

IPS/SP5/711: Thomas Merton's Travels in Eastern Religions: Buddhism

Vancouver School of Theology  
July 3-7, 2017, 9:00-12:00

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Description

After introducing Merton's biography, we shall survey the chronology and extent of his interest in Asian religions. The course focus is Merton and Buddhism, exploring what he knew of Buddhists traditions and their influence on his practice, aesthetics, and poetry. We conclude with Merton's principles of inter-religious dialogue and a discussion of how they could inform our conversations with those who believe differently.

Objectives: Students who complete the course should be able

- To identify key aspects of the life and thought of Thomas Merton.
- To be familiar with Merton's acquaintance with the religions of Asia.
- To understand what Merton did and did not know about Buddhism and why.
- To trace Buddhism's influence on his practice of prayer, art, and poetry.
- To summarize Merton's principles of inter-religious dialogue and know how they might influence their own interaction with those who believe differently.
- To improve in speech and writing clear, reasoned, and courteous discourse about religions and spirituality.

Expectations

- Having read assignments before class meetings, students must attend all classes as active participants and engage in discussion of assigned readings.
- For credit students will attend a session Tuesday on written assignments, deliver in writing to the professor on Friday the subject of their papers, and subsequently submit those papers *in hard copy* on time. (See pages 5 & 6.)
- We will engage each other in thoughtfully and with respect.

Required Texts

*The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*. N. Burton, P. Hart, & J. Laughlin (eds.)  
(NY: New Directions, 1968). [*Not* Vol. 6 of the Merton journals]  
Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1967/87).  
Bonnie Thurston (ed.), *Merton & Buddhism: Wisdom, Emptiness & Everyday Mind*  
(Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae Press, 2007).

Recommended Texts

Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (NY: New Directions, 1968).  
W. Shannon, C. Bochen, and P. O'Connell (eds.), *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*  
(Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002) NOTE: The paperback edition is ca.  
\$35 USD, but invaluable for serious students of Merton & worth the cost.  
Bonnie Thurston (ed.), *Thomas Merton on Eastern Meditation* (NY: New Directions,  
2012).

## Suggested Course Outline & Reading Assignments

**IMPORTANT NOTES:** The following is what we hope to cover. Some subjects may take longer, some less time. *PLEASE READ The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton IN ITS ENTIRETY.* Each class meeting includes discussion of readings, presentations by the professor with time for questions and discussion.

If you are unacquainted with the life and thought of Thomas Merton the biography by William Shannon, The Silent Lamp (and see the chronology in *The Merton Encyclopedia*) and the anthology of Merton's writings in the Orbis Press Modern Spiritual Masters series edited by Christine Bochen are highly recommended.

### Monday, July 3<sup>rd</sup>:

- ~Introductions: to each other & to the course and its procedures
- ~How much do we know about Thomas Merton and Buddhism in general?
- ~Thomas Merton's biography & acquaintance with Asian Religions: an overview

### Required Reading:

Thurston (ed.), Part I, Corliss & Thurston  
*Asian Journal*, Preface, Editor's Notes, Foreword

### Recommended Reading:

*Merton Encyclopedia*: "Hinduism," "Taoism," "Buddhism," "Asian Journal of Thomas Merton"

### Related Works:

- Joseph Chu-Cong, OCSO, "Thomas Merton and the Far East," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly*, 14/1 (1979) 45-58.  
Alexander Lipski, *Thomas Merton and Asia: His Quest for Utopia* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1983)  
David Steindl-Rast, OSB, "Exposure: Key to Thomas Merton's Asian Journal?" *Monastic Studies* 10 (Spring, 1974) 181-204.

### Tuesday, July 4:

- ~Thomas Merton: Theravada Buddhism & Zen
- ~Merton, Zen, and Understanding the "True Self"  
(Credit students will stay after class for a discussion of written assignments.)

### Required Reading:

Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, chaps. 5-7 (on the self)  
MZM: "Mystics and Zen Masters," "Zen Buddhist Monasticism," "The Zen Koan"

Thurston (ed.), Articles in Part II, Wiseman, Habito

### Recommended Reading:

Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (NY: New Directions, 1968)  
*Merton Encyclopedia*: "Z" entries (!) & "Suzuki, Daisetz"

### Related Work:

Larry A. Fader, "Beyond the Birds of Appetite: Thomas Merton's Encounter with Zen," *Biography* 2/3 (1979) 230-245.

Robert H. King, *Thomas Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh* (NY: Continuum, 2001)  
Bonnie Thurston, "Zen Influence and Thomas Merton's View of the Self,"  
*Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, Dec., 1986 (14/3) 28-47.

Wednesday, July 5:

- ~What happened at Polonnaruwa?
- ~Merton & the Tibetans & HH the Dalai Lama

Required Reading:

*Asian Journal* (231-236 & 78-125)  
Thurston (ed.), Articles in Part II, Simmer-Brown & reflections by  
Lhalungpa (223) and Talbott (224)

Recommended Reading:

*Merton Encyclopedia*: "Dalai Lama"  
Donald Grayston, "Merton in Asia: The Polonnaruwa Illumination," chapter 8 in  
R. Labrie & A. Stuart (eds.), (Thomas Merton Society of Canada, 2012)  
"The Jesus Lama: Thomas Merton in the Himalayas," *Tricycle: The Buddhist  
Review*, Summer, 1992, 14-24.

Note: There is an extensive secondary literature on Merton at Polonnaruwa.

Thursday, July 6:

- ~Catch up or further discussion of any of the above
- ~Buddhism and Merton's prayer
- ~Buddhism and Merton's arts: calligraphy, photography, poetry

Required Reading:

Thurston (ed.), Articles in Part III, Lipsey, Pearson, Thurston  
MZM: "Buddhism and the Modern World"

Recommended Reading:

*Merton Encyclopedia*: "Calligraphies," "Photography," "Poetry, Theory of"  
Daniel J. O'Hanlon, SJ, "The Influence of 'Eastern' Traditions on Thomas  
Merton's Personal Prayer," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 26/2 (1991)  
152-164.

If available the exhibit catalogues from Merton's photography exhibits  
"The Paradox of Place" (Bellarmine U. 2003) and "A Hidden Wholeness"  
(Bellarmine U. 2005) are excellent on Merton's Zen Photography.

Related Work:

Kramer, Victor A., "Merton's Art and Non-Western Thought," *JAAR*,  
March, 1978 (XLIV/1) 27-41.  
Labrie, Ross, *The Art of Thomas Merton* (Fort Worth: TCU Press, 1979).  
Lipsey, Roger, *Angelic Mistakes: The Art of Thomas Merton* (Boston: New Seeds/  
Shambhala Publications, 2006).

Friday, July 7:

- ~Why did Merton "look East?"
- ~How well do you think he understood Buddhism?

~Merton's Principles of Inter-religious Dialogue and Ours  
~Closing thoughts & evaluations

Required Reading:

*Asian Journal*: Appendix I, IV, VII  
MZM: "Contemplation and Dialogue"  
Thurston (ed.), Part II, Keenan

Recommended Reading:

*Merton Encyclopedia*: "Interreligious Dialogue"  
Bonnie Thurston, "Waking from a Dream of Separateness: Thomas  
Merton's Principles of Interreligious Dialogue," CSQ 2015 (50/1) 83-97.

Related Work:

William Apel, *Signs of Peace: The Interfaith Letters of Thomas Merton*  
(Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006).  
Ryan Scruggs, "Interreligious Dialogue," chapter 7 in R. Labrie & A. Stuart  
(eds.), *Thomas Merton: Monk on the Edge* (Thomas Merton Society of  
Canada, 2012).

Notes for Further Study and Bibliography

In an effort to keep book costs down, I omitted Merton's *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* as a text. It is highly recommended as are Merton's introductions to his books translated into Asian languages which are collected by Robert E. Daggy (ed.), *Thomas Merton: Introductions East and West* (Greensboro, NC: Unicorn Press, Inc., 1981).

Note the excellent glossary of terms at the back of *The Asian Journal*. This is an invaluable aid to those unfamiliar with Asian traditions.

"Merton and Buddhism: A Bibliography," by Paul Pearson in *Merton and Buddhism* (Thurston, ed.) is very complete in English to 2007. For more general material the hard cover bibliography by M. Breit and R. Daggy is useful to 1986. The bibliographical work of Canadian Patricia A. Burton is invaluable. See *More than Silence: A Bibliography of Thomas Merton* (ATLA Bibliography Series, No. 55) (ATLA Library Association, 2008). *The Merton Seasonal* prints a quarterly list of new articles by and about Merton.

Many periodicals have articles on Merton and Buddhism. A particularly good source is *Buddhist-Christian Studies*. VST has a wonderful Merton collection. It will be invaluable for your work in this course and your further explorations of Merton.

The on-line source for all things Mertonian is [www.merton.org](http://www.merton.org) which is the link both to the International Thomas Merton Society and the Merton Studies Center at Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY, USA. It is very user friendly (even I can figure it out!) and has a variety of ways to search for primary and secondary sources (in many languages). **PLEASE** (I probably don't have to say this) be judicious in use of on-line sources. Anybody can post stuff on Merton. That doesn't make their work accurate or helpful.

## Instructions for Written Assignments

**Graded students: We will meet immediately after class on Tuesday to discuss matters related to your papers. Be prepared to be available for that, please.**

Please consult VST materials for details of presentation and documentation. Papers are to be submitted to the professor in *hard copy*, double spaced, 12 point type, 1 inch margins using one of VST's preferred citation styles (Turabian or MLA).

Papers are to be sent hard copy to Bonnie Thurston, PO Box 2258, Wheeling, WV 26003, USA.

Certificate/ Diploma Students (Papers postmarked by August 31, 2017.)

You are to submit a paper of 5-7 pages that engages the following question: What was the most challenging idea you encountered in either Merton's engagement with Buddhism *OR* (not both) his principles of inter-religious dialogue?

Your paper should follow this format: 1. Clear statement of your "challenge" and where it appeared in Merton's writing/our course discussion. 2. Careful description of Merton's idea or position. 3. Why this was so challenging to you? 4. Your conclusions...or what you will continue to think about. Documentation as necessary.

Basic Degree Students: MA/M.Div (Papers postmarked by August 31, 2017.)

You are to submit a paper of 8-10 pages (2,500 words) on an aspect of Merton and Buddhism that we either did not cover extensively in class or in which you have a particular interest. (See suggestions below.) Subject of your paper must be approved by the professor during the class week and delivered to her in writing on Friday.

In addition to reflecting thoughtful reading of required texts, your paper should include material from, at minimum, *FIVE* other sources, 2 primary (from Merton, for example his letters or journals or works we did not read) and 3 secondary (others writing on Merton) one of which must be a periodical article. *The Merton Encyclopedia* will NOT count toward the required secondary sources. Please not only document appropriately (footnotes or endnotes), but append a bibliography of "Works Consulted" (everything you looked at or read to prepare the paper whether or not you quote it in your paper).

Advanced Degree Students: Th.M (Papers postmarked by September 30, 2017.)

You are to submit a paper of 15 pages (4,500 words) on an aspect of Merton and Buddhism that we did not cover in class, in which you have a particular interest, or which relates to your particular subject of advanced study. (See suggestions below.) Subject of your paper must be approved by the professor during the class week and delivered to her in writing Friday.

In addition to reflecting thoughtful reading of required texts, your paper should include material from, at minimum, *NINE* other sources, 4 primary (from Merton, for example his letters

or journals or works we did not read) and 5 secondary (others writing on Merton) two of which must be periodical articles. *The Merton Encyclopedia* will NOT count toward the required secondary sources. Please not only document appropriately (footnotes or end notes), but append to your paper a bibliography of “Words Consulted” (everything you looked at or read to prepare the paper whether or not you quote it in your paper).

### Thoughts about Paper Subjects for Degree Students/Graded Papers

I would really like you to write on something that interests you. I’m open to a wide variety of subjects so long as they are intrinsically related to Thomas Merton *and* Buddhism. (Got an idea? Try me.)

You might wish to explore an aspect of Merton and Buddhism that we did not treat in any detail in class. Examples include but are no means limited to:

- ~Merton and Monasticism (a comparison of Christian & Buddhist monasticisms)
- ~Merton’s letters to Buddhists and/or Buddhist scholars (Suzuki, Abe, etc.)
- ~ Influence of specific aspects of Buddhist practice on Merton’s own life of prayer (be careful here; you’ll have to uncover explicit reference by him to his prayer practice)
- ~Aspects of Buddhism that appear in the later (after 1960) writings of Merton, in his journals (I’d choose specific years), or essays, or other writings after 1960.
- ~Buddhism’s influence on Merton the poet OR photographer OR calligrapher OR Merton’s reflections on Buddhist/Asian aesthetics
- ~Did Buddhism explicitly influence Merton’s ideas on peace and justice? Where and how do you find this in his work?
- ~You might wish to explore Merton’s relationships/friendships with particular people Merton met (and you “meet”) who are mentioned in *The Asian Journal*
- ~You might want to explore Merton’s predecessors in Buddhist-Christian dialogue OR his influence on those who have come after him. (Be sure to be able to document direct connection/influence.)