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**Different Religion, Same Meditation?**  
*Meditation as the Heart of Christianity and Buddhism  
and the Basis for Dialogue in the Writings  
of Thomas Merton and Thích Nhất Hạnh<sup>1</sup>*

**Abstract**

The practice of meditation has become popular in Western countries during the last decades as an Eastern, and predominantly Buddhist, exercise. However, when properly compared, Christian contemplation and Buddhist meditation show numerous similarities. This paper sets out to determine the extent of comparability between these practices of the two traditions and how they are embedded in their respective theoretical frameworks. Additionally, as a further step, it aims to demonstrate how contemplative practice can act as a basis for Buddhist–Christian dialogue. The research centres around the works of two eminent monks of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the American Trappist Thomas Merton and the Vietnamese Thiền master Thích Nhất Hạnh. Their work provides an ideal target of analysis, since both were not only widely appreciated members of their respective traditions but also deeply engaged in interreligious dialogue, and thus they had a proper understanding of each other’s tradition. In this paper, the author will first analyse and compare the works of Nhất Hạnh and Merton written on contemplation during approximately the same time to determine what exactly they understand by the terms ‘meditation’ and ‘contemplative prayer’, respectively. Then, their works regarding the other monk’s respective religious tradition will be discussed and compared to see what the two authors select as main avenues of comparison. The main conclusions of the article are that the concepts of meditation and contemplation in Buddhism and Christianity denote strikingly similar exercises, which aim to achieve similar goals despite differences in theoretical formulation. For Merton, Christian contemplation aims to reconnect the believer to God with whom the initial unity was lost through the Fall of Man and the establishment of the ego-self as an entity separate from God. Such contemplation needs to happen in interior solitude and involve a complete self-emptying of the believer to become one with God. Since separation from God through the ego is the fundamental problem of humans, reconnecting to God through contemplation is seen as the highest form of prayer and, indeed, life. In a similar vein,

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for Nhất Hạnh, the fundamental problem of humanity is the misconception of a permanent self, which results in dividing the world into different, separate entities. Thus, for him, similarly to Merton, the goal is to reach a supreme unity beyond distinctions and duality. Moreover, the way to such unity is precisely meditation, which can best unify body and mind and thus bring forth Buddhahood. Then, as the second step, the article presents how Merton and Nhất Hạnh draw parallels between Christianity and Buddhism on the basis of similar contemplation. Merton points to, among others, the connection between God and the absolute Void of Zen, *kenosis* and *śūnyatā*, whereas Nhất Hạnh points to similarities between *nirvāṇa* and the Kingdom of God as well as mindfulness and the Holy Spirit. Thus, the paper provides a thorough analysis of the similarities of meditation practice in Christianity and Buddhism, as practiced by Thomas Merton and Thích Nhất Hạnh, and how these similarities can provide a basis for dialogue between the two religions in modern times.

**Keywords:** meditation, contemplative prayer, Buddhist–Christian dialogue, interreligious dialogue, mindfulness, Zen Buddhism, Christian mysticism, Thomas Merton, Thích Nhất Hạnh

## Introduction

Meditation and mindfulness have gained substantial popularity during the last decades in Western, traditionally Christian countries. Part of the populace embraces the practices with curiosity and open arms, while another views them with immense suspicion. No matter the attitude, however, there seems to be an agreement about the ‘Eastern’, mostly Buddhist origin of the practices. This is especially significant in cases of opposition, where one of the most crucial reasons is their embeddedness in an ‘alien religion’. Nevertheless, if one takes a closer look at the Christian practice of contemplative prayer, it quickly becomes evident that in terms of concrete methods of practice, there exists a stark resemblance between it and Eastern meditation practices. Therefore, this paper aims to dive deep into the question of parallels between Buddhist meditation and Christian contemplative prayer to determine if the similarities are indeed substantial, and if so, how the two traditions incorporate a similar practice into their different theoretical frameworks. Additionally, to take the issue a step further, it also explores how the practice can act as a basis of dialogue between the two traditions.

To answer these questions, the research analyses the writings and attitudes of two 20<sup>th</sup> century monks, the American Trappist Thomas Merton and the Vietnamese Thiền<sup>2</sup> master Thích Nhất Hạnh. These two monks are ideal targets of

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<sup>2</sup> Thiền Buddhism is the Vietnamese branch of Chinese Chan 禪 Buddhism, which was introduced into the region around the middle of the first millennium CE and has had a unique and complex history since (Soucy 2022: 29–39). It draws its origin from the early Chinese Chan patriarchs and engages in the same key practices as the Chinese Chan and Japanese Zen

analysis, since both were eminent members of their own traditions, while they were also open to dialogue with other religions. Through their travels and personal encounters, they established a deep and proper understanding of the other's tradition, which enabled them to form valid assumptions regarding the other. Moreover, despite the numerous similarities within their approach to contemplation, which will be discussed in detail in the subsequent parts of this paper, it cannot be said that these similarities merely stem from their influence upon each other. In fact, the two monks only met once, in 1966, before which they had no correspondence,<sup>3</sup> and the vast majority of Merton's works on contemplation had been written before this meeting. Additionally, as Christopher Pramuk points out, the fundamental sources of Merton's contemplative journey were the Desert Fathers of 3<sup>rd</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> century Egypt, along with Russian Orthodox 'sophiology' even before and along with his engagement with Zen Buddhism.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, even this engagement was primarily conducted through correspondence with D.T. Suzuki—not Nhất Hạnh. On the other side, the same can be said of Nhất Hạnh's approach to meditation, which was formed by his early years in a Thiền monastery in Vietnam completely rooted in Buddhist tradition. Additionally, his later understanding of Christianity was significantly more formed by other Christians, such as Daniel Berrigan S.J. and cardinal Jean Daniélou S.J. among others, than by Merton. Thus, a comparison of Merton's and Nhất Hạnh's views, which were not tainted by early mutual influence, is warranted.

Certainly, given the eminence and popularity of the two monks, several scholarly works have been written on their respective views and teachings. However, these works mostly focus on either of the two authors and on topics more broad or different than contemplation. Larry Fader provides a thorough analysis of Merton's engagement with Zen presenting all the different ways in which he encountered the religion and wrote about it. Necessarily, Fader touches upon several topics, which will be discussed also in this paper. Nevertheless, he presents them from completely different angles, given his focus on Merton's approach to Zen and the teachings of D.T. Suzuki.<sup>5</sup> John Dadosky provides a similarly crucial account of Merton's engagement with Zen; however, he places

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schools. Drawing on these connections, Thích Nhất Hạnh is often referred to as a Zen master, since Zen became the most widely used term in English literature to denote this tradition of Buddhism. This choice is understandable, especially since Nhất Hạnh himself was significantly influenced by Japanese Zen teachers. Nevertheless, besides keeping the core practices, Chan Buddhism evolved in unique ways in these different countries. Thus for the sake of accuracy, this paper refers to the Vietnamese tradition and its practitioners as Thiền, to the Japanese as Zen, and to the Chinese as Chan.

<sup>3</sup> King 2003: 9.

<sup>4</sup> Pramuk 2008: 67.

<sup>5</sup> Fader 1979: 230–254.

his focus on the ongoing academic debate involving John Keenan, Robert Sharf, and others, who criticise Merton's understanding of Zen Buddhism through questioning the legitimacy of D.T. Suzuki in conveying the true essence of Zen to the West.<sup>6</sup> After a thorough analysis, he reaches the conclusion that although neither Merton nor Suzuki would claim a complete understanding of and authority regarding Zen, at the time of their writings, and their postulations of Zen as a living and ever-changing tradition, their views can certainly be accepted as legitimate and their success in interreligious dialogue appreciated. Additionally, the works of Lipski and Pramuk need to be mentioned as well among the significant analyses of Merton's views. Lipski provides a broad account of Merton's engagement with Asia including his encounter with Hinduism along with Buddhism.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Pramuk presents a thorough and convincing analysis of how the understanding of Sophia within the works of Russian Orthodox writers influenced Merton's contemplative journey and approach to Zen.<sup>8</sup> However, all these works focus exclusively on Merton with only occasional mentions of Nhất Hạnh and thus have a scope different than that of the present paper. Works that in parallel discuss both authors number a mere handful. Of these, Robert H. King's seminal book *Thomas Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh: engaged spirituality in an age of globalization* stands out in its scope and depth. The book provides a thorough analysis of the life and work of the two monks, focusing on the interplay of contemplation and social action in their. However, its explicit aim is not to objectively analyse the two monks' writings but rather to present a personal take on their work and their influence on King's own practice and spirituality.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, despite that the topics of the present paper have mostly been touched upon in earlier works, its analysis is unique in two major ways. First, it examines how the practice of contemplation is nested within the theoretical frameworks of the two religions, and second, it explores how the two monks employed similarities in contemplative practice to lay the foundation of engagement with the other religion. Thus, it hopes to augment existing scholarly research along these lines.

The subsequent chapters are organised as follows. First, the paper will provide an analysis of Merton's view on contemplative prayer and its role and place in Christian worship. Then the view of Nhất Hạnh on meditation will be elaborated and a comparison drawn between the two. Afterwards, the views of the two monks on Buddhist–Christian parallels, dialogue, and understanding will be demonstrated and finally a conclusion presented.

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<sup>6</sup> Dadosky 2008: 53.

<sup>7</sup> Lipski 1983.

<sup>8</sup> Pramuk 2008: 67–71.

<sup>9</sup> King 2008: 1–3.

### Merton on contemplative prayer

Despite the widespread contemporary impression that meditation is alien to the Christian faith, for Merton it is the very heart of Christian religiosity. Moreover, throughout his works on the topic, he provides a clear demonstration that it is deeply rooted in the Christian tradition.<sup>10</sup> Before turning to his specific views, however, one issue of terminology needs to be clarified. In the present paper, the terms ‘meditation’ and ‘contemplative prayer’ will be used almost interchangeably. The reason for this lies in the fact that this terminological difference stems from choices of translation. Meditation in English and other Western languages became used as the translation for the Sanskrit *dhyāna* and the Chinese *chan* 禪. At the same time, however, the Latin *meditatio* in the Christian tradition denotes a practice different from the meaning of the above terms, namely one concerned with rational discursive thinking, pondering on a particular text or idea. On the other hand, the Latin term *contemplation* and the English terms ‘contemplation’ and ‘contemplative prayer’ refer to a practice or state of mind, highly similar to *chan*, as we will see in the subsequent parts of this essay. Therefore, during the course of this paper, meditation will be used to refer to the Buddhist practice, whereas contemplative prayer will be used to refer to the Christian practice, but they will be regarded as synonyms.

If we then turn to Merton’s understanding of contemplative prayer, as said above, he regards it as the very heart of Christian practice and life. What he understands as contemplative prayer is a direct experience ‘of God’ not mitigated and distracted by any movement of the rational mind. He describes the concrete practice as something happening in ‘interior solitude’. Interior solitude can be achieved next to other people, but physical solitude is something which can facilitate its attainment. As he quotes Matthew 6:6, ‘[b]ut thou, when thou shalt pray, enter into thy chamber, and having shut the door, pray to thy Father in secret [...]’.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, in this solitude, an arduous journey begins, where the believer has to go through a *kenosis*, a self-emptying, in order to experience true contemplation, which is the direct experience of God. For Merton, the journey of contemplative prayer starts with proper theological and biblical knowledge, since Christianity is fundamentally based on the revelation of God. Therefore, to properly start a journey towards God, one needs to be familiar with this revelation. However, an equally significant and potentially even more difficult part of the contemplative way is that the believer needs to supersede the sphere of words and concepts, in fact to supersede their own self, in order not to ‘think

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<sup>10</sup> Merton 1996; Merton 1972.

<sup>11</sup> Merton 1972: 81–82.

about God' or relate to an 'idea of God' but to experience a connection to Him directly.

Furthermore, this connection should be considered as not even to Him, but rather with Him, in Him, because the reason for why one needs to completely empty or lose oneself in order to experience God is that one can only truly *know* God through Himself. In order to be able to know God through Himself, one has to become one with Him, to lose oneself to the point where, in the words of St Paul, '[i]t is now no longer I that live but Christ lives in me'.<sup>12</sup> Alternatively, or even more so, one must lose oneself to the degree that the dual nature of subject and object (i.e., of I and non-I, of I and God) ceases to exist, and every experience arises in the unity of the believer and God. To illustrate this notion, Merton quotes St John of the Cross.

In thus allowing God to work in it, the soul (having rid itself of every mist and stain of creatures, which consists in having its will perfectly united with that of God, for to love is to labour to detach and strip itself for God's sake of all that is not God) is at once illumined and transformed in God, and God communicates to it His supernatural being in such wise that the soul appears to be God Himself, and has all that God Himself has. [...] All the things of God and the soul are one in participant transformation; and the soul seems to be God rather than the soul, and is indeed God by participation.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, contemplation is inevitably the highest form of prayer, since at its fulfillment it means direct contact, or rather complete unification, with God.

### **Theological background of contemplation**

This view of prayer, and the ultimate goal of a believer during this lifetime, rests within Merton's understanding of humanity, the world, and the history of Salvation. Therefore, to properly understand it, one needs to see these views. For Merton, humans 'have' two distinct selves: an external 'ego-self' and an internal 'deep transcendent self'.<sup>14</sup> This duality, then, lies at the heart of all problems that humans face on Earth, since it appeared with the Fall of Man. In Merton's view, the original state of Adam and Eve in Eden was in complete unity with God. They accepted the world as created, a complete gift of God, and in this reality, it also 'belonged' to them in their unity with God. Then, acquiring knowledge of good and evil was primarily not a moral choice but the very moment of division

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<sup>12</sup> Merton 1972: 5. Quoting St Paul's letter to the Galatians 2:20.

<sup>13</sup> Merton 1968: 119.

<sup>14</sup> Merton 1972: 7.

from God. The Fall essentially means the establishment of the 'ego-self', which can reflect on itself and relate to the 'objects' of the world from the point of view of a 'subject', and in so doing, it casts itself out from the original unity with God.

Now all the problems of humanity arise from the fact that humans were created to live in unity with God and therefore crave this unity and a return to the original paradisaical state, where the inner transcendent self is one with God and thus 'eternal' and 'real'. However, instead of trying to return to God through finding and uncovering the transcendent self, humans aim to render the ego-self real and unchanging. This, however, is a completely futile endeavour, since by nature it is only an illusion, and therefore no possessions or worldly attributes can make it real.

Hence, for Merton, contemplative prayer is essentially a '[r]ecovery of Paradise'.<sup>15</sup> It aims to let the illusory ego-self go through tedious work in internal solitude and, after a complete emptying of the ego, to let God reach out to the transcendent self and unite it back to the state of oneness with God. This would not yet be the state of Heaven, which would be a new creation, but the recovery of the initial state of man on Earth, completely united with God, which is the highest form of living this life.

Finally, what needs to be highlighted regarding Merton's view of contemplation is that at its basis it is one particular form of prayer, one separate activity in the life of the believer. However, its fulfilment is a 'contemplative life' a 'life of prayer', where the whole life of the practitioner is lived in the state of contemplative unity with God in all their daily activities.

### **Contemplation in Church history**

A feature that immediately stands out in Merton's treatment of contemplative prayer is the long ecclesial tradition within which he situates the question. All of his analyses, and especially the *Contemplative prayer*, which is a systematic discussion of the issue, are full of quotations from earlier saints and Church Fathers. Clearly, at the time of writing, 'mystical' or contemplative religiosity was not regarded as mainstream in Christian faith, and thus situating it within Church history provided legitimation for the practice. Additionally, for a later reader, it also provides clarity regarding the practice, since it highlights the inspirations for Merton's own analysis. Therefore, a short overview of his sources is warranted.

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<sup>15</sup> Merton 1968: 117.

Merton dates the inception of solitary prayer from the instances in which Jesus ascended mountains alone to pray to God. Afterwards, Merton highlights practitioners of this tradition throughout Church history. From the Apostles, he frequently quotes St Paul saying that it is no longer he that lives but rather that it is Christ that lives in him, or St Peter and St John, highlighting that through Christ humans can take part in the divine nature.<sup>16</sup>

Following the Apostolic age, his most important early sources of contemplative prayer are the Desert Fathers of 3<sup>rd</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> century Egypt, especially Evagrius Ponticus and John Cassian. Their writings are relevant to Merton's argumentation in two ways. First the essential goal and second the concrete methods of prayer are both highly similar to Merton's understanding of contemplative prayer. When talking about the Desert Fathers, Merton introduces a concept that he draws from the mystics of the Eastern Church but relates to the Sinai tradition as well. It is the 'prayer of the heart', which expresses the essence of contemplative prayer and meditation. In his words, '[b]y "prayer of the heart" we seek God himself present in the depths of our being and meet him there by invoking the name of Jesus in faith, wonder and love'.<sup>17</sup> Here one can already find the themes highlighted above, namely that this kind of prayer is 'meeting' God and meeting Him within the depths of our own being. Then, from the Desert Fathers' texts, Merton quotes their description of this kind of prayer. Here, the most important themes are silence and superseding the senses on the journey of meeting God. Merton quotes Father Ammonas on silence.

Behold, my beloved, I have shown you the power of silence, how thoroughly it heals and how fully pleasing it is to God. Wherefore I have written to you to show yourselves strong in this work you have undertaken, so that you may know that it is by silence that the saints grew, that it was because of silence that the power of God dwelt in them, because of silence that the mysteries of God were known to them.<sup>18</sup>

Then, regarding the journey of meeting God within oneself, Merton quotes Evagrius.

[W]hen the understanding, in ardent love for God, begins bit by bit to go forth from the flesh and casts aside all thoughts that come from the senses, the memory or the temperament, while at the same time being filled with respect and joy.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Merton 1968: 39–40.

<sup>17</sup> Merton 1996: 30–31.

<sup>18</sup> Merton 1996: 42.

<sup>19</sup> Merton 1996: 48.



Thus, one can see that for two of the most important aspects of contemplative prayer, silence and overcoming the knowledge of senses, the Desert Fathers are already a significant source for Merton.

Then, after the Desert Fathers, followers of the neo-Platonic line of thought provide crucial references for Merton. St Gregory of Nyssa and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite are some of his most-quoted thinkers on the approach that the journey towards ‘meeting’ God has to go through a ‘night’, which is darkness for the senses but is the true light of God.<sup>20</sup>

Following the early Middle Ages, the next important group of quoted authors are the Rhineland mystics of the 13<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> century, especially Meister Eckhart but also his student Johannes Tauler. The notion that Merton quotes from them is complete self-emptying, ‘complete poverty’, which the believer has to attain in order to fully let God act in him. In the words of Eckhart,

If it is the case that man is emptied of all things, creatures, himself and god, and if god could still fund a place in him to act. . . this man is not poor with the most intimate poverty. For God does not intend that man should have a place reserved for him to work in since true poverty of spirit requires that man shall be emptied of god and all his works so that if God wants to act in the soul he himself must be the place in which he acts. . . . (God takes then) responsibility for his own action and (is) himself the scene of the action, for God is one who acts within himself.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, the last group of ecclesial authors on whom Merton draws in his analysis are the Spanish mystics of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, St John of the Cross and Teresa of Ávila. He quotes the views of St John of the Cross on the night of senses, similarly to the texts of Eckhart, but also on the concrete experience of ‘meeting’ God in self-emptying as a flame of love.

How can we say that this flame wounds the soul, when there is nothing in the soul to be wounded, since it is wholly consumed by the fire of love? It is a marvelous thing: for, as love is never idle, but is continually in motion, it is continually throwing out sparks, like a flame, in every direction; and, as the office of love is to wound, that it may enkindle with love and cause delight, so, when it is as it were a living flame, within the soul, it is ever sending forth its arrow-wounds, like most tender sparks of delicate love, joyfully and happily exercising the arts and wiles of love. [...] Wherefore these wounds, which are the playing of God, are the sparks of these tender touches of flame which touch the soul intermittently

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<sup>20</sup> Merton 1996: 81.

<sup>21</sup> Merton 1968: 9.

and proceed from the fire of love, which is not idle, but whose flames, says the stanza, strike and wound my soul in its deepest center.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, we can see that for Merton the most central ideas of contemplative prayer (i.e., silence, solitude, the arduous journey through the night of senses, self-emptying, and experiencing God through transcending the everyday self) fit neatly into the long tradition of Christian mystics and constitute a perfectly orthodox and central aspect of Christian religiosity, even if at the time it was regarded as being far from mainstream. In the subsequent chapter we will see Thích Nhất Hạnh's notion of meditation, compared to the understanding of Merton.

### Nhất Hạnh's understanding of meditation and its comparison

After introducing Merton's view of contemplation, the most natural way to turn to Nhất Hạnh's understanding is through comparison. Certainly, when comparing the two approaches, we have to see the differences in the backgrounds of the two authors, such as the time and the audience when and for whom they were writing. Merton wrote his books on contemplative prayer during the late 1950s and 1960s, when both progressive and conservative Christians were more focused on active rather than contemplative sides of their faith. Therefore, when introducing contemplation, he had to write an apologetic work, which could prompt acceptance for the practice within the Church. Therefore, his treatment of the topic is focused predominantly on theology. Through quoting eminent members of Church history, he aims to provide an acceptable basis of understanding for skeptical readers. For similar reasons, he is exceedingly precise in terminology and conscious about formulating arguments that can be widely accepted. Consequently, he does not aim to provide concrete methods of contemplation either. Within his books on the topic, he provides only one mention of meditation methods, solely to state that there are other books that deal with these questions.

Thích Nhất Hạnh, however, was in a markedly different situation when he wrote about meditation. As a Thiền master, for him, or his audience, it was never a question that meditation is something completely essential to religious practice. Additionally, as he was a Thiền master, the *experience* of meditation was more central to his arguments about the usefulness of the practice than any theoretical argumentation. Finally, the time of writing can also be regarded as essential. Nhất Hạnh died more than 50 years later after Merton, passing in

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<sup>22</sup> Merton 1996: 86.

2022. Therefore, the way he approached the issue and even the topics handled were markedly different from those in Merton's books from the 1950s, given the difference in social and political environments. Nevertheless, to mitigate this distinction, this paper focuses on his first book in English, *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, which was published in 1975, relatively close to the publishing of Merton's works.

However, even these few decades of distance already mean a changed environment regarding knowledge of contemplation and meditation. Coupled with the fact that as a Thiền master Nhất Hạnh never had to justify his focus on meditation, in his works, we do not find extensive quotations of eminent monks to support his argument, as we have seen in the case of Merton. At the beginning of *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, he refers to the *Ānāpānasati Sutta*,<sup>23</sup> in which the Buddha explains how to use concentration on one's breath to achieve mindfulness, and then simply proceeds with methods and guidance.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, there exist multiple differences in the two monks' approaches, but there are also several similarities, which will be highlighted in the subsequent parts of this chapter. The most evident differences are Nhất Hạnh's concrete suggestions for meditation practice. In the tradition of the *Ānāpānasati Sutta*, his main teaching is to use breathing to achieve mindfulness.

Our breath is the bridge from our body to our mind, the element which reconciles our body and mind and which makes possible one-ness of body and mind. Breath is aligned to both body and mind and it alone is the tool which can bring them both together, illuminating both and bringing both peace and calm.<sup>25</sup>

He provides multiple methods, including counting one's breath, breathing deeply while lying down, and counting breaths while walking.

As for similarities, they appear chiefly among the theoretical considerations of mindfulness. As Nhất Hạnh claims in the sole clearly theoretical passage of his book,

Dispersed mind is also mind, just as waves rippling in water are also water. When mind has taken hold of mind, deluded mind becomes true mind. True mind is our real self, is the Buddha: the pure one-ness which cannot be cut up by the illusory divisions of separate selves, created by concepts and language. But I don't want to say a lot about this.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Throughout the present paper, Indic Buddhist terms are provided mostly in Sanskrit. However, in certain cases when other versions are more relevant, those are given. In his book, Thích Nhất Hạnh refers explicitly to the Pāli version of the text, the *Ānāpānasati Sutta*, so that is mentioned here as well.

<sup>24</sup> Thích Nhat Hanh 2008: 7.

<sup>25</sup> Thích Nhat Hanh 2008: 23.

<sup>26</sup> Thích Nhat Hanh 2008: 42.

Apparently, he does not find elaboration on theoretical issues useful within the framework of the book. However, when compared to Merton's writings, even this short passage provides useful insights for comparison. Additionally, one can also find theoretical points scattered in other parts of the book as well, so a broad framework can be pieced together.

The first similar point is the question of a real self, in relation to mind and body. As highlighted earlier, for Merton, ego-self and transcendent self are on a different axis than soul/mind and body. Therefore, both selves can be related to both body and mind and need to be understood beyond them. If we look at the last two quoted sections of Nhất Hạnh, we can discern a similar perception. When mind and body are united through breath, that is the moment when mind takes hold of mind and becomes true mind. This 'true mind[, then,] is our real self, is the Buddha'.<sup>27</sup> Thus, for Nhất Hạnh, similarly to Merton, when we become our true self, we become the Buddha, and he interprets this true self as 'pure one-ness', just as Merton interprets this true self as complete unity of the believer and God. Finally, in this short passage, Nhất Hạnh describes this oneness as something that 'cannot be cut up by the illusory divisions of separate selves, created by concepts and language', which is strikingly similar to Merton's understanding of the final contemplative experience beyond words, where all problems created by the duality of the Fall cease to exist.

If one turns to other sections of Nhất Hạnh's book, even more similarities appear. He writes that:

[T]hus mindfulness is at the same time a means and an end, the seed and the fruit. When we practice mindfulness in order to build up concentration, mindfulness is a seed. But mindfulness itself is the life of awareness: the presence of mindfulness means the presence of life, and therefore mindfulness is also the fruit.<sup>28</sup>

This is exactly how Merton describes contemplation, as both the way and the end itself.

Finally, the perception of individual self is strikingly similar in the works of the two authors as well. Both of them regard it as the fundamental source of suffering in the world.

People normally cut reality into compartments, and so are unable to see the interdependence of all phenomena. To see one in all and all in one is to break through the great barrier which narrows one's perception of reality, a barrier which Buddhism calls the attachment to the false view of self. Attachment to the false view of self means belief in the presence of unchanging entities which exist

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<sup>27</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh 2008: 42.

<sup>28</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh 2008: 14–15.

on their own. To break through this false view is to be liberated from every sort of fear, pain, and anxiety.

We have to strip away all the barriers in order to live as part of the universal life. A person isn't some private entity traveling unaffected through time and space as if sealed off from the rest of the world by a thick shell. [...] In our lives are present a multitude of phenomena, just as we ourselves are present in many different phenomena. We are life, and life is limitless.<sup>29</sup>

These views resemble Merton's understanding of the Fall of Man and the establishment of the ego-self, as well as his view on how one necessarily needs to become closer to fellow humans on the way to God, since if God lives in all persons, then to be completely one with God the person has to become one with all other humans as well. Certainly, other parallels could be highlighted as well between the books on meditation, but after this initial part, it is time to see how the two monks themselves compare Buddhism and Christianity in their works.

### Views on the other religion

After discussing how Merton and Thích Nhất Hạnh understands meditation, we can now turn to the second part of the paper to see how the two eminent monks aim to establish a dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism on the basis of their deep understanding of meditation and contemplative prayer. Given their openness to other traditions, both monks wrote at least one book discussing the compatibility of Buddhist and Christian thought. Merton's *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* is partly a set of his own essays and partly the accounts of his correspondences with D.T. Suzuki on the topic, and the result is a stunning text in which both authors aim to draw parallels between the very essence of the two traditions. Moreover, Nhất Hạnh's *Living Buddha, Living Christ* is an equally stunning account that touches upon some of the theoretical points raised by Merton's book, but it is unique in terms of the ease with which Nhất Hạnh connects the two traditions from a practitioner's point of view.<sup>30</sup> The subsequent part of this essay will be an analysis of the two books, organised on a thematic basis.

First, what has to be highlighted here again is the difference of circumstances in which the two books were published. *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* was published in 1968, only a few decades after D.T. Suzuki's first books in English, which presented the Zen tradition in a truly authentic and accessible way for the first time in the West. Therefore, Merton's in-depth response to Suzuki's work constitutes an early discussion of the topic from a Western monastic author, and

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<sup>29</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh 2008: 48–49.

<sup>30</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh 2007.

it is therefore highly cautious and precise in its terminology and approach. *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, on the other hand, was published in 1995, at a time when analyses of Buddhist–Christian relations had already developed a history and Nhất Hạnh himself had been living in a Christian environment for multiple decades.

Second, when discussing the comparative approach of the two monks, it has to be highlighted that Buddhism upholds a tendency to incorporate elements of other religions in its argumentation when engaging them, if they can be useful to expound its own insights, as amply demonstrated by Makransky's 2003 article.<sup>31</sup> Conversely, for a Christian monk, it would be less conventional to adopt such an approach. Therefore, besides the different environments, this traditional tendency has also certainly influenced Nhất Hạnh's way of comparing the two religions, rendering it significantly more free to the point that he drew parallels with striking ease. Despite these differences, however, or maybe because of them, a comparison might indeed prove to be fruitful.

### Comparison of approaches

After the previous discussion about the centrality of meditation and contemplation for both authors, it is no wonder that in their treatment of the comparability of the two religions, their contemplative essence comes to the fore. Merton's description of this choice is entirely illuminating. He highlights that both Christianity and Buddhism can be understood in multiple ways. The first, most evident one is to approach them as the institutional and cultural forms that they developed during the numerous centuries of their existence. In this sense, we could compare rituals, architecture, art, and many other paraphernalia of Catholic, Protestant, and Eastern Orthodox Christianity with those of Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna Buddhism, which would be further complicated by specific geographical and temporal occurrences. However, as Merton claims, this would only lead to confusion and the highlighting of differences that are due to cultural specificities and are less the essence of the two traditions.

Therefore, what Merton proposes to do is to start a dialogue in a field that can relevantly be compared. He considers three options.

First, on the plane of mysticism and mystical experience. This may at first sight appear the most fruitful, but it is complicated by theological problems on the Christian side and by an absence of theological content which would offer material for comparison on the Buddhist side. Second there is the ethical level: Buddhist

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<sup>31</sup> Makransky 2003: 334–361.

compassion is compared with Christian charity. But since Christian charity is a theological virtue, the same problem arises again here—the discussion takes place on two levels which fail to meet. Finally there is the plane of metaphysics. Here it would seem that a meeting is possible.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, in Merton's view, mystical experiences, despite at first sight exhibiting similarities, are difficult to compare given the different theological languages in which they are being expressed. The degree of similarity holds true for ethics as well. However, metaphysics, especially the notion of *nirvāṇa* related to Christian concepts, can be a proper field of comparison. As we will see later, Merton also engages in comparing the first two categories, but his preference for metaphysics warrants the discussion to start by examining the similarities with that topic. At the outset, it is instrumental to also highlight that Merton chooses to examine the concept within the auspices of Zen, which he conceives as a method to reach ultimate reality beyond concepts and which thus can be a proper object of interfaith comparison.

### **Nirvāṇa from a Christian point of view**

For Merton, *nirvāṇa* can be very easily interpreted in line with Christianity through the works of Christian mystics, who were also quoted above. He interprets it in close relation to his understanding of the Fall of Man in Christianity. As he states,

Buddhism and Biblical Christianity agree in their view of man's present condition. Both are aware that man is somehow not in his right relation to the world and to things in it, or rather, to be more exact, they see that man bears in himself a mysterious tendency to falsify that relation, and to spend a great deal of energy in justifying the false view he takes of his world and of his place in it.<sup>33</sup>

In Christianity, this false view is the notion of ego-self, which distorts the relationship between humans and God. In Merton's view, *nirvāṇa* points to a similar direction. Described through Buddhist terminology, humans are in a state of ignorance (*avidyā*) about the true nature of reality and themselves and particularly of the impermanence of all phenomena. This ignorance, which treats impermanent things as permanent, causes the state of suffering (*duḥkha*). This suffering is at a deeper level than that which one could rationally grasp, since it stems from the idea of a permanent self. Therefore, even if the self *desires*

<sup>32</sup> Merton 1968: 80.

<sup>33</sup> Merton 1968: 82.

to reach *nirvāṇa*, it continues to suffer, because the very act of *desiring* by an ‘illusory’ ego is the root cause of suffering. Merton connects this to St Paul’s notion of the ultimate powerlessness of the person without God.

I desire to do what is right and yet what I do is wrong. I cordially agree with the Law of God in my inner self, but I find another law in my members which contradicts the law of my mind and makes me a prisoner to sin (untruth, brokenness, wilful delusion, culpable distortion of values). [...] Unfortunate wretch that I am, who will liberate me from this living death? God, by His grace, in Christ Jesus our Lord.<sup>34</sup>

From a Buddhist standpoint, to attain *nirvāṇa*, one has to supersede any activity of the ego-self. This is the cessation of thirst (*taṇhā*) and attainment of *nirvāṇa* in the realisation that it is not a ‘place’ ‘somewhere else’ but the right understanding of reality, in which *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are the same. In Merton’s view, this understanding is very close to the Christian notion that the Kingdom of God can be experienced in this world, if one is united in contemplation with God. This parallel understanding of the state of man and the nature of a solution provides a solid foundation in Merton’s view for further dialogue. As he puts it,

When the purity of this Buddhist metaphysic has been duly appreciated, there may be grounds for a serious discussion, with Buddhists, of the idea of God—when Absolute Reality is also Absolute Person (but never object).<sup>35</sup>

### Contemplation as connection for Merton

Following the above metaphysical groundwork, Merton proceeds to highlight similarities in the field of the broad topic of this paper, namely contemplation. Within this field, he highlights two similarities. The first is the question of ‘who is having the transcendental experience?’ and the second, relatedly, the superseding of the ego-self. As for the first, Merton shows that for both traditions, the final stage of spiritual journey is transcendent unity. From a Christian point of view, it is participation ‘in the mind of Christ’. As Merton describes it,

[i]t is a kenotic transformation, an emptying of all the contents of the ego-consciousness to become a void in which the light of God or the glory of God, the full radiation of the infinite reality of His Being and Love are manifested.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Merton 1968: 84.

<sup>35</sup> Merton 1968: 85.

<sup>36</sup> Merton 1968: 75.



Here, Merton deliberately uses terms that are close to Buddhist terminology as well. The mind of Christ resembles the mind of the Buddha, and kenotic transformation is *emptying* to become *void*, which are both central notions of Zen descriptions. Subsequently, he also quotes Meister Eckhart, to phrase it 'in perfectly orthodox and traditional Christian terms'. 'In giving us His love God has given us His Holy Ghost so that we can love Him with the love wherewith He loves Himself. We love God with His own love; awareness of it deifies us'.<sup>37</sup> Then, he says that this description was quoted with approval by D.T. Suzuki and comparable to *prajñā* wisdom in Buddhism.

Subsequently, when discussing the same notion in Buddhism, he states that the practitioner's aim is to realise itself as the enlightened Buddha mind, where there is no separate self, since as long as one has a notion of having crossed to the other shore, one has crossed nothing, because in the 'Absolute Ground-Consciousness of the Void, [...] there are no shores'.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, he draws a conclusion of parallel understandings.

Thus the Buddhist enters into the self-emptying and enlightenment of Buddha as the Christian enters into the self-emptying (crucifixion) and glorification (resurrection and ascension) of Christ. The chief difference between the two is that the former is existential and ontological, the latter is theological and personal.<sup>39</sup>

As for the point of superseding the ego-self, it follows directly from the first. In Merton's words,

This explains why in all these higher religious traditions the path to transcendent realization is a path of ascetic self-emptying and 'self-naughting' and not at all a path of self-affirmation, of self-fulfillment, or of 'perfect attainment'.<sup>40</sup>

Finally, what highlights even more the breadth in which he regards contemplation as the basis for connection between the two traditions is his analysis of Zen art. He finds the ultimate meaning of, and way to connect with, Japanese art in its nature deeply integrated with Zen contemplation. As he puts it,

In particular, it is the function of the beautiful to be, so to speak, an epiphany of the Absolute and formless Void which is God. It is an embodiment of the

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<sup>37</sup> Merton 1968: 75.

<sup>38</sup> Merton 1968: 76.

<sup>39</sup> Merton 1968: 76.

<sup>40</sup> Merton 1968: 76.

Absolute mediated through the personality of the artist, or perhaps better his ‘spirit’ and his contemplative experience.<sup>41</sup>

Here again, he draws the parallel between the ‘Void’ and ‘God’, which can be reached through contemplation. Additionally, he interprets the tea ceremony as ‘almost liturgical’, where the spirit of host and guest become one, and ‘art, spiritual experience and communal, personal relationships enter together into an expression of God in His world’.<sup>42</sup> Together with its simplicity (*wabi* 侘), which Merton highlights as parallel to the purity and simplicity of early Cistercian architecture, he claims that these Japanese art forms can be of interest to monastics everywhere through their insights into contemplation and purity.

### Contemplation as connection for Nhất Hạnh

Similarly to Merton, contemplation, or the direct experience or ‘touch’ of ultimate reality, serves as the most significant basis to connect the two religions for Thích Nhất Hạnh as well. Due to its size and later publication, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* encompasses more areas of comparison than *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*. Nevertheless, there are numerous similar points to be found. Therefore, this chapter will first highlight the parts that are closely related between the two books and then elaborate on the parts that are unique to Nhất Hạnh’s analysis.

The central point of Nhất Hạnh’s book, as its title also highlights, is the perception that at the heart of the two religions, there exist the living Buddha and the living Christ and that the essence of religious practice lies in maintaining a connection to the ultimate reality of Buddha and Christ and manifesting that connection in the way we live on this Earth. To refer to this connection to the transcendent, and in an attempt to provide a name to that ‘transcendent experience’ that is also crucial for Merton, Nhất Hạnh coins the term *touch*, giving it a new meaning. He talks about *touching* the living Buddha and the living Christ in our own self, when he refers to the experience of direct connection to the transcendent beyond rational comprehension. This new term, then, enables him to talk about the practice of this experience and its benefits in very natural ways. Overall, what one has to highlight about this book (and about Nhất Hạnh’s works in general) is its striking simplicity, directness, and practicality, which aim to achieve results in its audience and not establish complex theories.

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<sup>41</sup> Merton 1968: 90.

<sup>42</sup> Merton 1968: 90–91.

Certainly, these are the texts of a peace activist and Thiền monk who above all focuses on the essence.

Consequently, then, the book consists of short, one-to-two-page-long essays on specific questions, which range from mindful eating to the Eucharist and the *dharmakāya*. The first essays are more practical, whereas the later ones are more theoretical, so the present analysis of Nhất Hạnh's arguments will follow a reverse order in order to relate to Merton's points more easily.

The first, foundational insight, similar to Merton's notion of the unity of the believer and God, is the nonduality of ultimate reality. After elaborating the meaning of 'the other shore' and *nirvāṇa*, Nhất Hạnh draws a parallel with the Kingdom of God.

Jesus pointed to that same reality of no-birth, no-death. He called it the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is not something distinct from God, whom he called Abba, 'Father'. Just as the concept 'other shore' can create the misunderstanding that the other shore is not this shore, the concept 'Father' can also be misleading. For instance, feminists in our time ask why 'Father' and not 'Mother'? Eternal life is the kind of life that includes death. In fact, eternal life without death is not possible. It is like two sides of a coin. Eternal life is the whole coin. Noneternal life is just one side of the coin. Once you choose eternal life, you choose death as well, and both are life. But if you want to take only one side of the coin, you have no coin.<sup>43</sup>

As a logical next step, he again highlights the need to supersede concepts. 'Things cannot be described by concepts and words. They can only be encountered by direct experience'. Moreover, in a Christian context, '[t]heologians have spent thousands of years talking about God as one representation. This is called onto-theology, and it is talking about what we should not talk about'.<sup>44</sup>

However, similarly to Merton, he also points out that 'direct experience' can lead to *nirvāṇa* or the Kingdom of God here and now.

Some waves on the ocean are high and some are low. Waves appear to be born and to die. But if we look more deeply, we see that the waves, although coming and going, are also water, which is always there. [...] Enlightenment for a wave is the moment the wave realizes that it is water. At that moment, all fear of death disappears. If you practice deeply, one day you will realize that you are free from birth and death, free from many of the dangers that have been assaulting you. [...] Smiling, you will understand that you do not have to abandon this world in order to be free. You will know that nirvana, the Kingdom of Heaven, is available here and now.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh 2007: 143.

<sup>44</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh 2007: 139–140.

<sup>45</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh 2007: 138.

He also adds that we can find God and the Buddha within ourselves. ‘We hear repeatedly that God is within us. To me, it means that God is within our consciousness. Buddha nature, the seed of mindfulness, is in the soil of our consciousness’.<sup>46</sup> Here again, he speaks about God and Buddha nature as closely similar concepts with ease.

Expanding on this similarity, he highlights that ‘direct experience’ and letting the ‘seed of mindfulness’ grow is completely possible. Moreover, the way to it is contemplative practice, which is at the heart of both traditions. ‘Christian contemplation includes the practice of resting in God, which, I believe, is the equivalent of touching nirvana’.<sup>47</sup> Thus, Nhất Hạnh arrives to the same conclusion as Merton that at the fundamental level beyond concepts, unity with God and attaining *nirvāṇa* can be conceived of as equivalent notions. Then, from this point, it is possible to speak about meditation and contemplation as parallels.

Hence, at other parts of the book, he introduces Buddhist and Christian meditation practices as parallels. One of the first such practices is the ‘Recollection of the Buddha’ (Buddhānusr̥ti), where ‘invoking these holy names, the practitioners’ minds should be filled with the wholesome qualities of these Buddhas and bodhisattvas’.<sup>48</sup> Right after this, he draws the parallel with reciting the name of Jesus.

Saint Macarius said, ‘There is no other perfect meditation than the saving and blessed name of our Lord Jesus Christ dwelling without interruption in you’. This practice is called by Christians ‘interior recollection’ (equivalent to the Sanskrit *anusmṛti*, and the Pali *anussati*).<sup>49</sup>

As for stillness, as a prerequisite to ‘touching’ ultimate reality, and the way it is possible beyond the self, he again draws parallels.

In the Psalms, it says, ‘Be still and know that I am God’. ‘Be still’ means to become peaceful and concentrated. The Buddhist term is *samatha* (stopping, calming, concentrating). ‘Know’ means to acquire wisdom, insight, or understanding. The Buddhist term is *vipasyana* (insight, or looking deeply). ‘Looking deeply’ means observing something or someone with so much concentration that the distinction between observer and observed disappears.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh 2007: 155.

<sup>47</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh 2007: 154.

<sup>48</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh 2007: 163.

<sup>49</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh 2007: 166.

<sup>50</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh 2007: 10–11.

What is even more striking, however, is the ease with which he draws parallels among seemingly diverging concepts. The first such parallel is between mindfulness and the Holy Spirit.

To me, mindfulness is very much like the Holy Spirit. Both are agents of healing. When you have mindfulness, you have love and understanding, you see more deeply, and you can heal the wounds in your own mind. The Buddha was called the King of Healers. In the Bible, when someone touches Christ, he or she is healed. It is not just touching a cloth that brings about a miracle. When you touch deep understanding and love, you are healed.<sup>51</sup>

This comparison, again, is close to the notion of contemplation. In Christian terms, the point of contemplative practice is exactly to prepare the practitioner to be able to let God work in them through the Holy Spirit. From a Buddhist standpoint, '[m]indfulness is the substance of a Buddha', the essence of meditation.<sup>52</sup>

The second such comparison is between the Eucharist and mindful eating.

In Christianity, when we celebrate the Eucharist, sharing the bread and the wine as the body of God, we do it in the same spirit of piety, of mindfulness, aware that we are alive, enjoying dwelling in the present moment. [...] When a priest performs the Eucharistic rite, his role is to bring life to the community. The miracle happens not because he says the words correctly, but because we eat and drink in mindfulness. Holy Communion is a strong bell of mindfulness. [...] If we allow ourselves to touch our bread deeply, we become reborn, because our bread is life itself. Eating it deeply, we touch the sun, the clouds, the earth, and everything in the cosmos. We touch life, and we touch the Kingdom of God. When I asked Cardinal Jean Daniélou if the Eucharist can be described in this way, he said yes.<sup>53</sup>

Here again, the connection between the two religions is contemplation, being present to the reality of God within the Eucharist in the practice of eating mindfully.

Hence, given all of these connections that can be established between the two religions in the view of Nhất Hạnh, it is no wonder that he closes *Living Buddha, Living Christ* with a strong call to appreciate both traditions and engage in dialogue.

Buddhists and Christians alike, in dialogue, want to recognize similarities as well as differences in their traditions. It is good that an orange is an orange and a

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<sup>51</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh 2007: 14–15.

<sup>52</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh 2007: 15.

<sup>53</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh 2007: 30–31.

mango is a mango. The colors, the smells, and the tastes are different, but looking deeply, we see that they are both authentic fruits. Looking more deeply, we can see the sunshine, the rain, the minerals, and the earth in both of them. Only their manifestations are different. Authentic experience makes a religion a true tradition. Religious experience is, above all, human experience. If religions are authentic, they contain the same elements of stability, joy, peace, understanding, and love. The similarities as well as the differences are there. They differ only in terms of emphasis. Glucose and acid are in all fruits, but their degrees differ. We cannot say that one is a real fruit and the other is not.<sup>54</sup>

### Conclusion

To conclude, the paper aims to demonstrate that meditation and contemplative practice can be found within both traditional Buddhist and Christian religiosity. In Buddhism, especially its *Thiền* school, the presence of these practices is clear. However, Thomas Merton's work highlights that they can be regarded as a central part of Christian religiosity as well. Additionally, as the analysed writings of the two monks demonstrate, despite stark differences in theoretical formulation, the practice of contemplation and its main goals share numerous similarities within the two traditions.

The need for contemplative practice arises from the assessment of humans' state in the world, which is perceived as deeply flawed by both traditions in their clinging to an illusory 'ego'. For Merton, this is formulated in a theological language, stating that the Fall of Man cast out humans from their original state of unity with God through establishing a self-reflective ego that perceives itself as separate from God and other 'objects' of cognition. This results in a brokenness of human life, which people aim to mend through 'wrapping' the illusory ego into fame and possessions to make it appear real and unchanging. Nevertheless, for Merton, the only way to truly solve the problem is to 'return' to unity with God through the person's deep transcendent self and, in this unity with God, experience true realness and eternity of the person. Moreover, the central way to achieve this unity is contemplative practice where the believer aims to experience a direct connection with God beyond concepts and duality. Thus, for him, contemplation is the essence of Christian life and the highest form of prayer, since it does not aim to intellectually relate to an 'idea of God' but to experience a direct connection to Him in Him.

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<sup>54</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh 2007: 194–195.

For Thích Nhất Hạnh, as a Thiền master, meditation naturally lies at the heart of his religious practice. In his view, humans' fundamental problem is to understand the ego as a real and unchanging entity separate from all other entities of the world. This view prevents people from realising the underlying unity of the world, self and others, life and death, and saṃsāra and nirvāṇa. The realisation of this unity is the attainment of Buddhahood, to which the best practice is meditation and mindfulness, especially through using breath to unify the body and mind. Thus, for Nhất Hạnh, just as for Merton, the final goal of the practitioner is the attainment of an ultimate unity.

Finally, drawing on these similarities regarding the central religious practice, the two monks themselves mapped out avenues to draw parallels between the two traditions and start a deep dialogue. For Merton, such avenues are connections between God and the absolute Void of Zen, the self-emptying of the practitioner on their way to unity exemplified in the concepts of *kenosis* in Christianity and *śūnyatā* in Buddhism. As a Thiền master centred on practice, Nhất Hạnh identified even more such places of connection. Besides drawing parallels between *nirvāṇa* and the Kingdom of God, he also connected mindfulness and the Holy Spirit, as well as mindful eating and taking the Eucharist.

Thus, based on the analysed works of Thomas Merton and Thích Nhất Hạnh, it can be said that the practice of contemplation can be regarded as a central part of both religions, and it may act as a bridge between Buddhism and Christianity despite the different theoretical formulations through which it is nested within each tradition. Furthermore, following the approach of the two monks, walking on that bridge might be worthwhile.

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