# "A Very Disciplined Person"... from Nelson County: An Interview with Canon A.M. Allchin about Merton"

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**Kramer:** We are going to talk some about Thomas Merton. We want to go back to 1963 and talk about when you first were there at [The Abbey of] Gethsemani. I thought it might be good if you gave a bit of information about your background and how you became interested in Merton.

**Allchin**: Well, I don't remember which of Merton's books I read first. I think it was *Seeds of Contemplation*. It certainly wasn't *The Seven Storey Mountain* (or *Elected Silence*, as it was called in the English edition, which was even more abbreviated). And I'm glad because as a young Anglican and rather tender, I would have been rather put off by *The Seven Storey Mountain*. But I think *Seeds of Contemplation* was the first one that I read and I loved it very much. I remember vividly reading *The Sign of Jonas* when I was making a retreat in a small retreat house in the countryside. Then I had this feeling—which I suppose lots of people have reading Merton's books—as if he was in the room talking to me. There seemed to be this immediate contact. This account of how it was like living inside a Cistercian monastery was so fascinating and so absolutely unexpected at that time. That was part of the fascination of the book for me. But I never dreamt I'd meet him.

**Kramer**: Were you teaching in New York City?

**Allchin**: No, the first time I went to Louisville was before I'd been to New York. It was my first visit to the United States. In 1962 Dale Moody, who was a Professor at the Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, had a sabbatical year in Oxford. And most days of the week he used to come to Pusey House where I was on the staff—because he was using our library—and he would come to have lunch with us, an informal lunch. We got to know each other rather well. I was an Anglican delegate to the Faith-And-Order conference at Montreal. I think it was in July 1963 and it was my first ever visit to North America. When I told Dale I was coming to Montreal he said, "You must come to the United States and stay with us." So I went to the Montreal conference and then I came to Louisville.

**Kramer**: How did you get out to Gethsemani? Did one of the monks meet you?

**Allchin**: I spent three or four days at the seminary as a guest of Dr. Moody and his wife and family. Dale Moody drove me around; we went to all kinds of places in Kentucky. I learned much about the history of Kentucky and its role in the Civil War and how they were on both sides. I learned quite a lot about the Revival of 1802 and 1803 and the Camp Meetings. I began to get a feeling of the kind of place it was. But the thing that impressed me most was the Shaker Village—Pleasant Hill—[near Lexington]. It was Dale who had written to Merton, made an arrangement, and he took me out there [to Gethsemani]. He left me there and I spent three or four days at the monastery. And that was my first visit to a Cistercian monastery.

**Kramer**: So when you went to the Guesthouse did you have some time there before you met Merton?

**Allchin**: Well, I think Merton must have been there to meet us because I remember, for a brief time, there were the three of us together. There was Dale Moody, myself, and Merton and we sat and talked. Then Dale drove off. And Merton took me up into what I suppose was his office. I think it must have been his office because I remember the conversation began and very soon got on to the question of Shakers. Because Merton said "What have you been doing in Kentucky and what have you seen?" I said I've seen all kinds of things but what impressed me most was the Shaker Village because I thought the architecture was so absolutely wonderful. There was a kind of purity and simplicity about it. And he at once went over to his filing cabinet, pulled out the drawer, pulled out a file full of photographs and said, "Look at these photographs!"—which were very beautiful. He said he wanted to write a book about the Shakers. So we started talking about Shakers and that broke the ice between us, because I was feeling a bit nervous being face to face with this world-famous author whom I'd never met before. And then I didn't feel nervous anymore because we were both so enthusiastic about Shakers.

**Kramer**: When you were there at Gethsemani, did you participate in the liturgy? Were you invited to be there in the choir stalls?

**Allchin**: No, at that time I was up in the balcony. And I don't think at that time there was any thought that I would receive Communion. I don't think it would have entered into my head nor anybody else's. The liturgy was very impressive but what struck me was the heat of the church, which was fearful. I was there in early August. It struck me that the physical asceticism of the community must have been very real because at that time there was no air conditioning in the monastery. There was air conditioning in the Guest House, thank goodness. Living through that heat and wearing those clothes must have been a kind of penance in itself which was enough for anybody.

**Kramer**: Did you have occasion to talk with other monks while you were there?

**Allchin**: Yes I did. The awful thing is that I don't have a very vivid memory of it. But I'm sure that I met Fr. John Eudes Bamberger and Fr. Chrysogonus Waddell. And I'm sure I met one or two other people too. But most of my conversation was with Merton. It was very fascinating. We wandered over all kinds of topics. He very much wanted to have news of friends and things going on in England. I suppose, in a way, that was one of the primary things I could bring. Because not very many people from England came to Gethsemani or to Louisville.

**Kramer**: Did you two have any mutual acquaintances?

**Allchin**: No, I don't think so. But obviously the people he knew in Oxford and corresponded with, he wanted information about. I don't remember if he knew Etta Gullick already at that stage. I think that came later. But as you know from the correspondence, there's a very full set of letters to her. And I knew her very well. But it was a little bit of time before we realized we were both in correspondence with Merton.

**Kramer**: After you left there in '63 did you start corresponding with Merton with any regularity?

**Allchin**: Yes I did. And I think also that it was the first time I went to St. Meinrad's to meet Fr. Polycarp Sherwood—the monk there who was a great expert on Maximus the Confessor. There were very few people who were experts on Maximus then. And I had a great friend in Sweden, Lars Thunberg, who was writing his doctoral thesis on Maximus. Wherever I went people who were interested in Maximus tried to help the cause. In those days, the number of people in the English-speaking world who were working on Maximus was about two!

**Kramer**: What did Merton know about Maximus?

**Allchin**: At that stage, Merton certainly knew quite a lot about Maximus. I, of course, had no idea what was in his Lectures on Ascetical and Mystical Theology, which I think he gave in '61. The chapter on Maximus seems to be one of the most remarkable chapters in that book because he expounds Maximus' quite difficult theology with wonderful clarity. And he uses the example of the Shakers to explain Maximus' theory of natural contemplation and the Logos, the work of God in the whole created world.[1]

**Kramer**: I think it was in 1960 when he did that course. So he'd been thinking about these things for three or four years by the time you came to visit.

**Allchin**: Yes. And, of course, one of the things we must have talked about on that first visit was the Russians in Paris. For instance, the question of Paul Evdokimov came up, and I explained that Paul was a layman, not a priest, although I didn't know Paul personally. Then I told Merton about the Lossky family. Vladimir Lossky, who wrote *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, which certainly Merton had read by 1950; there was a very early reference to that in his correspondence with Jean Leclercq. Vladimir had died in '58. And his widow, Madeline, was a very, very remarkable person—a Jewish Christian with all the kind of emphasis and intensity of some Jewish-Christian people. So I was able to give him some kind of personal contact and anecdotes about that whole Russian emigration world where he'd read so much. And he was already in touch with Olivier Clément, a young Frenchman. So there was a kind of network of contacts there, which I suppose were useful and interesting to him.

**Kramer**: Often, when people talk about Merton they stress that he had this kind of intensity where you felt that he was totally focused upon the conversation he was having with that particular person. What kind of remembrances do you have of his mannerisms when you first met him?

**Allchin**: Well, the first thing which struck me was how wonderfully ordinary he was. It's quite true that he gave you his absolute, undivided attention. And we had wonderful conversations. We both had, you might say, lateral-thinking minds, or butterfly minds drifting from one thing to another. And that's one reason I found it terribly difficult to make notes of our conversations. We talked about so many things and moved from one subject to another so quickly. There was never any kind of systematic conversation. We went over all kinds of subjects. It was fascinating talking to him. He had this wonderful sense of humor and a wonderful sense of the ridiculous. I saw that he was excited by all kinds of things. It was always a delight being with him.

**Kramer**: What kind of scholarly interests were you pursuing at this particular time? And do you think things that you were able to talk about with Merton had any influence upon what you were then able to write yourself in those years?

**Allchin**: Yes. If I go right back to my first degree at Oxford, which was in History, I did a special subject on St. Bernard and the beginning of the Cistercian Reform. I wanted at that time to be a medieval historian. I thought that's what I was going to be. In the end, I wrote my thesis not in medieval history but in nineteenth-century history. But I did write it in monastic history, which was the revival of religious and monastic communities in the Church of England in the nineteenth-century in the aftermath of the Oxford movement. So I was already interested in monastic history, and I was interested in the history of spirituality. And that was one reason why Dale Moody said to me, "You must go and see Merton. There are so many interests that you two would have in common." So I think we talked a lot in that field. And, as I said, we talked about the Russians in Paris but we also talked about the whole theological situation in France. Because it was just towards the end of Vatican II, and I was very much involved in going back and forth from France because contact between Anglicans and

Catholics no longer had to be clandestine and secret and hidden as it had been before the Council. Suddenly, it was approved of and encouraged by the authorities in Rome.

Having a fair fluency in French, I was constantly invited to go to France by different kinds of groups—some clergy, some lay—to talk about Anglicans and Christian unity. It was a kind of springtime for all that. And of course, [Merton] being half-French and having such a fluency in French and obviously having contacts with people like Jean Leclercq, he was very much in touch with the French theological scene which was, at that time, an extraordinarily vital and lively one. And this kind of rediscovery of the Fathers, the return to the sources, was such an important part of French theology at that time. So, I'm sure we talked about that. I don't know that in the first meeting we talked so much about English poetry as we certainly did in the '67 and '68 time. But I'm pretty sure we must have done—again, without looking at the correspondence I don't remember when the first letters were written. I don't think I introduced him to David Jones that time, but when that came up it was an extraordinary common interest. That was certainly during my later visits.

I remember in the earliest visit there was an elderly monk from France—I forget from what monastery—who was busy trying to teach plain-chant to the community at Gethsemani. And we had quite a long conversation. We talked French together. I was on my first visit to America and I was full of enthusiasm. He had been a number of times and he was very French and rather skeptical about it [America]. He said, "In two- or three-hundred year's time America will be a remarkable country, very interesting indeed." But he didn't have much hope about what it was then! I remember a lot of conversations with American people who asked me if I was a Redemptorist because I wore my cassock most of the time and it was the kind of wrap-over cassock which Redemptorists would wear, and which Anglicans would also wear. And I said, "No I'm not a Redemptorist, I'm an Anglican. And they said, "Well, what kind of order is that?" Of course, it was interesting and surprising to be in a place that had not even heard of Anglicans, and probably never seen one before and wouldn't have known that they were basically the same as Episcopalians. But that was all to the good, because coming out of England where one is the center of things, it's good to be on the margin.

**Kramer**: Had you visited Cistercian monasteries in France before you went to Gethsemani?

**Allchin**: I don't think I had. I would love to have gone to Cistercian monasteries but I don't think at that time I had any contacts. Certainly in England at that time I never visited a Roman Catholic monastery because I was sure they would have tried to convert me. And I wanted to avoid that kind of situation. I think I had already stayed at the monastery at Bec in Normandy. So I had some experience with a Catholic monastery in France—although a Benedictine one. Later I got to know the monastery at Mont des Cats in France which was the Cistercian monastery I've known best over the last thirty years and have visited regularly. I think it was '69—the year after Merton died. So, no, this was a new experience for me—being in a Cistercian monastery—and a very fascinating one, having already read a good deal about them and about Merton.

**Kramer**: You went back to visit Gethsemani in 1967?

**Allchin**: Yes, and again in 1968.

**Kramer**: If you think back on that four-year period, did you notice any difference in terms of the way Gethsemani seemed in those four years?

**Allchin**: Oh yes. I have to say that 1963 was the only time I went to the hermitage. We went up and spent one afternoon in the hermitage. In '67 and '68, Merton came down to the Guest House and we always met in the Guest House. He didn't take me to the hermitage then. But in '67, I already felt that things were much more relaxed in the life of the community. And the Guest House was more comfortable, and I think that the restoration and renovation of the church had taken place. And as far as I can remember, there was air conditioning by then. I had the feeling that the place was being adapted and modernized. It was the second time I was there that we were sitting together one afternoon and suddenly someone came in—perhaps the phone rang—and Merton went out and spoke, and he came back and said, "That was Fr. Abbot on the phone. He wants you to talk to the community before Compline. Will you do so?" I agreed. Then I said, "What should I tell them about?" He said, "Tell them about the monastic life and that it is worthwhile." I said, "They know about that better than I do." He said, "Yes, but it is good for them to hear it from someone outside." So, that's what I did. And at the end of my talk, Dom James said, "We're going to have a little celebration now called 'Compline.' I suppose you've never heard of that, but you can come if you'd like to."

**Kramer**: What did you think of Dom James?
**Allchin**: Well, that was the only time I met him. Naturally, I was in awe of him—he was the Abbot. But I knew very little about him. My conversations with Merton would range very widely over things. But he never said anything that was the slightest bit critical of him. He was very loyal.
**Kramer**: Did you ever have the feeling when you were talking with Merton that he had criticisms to make of Gethsemani?
**Allchin**: Yes. Of course, by the time I came back [in 1967] *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* was out and I had read it. So that gave me an idea of where he was and what he thought about Gethsemani. For instance, we talked about the whole question as to whether there should be some provision for people to live the monastic life temporarily. Some may come to the monastery not necessarily intending to make a life commitment, but wanting to spend two or three years there and then go back into the world. We thought about the possibility of a community like Gethsemani—having a lay community alongside it where guests could be received, where postulants could be received. It would be a kind of decompression chamber between the outside world and the community itself. We talked of the need for a greater variety of monastic institutions.

We also talked about the question of smaller communities. Certainly, in my second two visits I talked to Merton about the community of the Sisters of the Love of God in Oxford at Fairacres. Because by '67 I had become the spiritual companion to them which I hadn't been, of course, in '63. We talked quite a lot about what he thought about the development of the contemplative life in the Church of England. I remember him saying you're so lucky as an Anglican. You're not tied to Canon Law; you don't have any laws on the subject! And we didn't really. We didn't know how lucky we were.
**Kramer**: In late '67 he gave a retreat for some women—abbesses and prioresses—and later those tapes were transcribed into [manuscripts].
**Allchin**: I think he talked about that. I think it was then that we went to Loretto one time. In '68 I came with a friend—a student from General Theological Seminary. And we had a car, and Jerry drove, because I've always been a bit nervous about driving on the right-hand side of the road. In the '68 visit we went out during the day. And again, we'd never done that before. And I always

said to people—and I still say to people—if you read about Merton you know about all the occasions when he went out. Most of the time he wasn't going out. Even in '67 and '68 with all the various disturbances there were, he was still living basically a very regular life. That was what always impressed me; he was a very disciplined person.

**Kramer**: So how was it in 1967 that you had planned to visit him. Were you in the United States for some particular reason?

**Allchin**: Yes, in both years I was invited for a semester to be a visiting lecturer at General Theological Seminary. I was lecturing in what we should nowadays call "Spirituality." In those days it was called "Ascetical Theology." Most students thought it was "Aesthetical Theology!" But I came in '67 and I knew I was coming back in '68, and I'm sure we talked about the possibility of coming again.

**Kramer**: When you came back in '68 various combinations of events conjoined to make that very special. You were with him on a trip to Lexington, is that right?

**Allchin**: Well, we went out for the day; it was towards the end of March. [Martin Luther King, Jr., died April 4th.] And we went first to the Shaker Village—Pleasant Hill. From there we went into Lexington where we went into a restaurant. After that we went and called Caroline Hammer and sat there and talked a bit. Then we began to drive back to Gethsemani and heard on the radio that Martin Luther King [Jr.] was in Memphis and things seemed to be rather dangerous and unhappy. We also heard a rather amusing report on the television news about Christian Barnard—the surgeon in a hospital in Cape Town who had just performed the first successful heart transplant. And there was some really rather amusing and absurd discussion in the film with Christian Barnard about the man who received the heart because he had the heart of a black man. Merton, in his diaries, seemed surprised that Jerry and I did not catch on to this. The reason why I didn't catch on was because my sister was head of the Radiology Department in that hospital and the last time she was in England I had asked her about Christian Barnard. She said he was a famous and brilliant surgeon but was extremely difficult to work with. He was a very difficult colleague. My fantasy was that I would be sitting in this roadside café and I'd see my sister speak [on television]. But that didn't happen. That's very much a footnote!

Then we drove on from there and while driving off we heard over the car radio that Martin Luther King had been shot. And Merton's immediate reaction was that we must go into Bardstown and go and call Colonel Hawk and see how he is. I think two of his children were away at college and would therefore be away from home and the whole possibility of rioting and violence was a concern. So we went to the restaurant—Hawk's Diner—and had a wonderful evening and a fascinating meal.

**Kramer**: So you were at the restaurant for quite a while?

**Allchin**: Oh yes. Some customers came and talked with us including Hawk himself. I suppose it was the first time I had had a serious conversation with a black American, and I must say he was a very impressive person and I had this impression—I already had quite a bit of contact with Eastern Europe—that people who belong to nations which have suffered, suffered history rather than made history, are often people of great depth because not only personally but somehow nationally, socially and culturally they have a kind of experience of adversity which very often we English-speaking people don't have, because we belong to nations which have been, on the whole, quite successful outwardly.

**Kramer**: Do you think Merton was aware of that too?

**Allchin**: Merton was intensely aware of that. I'm sure Merton had a great deal of respect for him, for the family, for the place. I don't know how many local contacts [he had] with black people who were Catholic. Probably not very many because I think there weren't very many black people in that part of Kentucky.

**Kramer**: Do you think this fed into Merton's writing?

**Allchin**: Sure it did. He has in those writings, in the 60s where he is writing about the relationship of black and white people, a very deep empathy and a typical Merton-kind-of-understanding of the feelings and thoughts of black people.

**Kramer**: Do you know that song cycle where he takes a Psalm and re-writes some Psalms thinking just below the surface of Civil Rights issues?

**Allchin**: Yes, I've never heard them but I've read about them. John Howard Griffin had already written *Black Like Me* at that time. So, there again was another person whom Merton obviously knew very well, who affected him in that matter.

**Kramer**: Do you think any of this feeds into the poetry in *The Geography of Lograire*?

**Allchin**: Oh yes, indeed, it does. But what I notice more in *The Geography of Lograire* is the opening section where he says there are two seas in here—a German sea and a Celtic sea. And it seems to me that the opening of the poem is clearly influenced by David Jones and by *The Anathemata*. He had discovered David Jones about a year before and he had written to him saying it was a really great discovery. I, myself, was also in the process of discovering David Jones.

**Kramer**: I do not think much has been written about Merton's awareness of David Jones. That would be an important thing to follow-up.

**Allchin**: I think it would, yes. It's something that happened the last year of his life—or the last 18 months of his life. But clearly it made a very great impression. And David Jones is a very great writer.

**Kramer**: Did Merton ever talk to you about the kinds of books he was reading because he was a poet and because of his relationship with James Laughlin—the New Directions editor—and the fact that Laughlin would have been sending him books by some of the people he was publishing like William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound and Denise Levertov, people like that. Did he ever mention any of those people?

**Allchin**: Yes. My own very limited knowledge of American poetry, I suppose, in a way, restricted our conversation. As I said, I certainly talked about Edwin Muir and he was interested in R. S. Thomas and quite appreciated him. I talked probably on the first occasion about Edwin Muir whom I already liked very much. And certainly on the last occasion we talked about Denise Levertov whose poems I knew a little bit—not very much. But I had begun to appreciate [Levertov] and he gave me a very nice, large photograph of himself and Denise and Eugene Meatyard on some kind of picnic expedition.

**Kramer**: I guess Meatyard was taking photographs. Or, I think there was one picnic where Wendell Berry and Merton and Levertov were there and Meatyard was taking photographs. That would have been in 67, I think.

**Allchin**: Unfortunately, I can't find that photograph. I was looking for it recently, but my memory is certain that the photograph had Merton and Meatyard and Denise. He also told me on that occasion about Joan Baez's visit. And I had great enthusiasm for Joan Baez in those days. And Merton told me about his singing "Silver Dagger" when he was getting up in the morning. At the time he was living in a hermitage and could sing without disturbing anybody. He might disturb the frogs and sometimes they disturbed him!

**Kramer**: What did he say about Joan Baez? What did he think she was doing that was original?

**Allchin**: Well, I had the impression that he very much enjoyed her visit and admired her work.

**Kramer**: Could I change the subject? If you had to think for a moment about Merton's facial expressions, what kind of things come to mind?

**Allchin**: Well, first of all, of course, is that he didn't look at all like the traditional image of a Christian ascetic saint or even like the traditional Catholic image of St. Bernard. He looked round and somewhat like a Buddha. Secondly, the thing that you see as soon as you look at the spread of photos of him in John Howard Griffin's book is that his face is extraordinarily mobile. He looked different at different times. I was never surprised that the photographs showed such a variety of faces because that is in a sense how he was. But I suppose the thing which struck me most the third time, which was March '68—I think it had been quite a hard winter in the hermitage—was that he looked very weather-beaten. He looked like a man, a farmer who had been in the fields a good deal and it had been a hard winter. So he looked red-faced, in fact, weather-beaten. When we were in the restaurant in Lexington I was very correctly dressed in a black suit with a clerical collar. And my voice proclaimed me as not coming from Lexington. And a rather elegant lady came up and asked me if I came from England. I said, "Yes, I do." She said, "Have you met our bishop here?" And I said no I hadn't. She said, well you should meet him and all these things. She then turned to this curious, weather-beaten-looking character in a red-checked shirt who was sitting at the table with me and said: "Do you come from England too?" And he replied, "No, I come from Nelson County, lady." She was puzzled that I had a British accent, and he didn't!

**Kramer**: If you think back on that '68 moment and the last times you were with Merton, can you remember when that last moment was?

**Allchin**: No, I can't exactly. I remember Merton's reaction to the news as we heard it on the car radio that Martin Luther King [Jr.] was shot. It was one of not being surprised. I had the impression that he—and also a lot of other people—had a kind of intuitive sense that something was going wrong. And somehow when the tragedy happened it seemed to have a kind of inevitability about it. I remember that rather distinctly. I also remember that the next day—the day afterwards—he came down to the Guest House—whether he said Mass at the Guest House or whether we went over to a chapel in the Novitiate, I am not sure. But certainly he said Mass. He said the Mass of Our Lady of Sorrows. It was the week before Holy Week, and he said Mass for Martin Luther King and a particular prayer for his wife and the family. As you know, the Yungbluts were in the process of trying to organize a visit for Martin Luther King to the monastery.

So, in that sense he [Merton] obviously was very closely involved in the whole thing. I think he may actually have [corresponded with] Martin Luther King by that time. So I think it was probably after he said Mass that we left and he went back to the hermitage. And that was the last time we talked.

**Kramer**: If you think about his writing and his influence upon monastic communities, do you think that other monks have absorbed Merton's writing or do you think he has had some kind of concrete influence upon the way monasticism has developed? Do you think that some of his fellow monks have been somewhat reluctant to acknowledge his presence?

**Allchin**: Well, insofar as I know the monastic world in England—and I know more about the Catholic monastic world now but not so well as the Anglican one—I've thought that in England he has had a very great influence. Not everybody admires him. People disagree with him about this and that—it is not difficult to do that. But I think he's had a great influence within monasteries and within religious communities in England.

In France, I do not think he has been so much of an influence mainly because many of his writings have not been translated into French. Also, there is within the French Cistercian and Benedictine world such a strong tradition of monastic thinking and monastic commentary because there is a whole kind of monastic world there which still has a very traditional strength to it. Although his name is certainly known [within this French tradition] I don't think he has had a very great influence.

**Kramer**: So, do you think in France Merton would be considered more of a kind of American curiosity and someone that you would not take with much seriousness?

**Allchin**: I may be wrong. This may even have changed within the last few years, but before five or ten years ago not very much of his writing was available in French. I think quite a lot was translated in the '50s. Then after that I don't think very much was translated. So I don't think he's been such an influence there as far as I know.

**Kramer**: But in England you feel people have read him and think he is important?

**Allchin**: Oh certainly.

**Kramer**: Can you give examples of particular monastic influences?

**Allchin**: I can't think off-hand although I'm sure if I went back and looked through periodicals I could find examples of articles by members of religious communities and monastic communities about his work. But I know his books are very widely read and I think the whole development of his monastic understanding from the rather self-centered view of enclosure [being cloistered] (which you get in the earlier writing) to the much more open understanding of monastic life (which is seen in his later writing) has had a very great influence. Surely that is part of the whole rethinking and reliving of monasticism which maybe has not changed the lives of those inside so much, but has certainly changed their lives in relation to the outside world and church. Monks and nuns are in a much more direct and open relationship with people who come and stay than they were. And they are much more open and concerned with the affairs of the world than they were thirty or forty years ago. I am sure his influence there has been considerable. I think contemplatives almost naturally think of Christianity's relationship with other religions. They are almost instinctively interested in Zen and yoga and they are not frightened of it like many of the more intellectual and activist Christians are. There again, Merton's influence has been very great.

**Kramer**: When you go back to those visits in '67 and '68, did he talk about non-Christian religions much?

**Allchin**: Oh yes. I think in ['65] *The Way of Chuang Tzu* had just come out and he gave me a copy of it and he talked a lot about it. I was a little bit shocked. I thought, "I would much rather see you writing a new book about St. Antony or St. Gregory of Nyssa or St. Bernard. Why are you writing about this curious Chinese author?" But that just shows you how narrow-mindedly Christian I was at that time myself! But he certainly was already fascinated and it was quite clear that he was fascinated by Chuang Tzu. And, of course, having heard him talk about it, then having read his book, my own eyes began to open and my views were widened. But, yes, he was clearly very interested in that whole world. I think he probably saw that I was not all that interested or very well informed. So he did not press the matter. I am sure we talked more about it in '67 and '68.

[By '68] he had this contact with R. S. Thomas and he got interested in the Welsh background in his own family tree. And although at that stage I was still pretty much a novice in Welsh things, I was beginning myself to become much more interested in Welsh. I sent him copies of the English translation of the hymns of Anna Griffith. He was very interested in Anna Griffith, and he was very interested in things to do with Wales. The postcard that he sent from New Delhi said that he hoped to get permission to come back through England. He said he would come to England and then we would go to Wales. And now I've been living in Wales for ten years.

**Kramer**: Do you have particular works of his that you feel are especially valuable in relation to questions about ecumenism. Are there particular books that you feel are of value?

**Allchin**: In terms of Christian ecumenism, I think that the discussion with Bonhoeffer and Barth in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* is quite exceptionally valuable. I must say that *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* is almost my favorite Merton book. I was fascinated by it when I first read it and I've been fascinated by it ever since. I have been very interested since his Journals were published to discover how much he was reading of the [Orthodox] Russians in Paris. Although we certainly talked about it, I do not think I realized it until I read those journals quite how much he had read of them. But it is quite clear that although he did not write about them and it does not [necessarily] appear in his own productions, the influence of the Russians in Paris was quite considerable. Naturally, some of the things he wrote in his letters to me were about the seventeenth-century Anglicans and how he felt they were important if people could assimilate them. But he was not very hopeful that [people could assimilate them] because they were too remote from most American Catholics. But he certainly hoped that perhaps they would be assimilated. And he was particularly interested in Henry Vaughan and Thomas Traherne and the other Metaphysicals. I sent or tried to provide books that would help him in that particular interest.

**Kramer**: But he never could really pursue much of that.

**Allchin**: No. He said in a letter that he thought of making an edition of one of Henry Vaughan's translations [It was of Eucharius' *De Contemptus Mundi*, according to Working Notebook #5.], but he had many projects at one time or another. I don't think that was a project which would have been a top priority to him.

**Kramer**: Now, if we could change the subject just a bit and think in terms of your own work which has been really amazing in so many ways. Do you see any relationships between what you learned from Merton and what then subsequently you were able to do with all of your research and writing with regard to ecumenism and so forth?

**Allchin**: I think undoubtedly that if I've been able to hold together many interests, he has helped greatly. Some of my friends have told me that I look too widely and on too many subjects and never actually get anything finished. They have not said it quite like that but they point into that direction. If I have managed to hold together a rather diverse group of interests within the realm of Christian spirituality and Christian theology, I think the example of Merton was and has been terribly, terribly important for me. I don't for a moment think that I have anything like his intellect or capacity or ability. In my own kind of way, I have myself tried to branch out—not much beyond the Christian world—at least not in my writings but within the Christian world: Anglican, Catholic, Orthodox, Methodist, Lutheran. I've read a certain amount—especially [about] Sufism and to some extent Jewish Mysticism—but I have not written anything on those subjects, nor have I done anything like what Merton did. But again, in the whole thing about the relationship of faith to poetry and faith to literature, I've done a certain amount. But, not having Spanish and Portuguese, I have never investigated the Latin American world in the way that he did. I have (perhaps) a little more explored than he did through translation the Eastern European, Polish, Russian and Romanian worlds and, with my Celtic interests, at least tried to follow contemporary writing in Irish and Welsh which I suppose he didn't do. But in both cases, yes, clearly his example has been an immense inspiration and encouragement.

**Kramer**: You were recently in contact with people in Moscow and an International Thomas Merton Chapter has been set up and people are beginning to read Merton in Russia right now. He had had correspondence with Boris Pasternak and so on. What do you think Merton can offer Russia right now?

**Allchin**: Oh, I think Merton could be of immense value to Russia. I think but I'm not certain that his correspondence with Pasternak is now translated—I'm not sure that it's been published. But I'm sure it will draw much interest when it is published. As you know, the Russian Orthodox Church suffers from the kind of polarization of progressives and traditionalists which all churches seem to suffer from at the moment. But the Russians suffer in a very bad way. The extreme conservatives have the upper-hand and shout louder and, of course, get all of the attention from the press. But there are—in the Orthodox world in Russia—plenty of people who are thinking in a very ecumenical way. Many of them are directly inspired by Fr. Alexander Men.

**Kramer**: Who is Fr. Alexander Men?

**Allchin**: Fr. Alexander Men was a priest of the Orthodox Church who was murdered under very strange circumstances, probably by some extreme right-wing group about five or six years ago in Moscow. He was an exceptionally gifted man. He came from a Jewish family background which made him even more unacceptable to some of the anti-Semitic groups in Russian Orthodoxy. He had a very great gift as a popular expositor of Christianity. And when, in 1988 and 1989, it was possible for the first time to speak about Christian and religious questions openly on television and on radio, Fr. Alexander Men was one of the very few people who had the kind of preparation or the kind of intellectual and communicative capacities to do that. So for a brief period of two or three years, I think he became a very famous person in Russia as a spokesman for Russian Orthodoxy. And he represented a very open, ecumenically-minded kind of Orthodoxy which I would think of myself as the most authentic kind of Orthodoxy. But certainly he was criticized and he has been very much criticized since his death by the more traditionalist kinds of Orthodox groups. But there are many people in Russia who greatly admire him. There is an Alexander Men University which is a small, private university in Moscow which is teaching theology and studying theology. And it is in those kinds of circles that Merton's writings are being translated. I think of Merton as a monastic author, who is at the same time not at all a rigidly traditionalist but a profoundly traditional writer who will have an immense contribution to make to Russia.

Three or four years ago we had—I give this just as an example—in our Center at Oxford a very brilliant, young, Russian academic teaching philosophy who had re-discovered Christian faith about three or four years before he came to England. [He was] exploring Christian doctrine with passionate interest and excitement, discovering, as if for the first time, those things that have been there for fifteen hundred years. He was absolutely thrilled in England to be able to stay in the Russian Orthodox Monastery in Essex which is a small community of about fifteen monks. He was fascinated and happy to be there. He said, "I'd longed to have the opportunity to live in a monastic community for a time to share in prayer and understand more about Orthodox monasticism." He said, "In Russia the monasteries are so rigid—theologically and intellectually—and so afraid of someone like myself, who comes in and asks them to read Heidegger or listen to The Beatles. They think I must be a heretic by the fact that I know the names of such people!" That told me something about the problems in Russia at the moment, where the Church is struggling with a situation where for seventy years there was no publishing and therefore no possibility for the development of a well-informed and well-educated Christian leadership. It is in that kind of situation that I think Merton's writing will come into play.

**Kramer**: I'd like to talk more particularly about Merton's influence in the monastic world.
**Allchin**: Well, I do not know that I have a great deal to say except for one particular book I did not mention, which I think has been very important to many people inside monasteries rather than outside. That is, of course, *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*. That, I think, is a book which has been very—maybe not widely but—deeply read because it speaks so directly to the experience of prayer of other people whether they are living within monasteries or outside monasteries. This, I think, is one of Merton's greatest gifts. He has a great gift of communicating traditional material. It is often quite difficult to get at and to summarize a twelfth-century or a fourth-century author and to make them accessible to you, but he also has a way of expressing the particular experiences and dynamics and agonies of our twentieth-century world. And he gives words to experiences which people have which they find it difficult to name. I suppose that is one of the reasons why he is so widely read and so valued.
**Kramer**: I think so. This book *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*—which is now published as *Contemplative Prayer*—it is a very dark book and it is a book which some people find very discouraging because it forces the reader to think in terms of how you have to deal with your own disappointments.
**Allchin**: Yes. I think that is why it is such a useful and helpful book! It seems to me that the kind of spiritual writing and religious poetry which is able to face and name some of those dark, difficult experiences, and disappointments in ourselves, and the apparent absence of God, and living within a world from which God seems withdrawn—the people who can write about that and name those experiences are enormously helpful to others. Because if we do not confront those dark sides of the Christian experience openly, we are paralyzed by feelings of guilt about them. When we begin to discover that there are people who seem to be getting through a similar kind of "Dark Night," it is an enormous liberation and we begin to understand the situation a little more.

This is particularly characteristic in Great Britain [of] the poetry of R. S. Thomas. I know he is not very well known [in the United States] for one reason or another, but Merton very much appreciated [R. S. Thomas]. Well, this is thirty years ago. Over the last thirty years, Ronald Thomas' poetry has more and more turned into a poetry about the struggle with God. It is certainly a struggle and many of the poems represent a very dark kind of picture of the life of faith and the life of prayer—a picture which suggests at times that the whole thing is more or less impossible. But people find him, in a way, extraordinarily helpful and encouraging because he is so willing to express [carefully] dark elements of their own experience which are more easily lived with and coped with when they are named.

I remember an occasion some years ago when I had to do a kind of study weekend for some military chaplains. I decided to start with two or three of these rather dark poems of R. S. Thomas and my intuition for once was absolutely right because it released amongst the priests there—most of whom, as I say, were Army chaplains—a kind of honesty of discussion and recognition of our own doubts and difficulties in prayer and sense of darkness which made the whole weekend more open and, I think, much more personally honest and profound. And I think it is the same with that book [*Contemplative Prayer*] which translates much of the same sense of darkness which I think anybody who is living a life of prayer and faith in our age must come to because we are living a life of prayer and faith in a society that does not at all help us live [that sort] of life.

**Kramer**: I think that Merton's final writings (some of the poetry toward the end; some of the Journal material toward the end) is planned to force people to realize that you have to deal with the complexity of [a] life which is full of disappointments.

Now, I would like to ask a question. This is a theory that has not been systematically tested but I think that in the Journals towards the end, that is, beyond the Fourth Volume or so Merton has somehow made up his mind that his job is not to simply provide edification but to record the difficulties he is having with his own life. Therefore the Journals become less and less a matter of providing helpful advice and more of a kind of record of Merton's own difficulties. Some would say this is not going to be very helpful. Have you thought about what is going on in those Journals—Volumes Five, Six, Seven and towards the end?

**Allchin**: I think I agree with you with what is going on. And I think the result is that they are genuinely edifying and genuinely encouraging in a way that they could never have been if he had been offering advice and edification which had covered up the personal difficulties and anxieties and problems he had been going through. He is teaching us to live with immense uncertainties—to live in a very apophatic kind of way. This is perhaps, to some extent, a sign of personal maturity. Maybe earlier in one's life one has to have more clear boundaries of practice and doctrine and as time goes on one can learn to be a bit freer about those things and learn to hold less to particular formulations and more to some inward experience and knowledge which is very difficult to name. That seems to me to be what is going on inside [Merton]. The later volumes are very helpful because of their very great honesty. There are perplexing things about Merton—I mean he is so interested in what is going on in himself and he is obviously somewhat aware that other people are going to be. And he has this extraordinary rapport with things in the immediate past and in the remote past.

In that sense the comparison with John Henry Newman is, I think, very interesting. Newman seemed to have an extraordinary rapport with things in his childhood and his adolescence and different periods of his life which he can write about. And he also seemed to know people were going to be interested in him. Merton seems to have the same kind of intuition. That is perplexing to most of us because we are not those kinds of people and we feel that people who do that must be doing it in a rather self-conscious way. But Merton, for the most part, seems pretty un-self-conscious about it. When he gets self-conscious about it he becomes very ironical and self-critical and he makes many jokes.

**Kramer**: I think that is sufficient. Thank you.

Note

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1. See *Merton and Hesychasm: The Prayer of the Heart/The Eastern Church* edited by Bernadette Dieker and Jonathan Montaldo (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2003), pp. 409-45.

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