatred or bitterness, as much as external violence, because hatred depersonalized the individual. Nonviolence, according to King, was based upon the belief that acceptance of suffering was redemptive, because suffering could transform both the sufferer and the oppressor; it was based upon loving others regardless of worth or merit; it was based upon the realization that all human beings are interrelated; and it was grounded in the confidence that justice would, in the end, triumph over injustice. The belief that suffering was redemptive was crucial to King as the rationale for nonviolent direct action. By accepting the violence of the oppressor, without retaliation and even without hatred the demonstrators, he taught, could transform the oppressor's heart. [\(13\)](#)

Merton shared King's admiration for Gandhi and his commitment to nonviolence. In fact, Merton's first defense of Gandhian principles occurred in 1931, when as a sixteen-year-old schoolboy in England, he got into an argument with his dormitory prefect (the captain of the football team) over the legitimacy of the Mahatma's campaign to free India from British rule. [\(14\)](#) Gandhi's greatness, in

Merton's eyes, was his profound insight into the connection between nonviolence and truth, a connection that Merton insisted was crucial if renewal of either the person or society was ever to take place. Truth, in this context, did not refer to the defense of abstract principle, still less some rigidly held ideology, but rather "the truth that is incarnate in a concrete human situation, involving living persons whose rights are denied or whose lives are threatened."[\(15\)](#) Nonviolence, then, was much more than another tactic for gaining a political victory. It was, in the final analysis, an attitude toward life, more, a way of being in the world that conformed to truth.

Nonviolence, to Merton and King alike, was the only method of social change that took full account of the dignity of the human person since it rejected the use of force and replaced coercion with an appeal to the liberty and the intelligence of the person, the very qualities that constitute us as persons. Over and over again, King and Merton proclaimed the ultimate worth, the sacredness of persons. Over and over again, they lambasted current attitudes and behaviors that debased human freedom and deadened human consciousness. In particular, they condemned the mindless striving after power, status, and wealth, which we have come to call consumerism, as a dangerous collective illusion that effectively reduces persons to objects and relegates interpersonal relationship to manipulation and exploitation. In short, King warned, "we need to move from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society."[\(16\)](#) In the essay 'Rain and the Rhinoceros,' his most devastating critique of mass culture, Merton diagnosed consumerism as a futile attempt on our part to forget our condition of radical contingency, to suppress our awareness of the inevitability of death. Consumerism works by "creating an illusion of yourself as one who has no needs that he cannot immediately fulfill." Artificial needs are created, typically by mass media, and then "satisfied," thus holding out the spurious promise of omnipotence, but actually drawing the "consumer" into a spiralling cycle of need-gratification-need that can only lead to frustration and ultimately end in despair. Trapped in this vicious cycle, we are burdened by illusion and conditioned to "suffer all the needs that society demands we suffer."[\(17\)](#)

Consumerism commodifies human relationships and trivializes freedom of choice, so that individuals become alienated not only from others, but also from themselves. As Merton put it, "Our trouble is that we are alienated from our own personal reality, or true self. We do not believe in anything but money and the power or the enjoyment which come from the possession of money."[\(18\)](#) Alienation was the source of the disregard for persons that produced apathy, hatred, and violence. The purpose of nonviolence, then, was to oppose alienation by offering people the possibility of reconciliation, reconciliation with one's self as well as with others. (This implicit critique of capitalism resembles Marx's. Both



Merton and King appreciated the insights of Marxism, but rejected its atheism and its expression in totalitarian form in twentieth-century Communist regimes. Merton had flirted briefly with membership in a Communist organization during his Columbia days in the late 1930s; King had worked through Marx as part of his reading program in social philosophers of the West while doing graduate study at Boston. Independent of Marxism, both men came to the position that racism, poverty, and war are structurally related.)

The alienation of the person from himself, Merton claimed, was endemic to our society. One of the most consistent themes of his writing, as constant in his social as in his more "spiritual" books, was a distinction between the true, or inner, self and the false, or external self. We desperately need, Merton insisted in essay after essay, to move beyond our absorption in the false self to an awareness of the true self. "To have an identity is to be awake and aware," he wrote. "But to be awake is to accept our vulnerability and death. Not out of stoicism or despair but for the sake of the invulnerable inner reality which we cannot recognize (which we can only be) but to which we awaken only when we see the unreality of our vulnerable shell." [\(19\)](#) The only way to achieve this awareness is solitude, simplicity, and silence -- the contemplative life. Not everyone can be a monk, but every Christian is called to develop within his or her life a dimension of silence and solitude in order to become aware of the inner self.

Moreover, Merton contended, it is crucial to come to an awareness of the true self in order to come to an awareness of God. As he explained:

If we are involved only in our surface existence, in externals, and in the trivial concerns of our ego, we are untrue to Him and to ourselves. To reach a true awareness of Him as well as ourselves, we have to renounce our selfish and limited self and enter into a whole new kind of existence, discovering an inner center of motivation and love which makes us see ourselves and everything else in an entirely new light .... [T]he real sense of our own existence, which is normally veiled and distorted by the routine distractions of an alienated life, is now revealed in a central intuition. What was lost and dispersed in the relative meaninglessness and triviality of purposeless behavior (living like a machine, pushed around by impulses and suggestions from others) is brought together in fully integrated conscious significance. [\(20\)](#)

Influenced by the tradition of the Rhineland mystics John Tauler, Henry Suso, and especially Meister Eckhart, Merton came to a profound realization of the presence of God at the core of our being. He spoke of "**le**

***point vierge***

, " an apex, or still point, the "center of our nothingness where one meets God -- and is found completely in His mercy." (21) Merton's most extended description of le point vierge occurred in the account of his Fourth and Walnut experience already quoted:

At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak His name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship. 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.

(22)

To become aware of this point at the center requires that we confront our own contingency and death so that we might arrive, or, rather, be given an intuition (an immediate apprehension) of the Reality in which our being is truly grounded -- God. One must, according to Merton, face the poverty of the self and be ready to renounce "the empirical self, in the presence of death, and nothingness," precisely "in order, to overcome the ignorance and error that spring from the fear of 'being nothing'." In this "desert of loneliness and emptiness the fear of death and the need for self-affirmation are seen to be illusory," and one begins to realize that the void is full and that the darkness is light. And so "in the heart of anguish are found the gifts of peace and understanding": compulsion, fear, and illusion yield to joy, spontaneity, and truth? (23)

Moreover, Merton insists, this experience does not end merely in personal illumination and individual liberation; it also includes a profound realization of the unity that binds us all together, the "hidden ground of love." For in awakening to our own true identity, we find not only ourselves, but also the world, our sisters and brothers, and Christ. "It is not a matter of exclusivism and 'purity' but of wholeness, wholeheartedness, unit and... equality which finds the same ground of love in everything." (24) The result then of contemplative silence and solitude should not be narcissistic self-absorption, but profound compassion for everyone and everything, a compassion which expresses itself in empathy and commitment.

For Merton, commitment to nonviolence is in the final analysis an affirmation of the sacredness of human life, based upon his own contemplative experience of the presence of God at the still point of each person's true self. Martin Luther King's vision of the human person, though differing in certain emphases from Merton's, brought him to remarkably similar conclusions. King claimed that the sacredness of persons was based on our identity as children of God, made in His image and so worthy of respect. "Every man is somebody," he remarked, because "he is a child of God." (25) The image of God, King explained, "is universally shared in equal portions by all." "Every human being has etched in his personality the indelible stamp of the Creator." If any person is "treated as anything less than a person of sacred worth, the image of God is abused in him and consequently and proportionately lost by those who inflict this abuse." (26)

King's concept of the person as image of God takes on much deeper resonance when we recall King, the personalist philosopher, as well as King, the Baptist minister, had worked out for himself a philosophical position in which personality, finite and infinite, was regarded as the ultimate reality of the Universe. So that the God, who was in Tillich's phrase, the "ground of all being," was not to be viewed as merely impersonal force, but as a volitional consciousness, a person concerned about human beings and involved in human history.

If the key concept for Merton's analysis of the person is the point vierge, the key theme for King's philosophy of person is **agape**. King defined **agape**, as distinct from **eros** and **philia** -- romantic love and friendly affection -- as "an understanding, redeeming good will for all men." It is [he continued] an overflowing love which is purely spontaneous, unmotivated, groundless, and creative. It is not set in motion by any quality or function of its object. It is the love of God operating in the human heart. **agape** is disinterested love. It is a love in which the individual seeks not his own good, but the good of his neighbor .... **agape** does not begin by discriminating between worthy and unworthy people, or any qualities people possess. It begins by loving others for their sakes. It is an entirely "neighbor-regarding concern for others," which discovers the neighbor in every man it meets .... [I]t springs from the need of the person -- his need for belonging to the best in the human family. (27)

King depicted **agape** as the overflow of God's love within humans. An even more striking image is his vision of love "standing at the center of the cosmos," the supreme unifying principle of life. When we love, in the sense of **agape**, we open the "door which leads to ultimate reality." (28) In King's thought **agape** takes on the force of a cosmic principle, a law of life, to which human behavior and human personality should conform. Thus

not only acts of violence, but internal attitudes, such as hate or bitterness, even resentment, had to be abandoned because they contradicted the internal logic of personality and the ordering law of the universe.

Just as Merton taught that the experience of *le point vierge* included recognition of the unity of all persons under the aspect of being, so King taught that the experience of *agape* revealed the mutual interrelatedness of all persons under the aegis of love. Though Merton does speak of the "ground of love," his primary emphasis is on being as the unifying principle of reality, and though King does speak of being, his main stress is on *agape* as the principle of wholeness in the universe. This difference in emphasis, love, on the one hand, and, being, on the other, reflected two different paths taken by two different men. Contemplative solitude led Merton to a powerful experience of God's presence as Being. A life of incredibly busy activism in the cause of social justice led King to experience the personal intervention of a God of love who promised always to sustain him. These differences stem in part from the different religious traditions that shaped the two men -- in Merton's case, Western mysticism, supplemented by Eastern spirituality, especially Zen; in King's case, the social engagement of black Evangelical piety. One can't help but speculate about other more psychological sources. As the son of two artists, Merton's artistic temperament and literary vocation were formed early. Writing impelled him to capture the pattern within the details, the order behind the chaos, the general beneath the particular, if he were ever to succeed in putting experience into words. His particular focus as a writer was his own experience, but the very act of writing for publication posited the universality of that experience as a topic of significance for others. Moreover, Merton experienced early in his monastic career a great deal of ambivalence about his writing. Why should one who had left the world in search of obscurity and solitude, continue to claim the world's attention so insistently by publishing book after book? Illustrating this apparent inconsistency in Merton's personality, a friend commented after his death that he was after all a "gregarious hermit." Solitude and social concern, silence and volubility, the particular and the universal, all these oppositions coincided in the transcendent experience of reality as Being, the hidden wholeness in which everything connects.

Similarly, King's activism owed something to the high expectations placed upon a precocious son by a proudly self-made and highly successful father. Great expectations can be a strong motivation for achievement, and at the same time, a heavy burden to carry. It is interesting that King should come to emphasize so strongly the centrality of unmerited love, the experience of being totally accepted not for one's achievement, but simply and gratuitously for one's self.

Different emphasis and different backgrounds aside, the social vision of King, the

activist, and Merton, the contemplative, converged in their mutual realization of the interrelatedness of human beings -- the hidden wholeness that binds us all together. "Whether we call it an unconscious process, an impersonal Brahman, or a Personal Being of matchless power and infinite love, there is a creative force in this universe that works to bring the disconnected aspects of reality into a harmonious whole." (29) So spoke King. And, in one of those eloquent formulas that he repeated in speech after speech until it became a refrain: "All life is interrelated. All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny." (30)

Belief in the interrelatedness of all, moved King and Merton to take a universalist perspective on the social problems of our era. They perceived clearly, for example, the connection between the struggle for civil rights in America and the independence struggles of colonized peoples around the world. Earlier than most, they pointed out the link between violence at home and violence abroad, as they insisted upon speaking out against what Merton called an overwhelming atrocity, the Vietnam War.

Recognition of the interrelatedness of all persons, they claimed, lays upon all people of good will the radical obligation of compassion. Beyond barriers of race, nationality, and religion, we must identify ourselves with the poor, the oppressed, the wretched of the earth. It is our calling to become the voice of the voiceless, the face of the faceless, to an unheeding and uncaring society. For ultimately, according to King and Merton, there are no aliens, no enemies, no others, but only sisters and brothers. However, this kind of identification, if it is to be authentic instead of merely sentimental, requires suffering. Love in reality, unlike love in dreams, is a harsh and dreadful thing (as Fr. Zossima and Dorothy Day remind us). Compassion requires *kenosis*, self-emptying sacrifice. *kenosis* might take the shape of solitude and silence as it did for Merton -- the lonely self-emptying experience of nothingness that opens out into frightening darkness. Or, *kenosis* might take the form of altruistic activism, as it did for King - the daily burden of exhausting dedication to the schedules, needs, and demands of others. In either case, the cross must be born. Compassion demands it. As both men knew well, the pattern had been set long ago by the person they tried to follow: "Though he was in the form of God, he did not deem equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:6-8).

In the end, Merton's path and King's, the contemplative way and the activist way, met at the symbol of reconciliation, *agape*, and compassion -- the

cross. Their lives bore complementary witness to the profound meditation of an earlier disciple upon that same cross:

We know what love is by this: that he laid down his life for us so that we ought to lay down our lives for others. But whoever possesses this world's goods and notices his brother in need and shuts his heart against him, how can the love of God remain in him? Dear children, let us put our love not into words or into talk but into deeds... (I John 3:16-18).

## NOTES

1. Merton discussed the planned retreat in correspondence with June and John Yungblut in January and February of 1968. See ***The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*** ed. by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985), pp. 639-41, 644.
2. For details of Merton's life see his autobiography, ***The Seven Storey Mountain*** (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1948) and the most complete biography, Michael Mott, ***The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*** (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984).
3. The biographies of King I have found most useful are David Levering Lewis, ***King: A Biography*** 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), Stephen B. Oates ***Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.*** (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), and David J. Garrow, ***Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*** (New York: William Morrow, 1986). John J. Ansbro, ***Martin Luther***

- King, Jr.: The Making of a Mind** (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982) is a helpful analysis of King's thought. James M. Washington has edited a fine collection of King's sermons, speeches, and addresses in **A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.** (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986).
4. Martin Luther King, Sr., with Clayton Riley, **Daddy King: An Autobiography** (New York: William Morrow, 1980) pp. 84-87, 95-102. See also Taylor Branch, **Parting the Waters: America in the King Years** (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988).
  5. Thomas Merton, **Seeds of Destruction** (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1964), p. xiii.
  6. Thomas Merton, **Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander** (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) pp. 140-41. Walnut has since been renamed Muhammed Ali after one of Louisville's more notable native sons.
  7. Merton, **Conjectures**, p. 142.
  8. Martin Luther King, Jr., **Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story** (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), p. 101.
  9. Quoted by Garrow, **Bearing the Cross**, p. 58. It is significant that King's words "He promised never to leave me, no never leave me alone..." echo the words of an old evangelical hymn, suggesting the importance of tradition in this intensely personal conversion experience.
  10. Thomas Merton, **Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice** (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), pp. 130-31.
  11. From an address delivered by King in 1962, reprinted in Washington, **Testament of Hope**, p.

- 117.
12. Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* , p. 69; King, *Stride Toward Freedom* , pp. 63, 224.
  13. King, *Stride Toward Freedom* , pp. 101-07.
  14. Thomas Merton, "A Tribute to Gandhi," originally published in 1962, reprinted in *Thomas Merton on Peace* (New York: McCall, 1975), pp. 178-79.
  15. Merton, *Thomas Merton on Peace* , p. 211.
  16. In his famous "Beyond Vietnam address, delivered in Riverside Church in 1967, reprinted in Washington, *Testament of Hope* , p. 240.
  17. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), pp. 15-16.
  18. Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* , p. 25.
  19. Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* , p. 15.
  20. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) p. 161.
  21. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* , p. 142. Merton seems to have gotten the term from the French scholar of Islam, Massignon.
  22. Ibid.
  23. Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* , pp. 17-18.
  24. Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* , pp. 155-56.
  25. Christmas sermon 1967, reprinted in Washington, *Testament of Hope* , p. 255.
  26. From a 1962 address, reprinted in Washington, *Testament of Hope* , p. 119.
  27. From an article published in *Christian Century*, February 6, 1957, reprinted in Washington, *Testament of*



**Hope** , pp. 8-9.

28. From a 1956 sermon, reprinted in Washington, **Testament of Hope** and the "Beyond Vietnam" speech, *ibid.*, p. 242.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 254.

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A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life. Parker J. Palmer. 4.6 out of 5 stars 351. Paperback. This is a wonderful book for the eye. it includes pictures that Thomas Merton himself took illustrating the uniqueness of how he viewed his environment as well as a closing picture that was found in his camera after his death which previews something he wrote some years before he died. A good book for meditation. Commentary by John Griffin add much to the book. Albert J. Raboteau: Each of the people in my book went through some kind of conversion experience that motived their action and opened them up to seeing themselves as part of the long tradition of prophesy with Judaism and Christianity. I think that's less the case today with activists--the movements don't seem to flow as much from churches as they did in the past. He talks about how he would prefer those from opposite sides to those ministers who are hiding behind stained-glass windows. He's an example of somebody who is taking to task his own religious tradition, both white and black, in terms of its failure to act. We tend to think of some of these people as being domesticated by their traditions. PDF | Albert J. Raboteau, esteemed Professor of Religion at Princeton University, briefly examines the lives of seven influential civil rights activists | Find, read and cite all the research you need on ResearchGate. Raboteau, Albert J., American Prophets: Seven Religious Radicals and their Struggle for. Social and Political Justice. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016, 224 pages. Hardcover, \$29.95. Albert J. Raboteau, esteemed Professor of Religion at Princeton University, briefly. i. Raboteau thereafter directs the reader to Thomas Merton, a French Catholic convert and. monk who migrated to the United States in the 1940s. Merton asserted that monastic life. separated oneself only in name and that monks co-existed in the same world as laymen. He. Preview A Hidden Wholeness by Thomas Merton. A Hidden Wholeness: The Visual World of Thomas Merton. by. Thomas Merton. This book highlights the striking photography of the monk Thomas Merton and the stories these pictures relate of his life in his hermitage and the surrounding Kentucky woods and of his trip to Asia where he died in 1968. What's most touching is the author was a close friend of Merton's and he also happened to be the guy who gave Merton a good camera and encouraged his curiosity about photography. And Albert J. Raboteau's collection of essays, perhaps without conscious reflection on the author's part, is a major contribution to the most pressing challenge all religious groups have to face: what happens when a faith, having its origins in one culture, begins to evolve and transform itself in a new one, and how can the new expression be one with the. He reveals how King and Merton, working out of traditions that seemed antithetical -- one contemplative and the other activist -- can come to similar conclusions.