

# Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue

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*“Jesus Christ the same yesterday and today, and forever.” ~Heb, 13:9~*

The human person is “essentially a relational being” as a mirror of the Holy Trinity, finding God through others<sup>1</sup> and expecting answers from religion to unexplained questions of the human condition.<sup>2</sup> In this research paper, I will develop the parallel relationship between Inter-faith dialogues by Thomas Merton based on the book *Signs of Peace* and ecumenism as it is understood by Oscar Cullman in the book *“Unity through Diversity.”*

Since the fall into sin, humanity has lost sight of the interconnection with God, with us, with others and with creation. (CCC 279). The Interreligious dialogue between Catholicism and non-Christian religions, as envisioned by the Second Vatican Council, in *Nostra Aetate* –“In Our Times”– opened relations gradually coming to be understood. (Dialogue and Proclamation, Current affairs)<sup>3</sup> However, there is a “necessity of Evangelization and Discipleship” with care and understanding as part of the important interreligious dialogue and ecumenism.<sup>4</sup> The life of Thomas Merton and Oscar Cullman have impacted the Modern World in different areas, especially in accepting Christianity, “No doubt there have to be differences” (1 Corinthians 11:19) and frictions with the interconnectivity of human life with other members of different faiths.

On the one hand, **THOMAS MERTON** was born in 1915, Prades, France and died in 1968, Bangkok, Thailand. His parents had met at a painting school in Paris. His New Zealand-born father, Owen Merton, and his American-born mother, Ruth Jenkins, were both artists and were married at St. Anne's Church, London.<sup>5</sup>

A mystic, writer, poet, social activist and an American Trappist monk of the Cistercian Abbey of Gethsemani near Bardstown, Kentucky. Merton was

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<sup>1</sup> Franciscan University Workshop, Philosophy, “*The Human Person*” Petroc C. Willey, Pd.D., accessed May 30, 2021, <https://franciscanathome.com/node/325?track=5048>

<sup>2</sup> Paul VI, *Nostra Aetate*, 1

<sup>3</sup> Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, 4

<sup>4</sup> Catholic Distance University, “*Other Religions: Equality / Authority*,” accessed, June 6, 2021 [https://cdu.instructure.com/courses/1291/pages/other-religions-equality-slash-authority?module\\_item\\_id=95369](https://cdu.instructure.com/courses/1291/pages/other-religions-equality-slash-authority?module_item_id=95369)

<sup>5</sup> The Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University, “*Thomas Merton’s Life and Work*,” Blog, accessed May 31, 2021 <http://merton.org/chrono.aspx>

considered one of the greatest 20th century Catholic spiritual theologian scholars with his journey into monastic life.<sup>6</sup>

Merton's poems and writings, well known for his dialogues with prominent spiritual leaders compiled in the book *Sign of Peace* by Willian Apel, reflect the interconnection with God, with himself, with others in interreligious dialogues, and with nature. Moreover, his autobiography, *The Seven-Storey Mountain*, 1948, is one of the most prominent "spiritual classic" books about a man's search for spiritual life and peace. It recounts his contemplation during the years in the Trappist monastery of Gethsemani in Kentucky in the 1960s.<sup>7</sup> At the fifteenth anniversary of this book, William H. Shannon, in the Note to the Reader, acclaimed that *The Seven-Storey Mountain* can be considered as a "twentieth-century version of the Confessions of St. Augustine."<sup>8</sup>

In his autobiography he judges his disorderly youth, describes his conversion to Roman Catholicism and the day he arrives at the Abbey of Gethsemani, the most ascetic Roman Catholic monastic order, on December 10th, 1941. The twenty-seven years he spent in Gethsemani gave him a thoughtful "self-understanding."<sup>9</sup> In his last decade of life, he became intensely interested in dialogues with members of other Christian faith and other religious. Merton encourages the religious experience of others, rather than on doctrinal expressions "to practice in our own ways the vocation of unity."<sup>10</sup> This unity is derived from Merton's work in *Conjectures of Guilty Bystander*.

*"If I can unite in myself the thought and devotion of Eastern and Western Christendom, the Greek and the Latin Fathers, the Russians with the Spanish mystics, I can prepare in myself the reunion of divided Christians. From that secret and unspoken unity in myself can eventually come a visible and manifest unity of all Christians... we must contain all divided worlds in ourselves and transcend them in Christ."* (Apel, 2006, pp xiii)

According to Daniel Berrigan, Merton was a strong supporter of the nonviolent civil rights movement, which he called "certainly the greatest example of

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas Merton Center, "Biography," Palo Alto, California, accessed May 31, 2021, <https://thomasmerton.org/>

<sup>7</sup> Maltis, Elena, C.S.C. "Thomas Merton", accessed May 31, 2021 <http://merton.org/ITMS/Seasonal/15/15-1Maltis.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Merton, Thomas, *The Seven Storey Mountain: Fiftieth Anniversary Edition*, "Harcourt, Inc., 1998. pp xix

<sup>9</sup> Merton, Thomas, *The Seven Storey Mountain: Fiftieth Anniversary Edition*, "Harcourt, Inc., 1998

<sup>10</sup> Spirituality, "Signs of Peace: Resources for Spiritual Journeys", Blog, accessed May 31, 2021, <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/view/16414/signs-of-peace>

Christian faith in action in the social history of the United States."<sup>11</sup> For his social activism Merton suffered strict attacks, not only from Catholics, but also from non-Catholics who criticized his political writings as inappropriate of a monk.<sup>12</sup>

In the book, *Signs of Peace: The Interfaith Letters of Thomas Merton*, William Apel recounts a remarkable collection of original letters during the last years of Thomas Merton. The book contains reflections of the reprinted letters between Thomas Merton and Abdul Aziz, a Muslim and Pakistan Sufi scholar; with Amiya Chakravarty, an Indian poet and philosopher; John Wu, Chinese sage; Abraham Joshua Heschel, Jewish philosopher and professor of ethics and mysticism; D. T. Suzuki, a Zen Japanese master; Glenn Hinson, Baptist professor of church history; Thich Nhat Hanh, Vietnamese Buddhist teacher and activist; June J. Yungblut, Quaker, American Philosopher; and Dona Luisa Coomarswamy, an interfaith pioneer.<sup>13</sup>

The Dalai Lama praised Merton for his understanding of Buddhism, and it was during this conference that Merton died, near Bangkok, Thailand on December 10, 1968, at the twenty-seventh anniversary of his arrival at Gethsemani.<sup>14</sup>

Merton dedicated his life to contemplate and appreciate other believers and enriched his unity and connection with God with inter-faith dialogues. Once he said, *"We are already one. But we image that we are not. And what we must recover is our original unity. What we must be is what we are."*<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, **OSCAR CULLMANN**, was born in Strasbourg, France in 1902 and died in Chamonix, France in 1999. A protestant theologian and New Testament scholar, coming out of the Lutheran tradition and one of the twenty century's ecumenical pioneers. A lay member of the Lutheran Church of the Augsburg Confession of Alsace and Lorraine. Cullmann dedicated his life to debate the basic theological principle of Salvation History *"Heilsgeschichte"*<sup>16</sup> and his

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<sup>11</sup>The Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University, *"Thomas Merton's Life and Work,"* Blog, accessed May 31, 2021, <http://merton.org/chrono.aspx>

<sup>12</sup> Ibis

<sup>13</sup> Apel, William, *"Signs of Peace: The Interfaith Letters of Thomas Merton,"* Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 2006, pp. 9-185

<sup>14</sup> The Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University, *"Thomas Merton's Life and Work,"* Blog, accessed May 31, 2021, <http://merton.org/chrono.aspx>

<sup>15</sup> Merton, Thomas *"The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton"*, ed. Naomi Burton, Patrick Hart, and James Laughlin (New Directions Publishing: ©1973, 1975), pp.308.

<sup>16</sup> Merino, Diego Calvo, *"La Teología de Oscar Cullmann"* Blog, Accessed June 5, 2021 <https://lateologiasinprejuicios.blogspot.com/2016/01/la-teologia-de-oscar-cullmann.html> , 2016

openness to Christians of other denominations helped him forge a true ecumenical spirit.<sup>17</sup>

Cullmann's home was in the northern part of the region, in a half-Protestant area, while the other part of the city was rather Catholic. He was raised in Alsatian Lutheranism and grew up speaking both French and German, and amid two marked religious traditions. He was the co-founder of the Ecumenical Institute of Tantur in Jerusalem.<sup>18</sup>

Dr. Cullmann's greatest influence came from his lectures around the world and his writings that were translated into several languages and revisions. He was an advocate of historical-critical Bible research and formed himself to be obliged to create criticism, systematic insights, and ecumenical engagement.<sup>19</sup>

In 1946, he wrote his most influential work *“Christus und die Zeit: die urchristliche Zeit*, translated in 1948 to *“Christ and Time: the primitive Christian conception of time and history.”* Cullmann argued that what is exceptional about the New Testament is its view of “time and history” to understand the whole of salvation history.<sup>20</sup>

Oscar Cullman participated as a Protestant observer at the Second Vatican Council and received the Paul VI International Award for his ecumenical efforts. It was the most important event in his life. Dr. Cullmann was not an appointed observer sent by one of the Christian churches. His status was as a personal guest of both popes, St. John XXIII and St Paul VI, who presided over the Council. There were only a few guests and Cullmann was the only one to be invited to four of the Council's sessions. He was only a private person, and he was not obligated to give an account of the proceedings to any church. For this reason, the Roman hierarchy took a more open attitude toward him.”<sup>21</sup>

This was a significant development since the Roman Catholic Church had refused to participate in the ecumenical movement. Despite Dr. Cullmann's firm commitment to ecumenism, he was not a supporter of a new "world unity church" to bring together all Christians. In *Unity through Diversity*, 1986, he summed up his lifetime experience and suggested a "community of autonomous churches.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> ibis

<sup>18</sup> Corley, Felix, “Obituary: Oscar Cullmann, Article. January 30, 1999, accessed June 6, 2021 <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/obituary-oscar-cullmann-1077098.html>

<sup>19</sup> ibis

<sup>20</sup> Cullman, Oscar, *“Christ and Time: The Primitive conception of Time and History,”* Revised edition, 1962, Translated by Floyd V. Filson, SCM Press, London.

<sup>21</sup> Birmele, André, *“Oscar Cullmann: In the Service of Biblical Theology and Ecumenism,”* Jerusalem, Issue, October, pg. 1-40, 2012

<sup>22</sup> ibis

The Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Church *Lumen Gentium*, from Latin “Light of the Nations”<sup>23</sup> exceeded Cullmann’s expectation. He agreed it was the crowning achievement of the Second Vatican Council. The Council’s approach to salvation history led to a dynamic understanding of the church.<sup>24</sup> A few years after the Council, Cullmann formulated his ecumenical vision in various articles, which were published in French in 1971 in the volume “*True and False Ecumenism*” in which he drew out the ecumenical consequences of the Second Vatican Council.<sup>25</sup>

Twenty years after the Council, at the age of eighty-six, Cullmann published a systematic summary of his understanding of unity of the churches. In “*Unity through Diversity*,” he took up elements of his previous writings: “*The image of charisms*” in the New Testament, which he transferred to present day Christian churches and the emphasis on the fact that unity can only be a gift of the Holy Spirit. “To create unity belongs to the essential nature of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>26</sup>

*“The denial of the work of the Holy Spirit has two opposite results, each of which is equally fateful for the cause of Christian unity: on the one side an anarchic ecumenism, and on the other side its exact counterpart, a hardening of confessional barriers that excludes any hope for unity. Both attitudes - and they are both present in our activities these days - oppose the work of the Holy Spirit.”*<sup>27</sup>

Thomas Merton and Oscar Cullman maintained their inter-faith dialogues and ecumenism with civility, respect and understanding. They reach for the common ground with “God behind God” as the “hidden ground of Love”<sup>28</sup> to obtain the human “unity through diversity”<sup>29</sup> with the light of the Holy Spirit.

Ecumenism is a complex experience for two reasons; the first one is fear and the second, familiarity.<sup>30</sup> Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, in his book, “*What it Means to Be a Christian*” asks a question, “*Why, if there are so many other ways*

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<sup>23</sup> Paul VI, *Lumen Gentium*, 1964.

<sup>24</sup> Birmele, André, “Oscar Cullmann: In the Service of Biblical Theology and Ecumenism,” Jerusalem, Issue, October 2012 pp. 1-40,

<sup>25</sup> Merino, Diego Calvo, “La Teología de Oscar Cullmann” Blog, 2016, Accessed June 5, 2021, <https://lateologiasinprejuicios.blogspot.com/2016/01/la-teologia-de-oscar-cullmann.html>

<sup>26</sup> ibis

<sup>27</sup> ibis

<sup>28</sup> Apel, William, “*Signs of Peace: The Interfaith Letters of Thomas Merton*,” Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 2006, pp. 16

<sup>29</sup> Merino, Diego Calvo, “La Teología de Oscar Cullmann” Blog, 2016, Accessed June 5, 2021 <https://lateologiasinprejuicios.blogspot.com/2016/01/la-teologia-de-oscar-cullmann.html>

<sup>30</sup> Catholic Distance University, “*Denominational Competition/Collaboration*,” accessed, June 16, 2021 [https://cdu.instructure.com/courses/1291/pages/denominational-competition-slash-collaboration?module\\_item\\_id=95367](https://cdu.instructure.com/courses/1291/pages/denominational-competition-slash-collaboration?module_item_id=95367)

to heaven and to salvation-what compel us to live as Christians?”<sup>31</sup> Only if we have confidence in what we believe, we can answer that question and reach “the common ground” with the God's love that has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. (*Rom* 5:5).

*Nostra Aetate*<sup>32</sup> (NA) encourages us to enter an authentic dialogue that has an interest in the other. The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in other religions. (NA, 2) However, it is our duty to proclaim, “Christ who is the way, the truth and the life.” (John 1:6). We cannot rightly pray to God if we do not treat “people as other than sisters and brothers, for all are created in God's image.” (NA, 5). “They who do not love, don not know God.” (1 Jn. 4:8)

Thirty years after the end of the Second Vatican Council, Saint John Paul II published The Encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* from Latin: That they may be one. <sup>33</sup> (UUS). The Pope reiterated that the Catholic Church is committed “irrevocably” to following the path of the ecumenical venture (UUS, 3) with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who teaches us “the sings of the times” (UUS, 3) to work enthusiastically “in the work of ecumenism” (UUS, 8).

For more than two thousand years, the Catholic Church, despite of its crisis, has being diligence to “embrace with hope and love” (UUS, 8) the promise to ecumenism established on the Decree in *Unitatis Redintegratio* (UR) From Latin: "Restoration of unity"<sup>34</sup> in the Second Vatican Council's decree on ecumenism. This was the vision that Thomas Merton and Oscar Cullman worked for decades. It is the hope that has its divine source in the Trinitarian unity.

The restoration of unity among all Christians was one of the principal concerns of the Second Vatican Council. To engage in a sincere dialogue, it is necessary “a personal conversion as well as a communal conversion” (UR, 4). St. John Paul II promoted a third and more existential dimension of the ecumenical dialogue: “Dialogue is not simply an exchange of ideas. In some way it is always an “exchange of gifts” (UUS 28). St. John Paul II concept of dialogue was based on the Decree *Unitatis Redintegratio* and on the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*.

In 2007, Pope Francis answered several questions to the members of the Anglican congregation. The Pope reiterated that ecumenism is a journey and

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<sup>31</sup> Ratzinger, Joseph, “What It Means to Be a Christian,” Ignatius Press, San Francisco, New edition 2006, pp 46

<sup>32</sup> Paul VI, *Nostra Aetate*, 1-5

<sup>33</sup> Pope John Paul II, “*Ut Unum Sint*,” 1

<sup>34</sup> Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, “*Unitatis Redintegratio*” Decree on Ecumenism, 1965

praised the vitality of the young Churches. He explained ecumenical dialogue cannot be done in a “standstill.” It must be done on a journey “because ecumenical dialogue is a journey. And theological things are discussed on a journey.”<sup>35</sup>

In 2015, Pope Francis praised Merton saying, “Merton was above all a man of prayer, a thinker who challenged the certitudes of his time and opened new horizons for souls and for the church. He was also a man of dialogue, a promoter of peace between peoples and religions”<sup>36</sup>

During the Great Jubilee of the year 2000, St. John Paul II also honored the “ecumenism of the saints.” He was deeply convinced that the saints and martyrs of our time, belongs to numerous Churches but united by common suffering in the name of Christ considering the highest point of the life of grace, *martyria* unto death, the truest communion possible with Christ who shed his Blood, and by that sacrifice brings near those who once were far off (UUS, 84).

Moreover, the church reproaches any discrimination against people on the basis of their race, color, condition in life or religion following the footsteps of the holy apostles Peter and Paul (NA, 5) The sacred council supplicates the Christian faithful to “conduct themselves well among the Gentiles.” (1 Pet 2:12)

While preparing this term paper and after reading Thomas Merton inter-faith letters and Oscar Cullman’s writings, among his gifts to believers or unbelievers, they left us an extensive library of lectures, essays, articles and books dedicated to clarifying basic biblical theology principles, eschatological tensions and religious tenants. Furthermore, I must admit that Merton and Cullmann’s works are a treasure for Christian Churches. Moreover, the Ecumenical Encyclicals on Ecumenism are a clear pathway to enter communion with Christian and non-Christian faiths. We only need a clear vision and open heart to have a dialogue with knowledge, respect and understanding without fear of the unfamiliarity since the human person is essentially a relational being as a mirror of the Holy Trinity.

This class, THEO 640, has enriched me not only in Christian knowledge, but also has helped me understand the “hidden ground of love” as recognized by Tomas Merton on the book *Signs of Peace* and the “unity through diversity” understood by Oscar Cullman’s ecumenism.

In my opinion, a person is better equipped to understand and live inter-faith dialogues and ecumenism if he or she has put into action “the hidden ground of love” practicing the “greatest commandment” that Jesus has given to us, “You must

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<sup>35</sup> Vatican Summary of Bulletin, February 26, 2017, accessed June 16, 2021  
<https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2017/02/26/170226d.html>

<sup>36</sup> Horan, Daniel P., “Why should anyone care about Thomas Merton today?” accessed June 6, 2021  
<https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/why-should-anyone-care-about-thomas-merton-today>

love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: You must love your neighbor as you love yourself.” (Matthew 22:35)

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