

# Spiritual Materialism

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*What Christians can learn from Buddhists about integration in the inner life*

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This academic year had a difficult beginning. The scandals pushed aside virtually everything else. The attractiveness of the priestly and theological vocation was obscured. Consequently, my annual academic address will reflect on the struggles which this year has brought to the seminary, especially as they affect the inner life. I'm not going to rehearse the whole story but let me begin with two quotations.

*The Washington Post:*

. . . recently noted that a major religious organization in North America had revealed serious misconduct by its spiritual leaders, including some at the very highest ranks, that the organization had failed to do adequate background checks on its leaders, mishandled complaints by victims, resisted involving the civil authorities when crimes were reported, hid the problem from their members and the public, refused to remove leaders who were credibly accused and resisted policy changes that would provide accountability.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kristine Phillips and Amy Wang "'Pure evil': Southern Baptist leaders condemn decades of sexual abuse revealed in investigation," *The Washington Post* (February 10, 2019)  
[https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/02/10/pure-evil-southern-baptist-leaders-condemn-decades-sexual-abuse-revealed-investigation/?utm\\_term=.a1545907a36c](https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/02/10/pure-evil-southern-baptist-leaders-condemn-decades-sexual-abuse-revealed-investigation/?utm_term=.a1545907a36c)

*The New York Times* reported:

Late last month, a former [religious leader] released a report alleging that [one of the highest-ranking leaders] had sexually abused and exploited some of his most devoted . . . followers for years. [There was] drunken groping and forcefully extracted sexual favors. The report said that senior leaders . . . knew of the . . . misconduct and covered it up.<sup>2</sup>

Both of these are very familiar. However, neither article refers to the Catholic Church. The first reports the troubles of the Southern Baptist Convention and the second those of Shambhala Buddhism. I mention them to remind us that we are not dealing with a solely Catholic problem. There is a larger societal crisis which is the context for what the Church faces.

There can be a tendency to think that if only the Church had done this or that differently, we would not be in this mess. Certainly, there were many things we should have done differently, but the causes and conditions that led to this moment are rooted elsewhere, as the John Jay Report documents

Nevertheless, there are things in the Catholic Church and in the seminaries that contribute to or protect against the crisis. It is one of these that I want to focus on in my address. I am referring to the issue of clericalism.

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<sup>2</sup> Andy Newman, "The 'King' of Shambhala Buddhism Is Undone by Abuse Report," *The New York Times* (July 11, 2018) <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/11/nyregion/shambhala-sexual-misconduct.html> Accessed March 2, 2019.

I am going to argue in this address that the claim that clericalism is a cause of many of the evils in the Church is both correct and not entirely helpful. It is correct when viewed as an attitude or stance of privilege. It is not entirely helpful because the term has multiple meanings and lends itself to partisan distraction over those meanings. The issue is too important to allow for partisan division. My goal is to offer a different approach, free from any intra-Catholic dispute, so that we can keep our focus where it needs to be, on the corrosive inner attitude that the Holy Father is trying to describe. To this end, I want to give us a completely new vantage point, which will yield a completely new name for the problem. But where can we find this new vantage point? I will argue that we can find it through comparative religious studies. So let me take a few minutes to set the stage.

In my previous academic addresses, I have explored the nature of theology and argued that any notion of the theological vocation which does not integrate spirituality into the very essence of its theological work is a counterfeit. It is my position that religious studies and theology are different things altogether. I have studied both, so I am speaking from experience. It is not that one is good and the other bad, only that they are as different as cats and Three [dog] North. Religious studies is a humanistic discipline which investigates the phenomenon of religion, just as an anthropologist would study human tribes and people groups.<sup>3</sup> Anyone can practice religious studies,

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<sup>3</sup> For a fairly clear set of definitions about the methods of comparative religious studies and the phenomenology of religion, see Mary Pat Fisher, *Living Religions*, 6<sup>th</sup> edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2005), 5-9.

whether believer or not. Perhaps, given enough time and the proper programming, even Sophia, the Hanson Artificial Intelligence Robot, who recently received Saudi Arabian citizenship, might pull it off.<sup>4</sup>

While in the future we might see Martian theologians, since it seems that, if there are Martians and they come to us asking for faith, they can be baptized, we cannot have non-believers as theologians.<sup>5</sup> Theology is a discipline of the Church, which studies God as he has revealed himself to humankind. Not everyone can practice theology, only a believer and, only within the believing community of the churches. The difference between religious studies and theology is really like cats and dogs, or apples and oranges if you prefer not having to deal with kitty litter and leashes. On the other hand, I do think theologians need to have a walk every day.

Previously, I said that theology and spirituality belonged on Father Kartje's Mobius coin. They are not two sides of the same coin, but much more integrated. So I want to explore spirituality with you with the goal of understanding what it brings to the study of theology. Regarding method, in contrast to my usual approach, I will explore today's question through religious studies.<sup>6</sup> Today's address will show how the

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<sup>4</sup> Hanson Robotics <http://sophiobot.com/>

<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis: "If -- for example -- tomorrow an expedition of Martians came, and some of them came to us, here... Martians, right? Green, with that long nose and big ears, just like children paint them... And one says, 'But I want to be baptized!' What would happen?" See [https://www.upi.com/Odd\\_News/2014/05/13/Pope-Francis-says-he-would-baptize-aliens/8621399985308/](https://www.upi.com/Odd_News/2014/05/13/Pope-Francis-says-he-would-baptize-aliens/8621399985308/)

<sup>6</sup> The difference between Buddhism and Christianity is vast. In this paper, I will confine technical matters of Buddhist doctrine and terminology to the footnotes. Consequently, I will need to adopt a practice which I do not favor in religious studies, of using false cognates for technical terms. One example is speaking about a "spiritual teacher" instead of saying "guru." The sole thing the two terms have in common is that they reference another human being (well, usually human, it depends how you understand talkus who are alleged to be "divine" beings who voluntarily incarnate for the benefit of

different spiritual approach of Buddhism provides new perspectives and solutions to the problem of attitude commonly called clericalism. My goal will be to translate the Buddhist insights into the Christian tradition with the help of an American spiritual theologian.

Now, some may say “Buddhism? What can a non-Christian religion possible have to say to us about an internal church matter? This is not a new challenge. Really, it’s Tertullian’s question “What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?”<sup>7</sup> This question, basically about using pagan philosophy as a tool for theological exploration, is older than the Church. The Jewish rabbis were fighting this battle long before the incarnation of the second person of the Blessed Trinity. As the wisdom literature of the Old Testament proves, the answer has always been that truth is truth, regardless of the neighborhood it comes from. Louis de Wohl said it well when he put the following

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humankind), who accompanies the seeker in the journey of the inner life. These false cognates are a real problem in religious studies, for example when British scholars used the term “ordination” for the act whereby one becomes a monastic. This approach poses great opportunity for misunderstanding. But I reluctantly adopt it simply because in this presentation to Catholic seminarians, most of whom have no previous study of Buddhism, I would spend so much time defining terms that the main message of the paper would be lost. Translation is always treason, as the saying goes.

<sup>7</sup> This quotation, from the Latin Father of the Church, Tertullian, is found in chapter 7 of his work *De praescriptione haereticorum* (On the prescription of heretics). Tertullian poses this fundamentally as a question about the basis of religious authority, or said another way, how do the two historical sources of religious knowledge, Greek philosophy and the Biblical revelation which comes to us through the Jewish people, relate to one another. The mainstream answer, in the sense of being the one most widely adopted, and which was Tertullian’s own, is that you have to choose one source over the other to solve the dilemma. But, to the surprise of many, this is not the Catholic answer. The Catholic answer, articulated by Saint Thomas Aquinas, and in our own day by Pope Benedict XVI, is that each has a unique contribution to make to divine knowledge and, in fact, is indispensable to the other for proper understanding. Benedict’s comments can be found in the Regensburg Address. A larger treatment is found in the Encyclical Letter of Pope John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*.

sentence in the mouth of his character, Thomas Aquinas, in his historical novel *The Quiet Light*, “It doesn’t matter who said something. What matters is what he said.”<sup>8</sup>

I’m going to push that dictum quite far this evening by reaching into one of the more esoteric schools of Buddhism, the Karma Kagyu lineage, to access the teaching of one lama.<sup>9</sup> The teaching is vintage Buddhism, and recognized by all lineages and schools, although it is expressed in the language of this one, smaller Tibetan lineage. Also, the lama is question ended his career in disgrace and is remembered as both a genius and a scoundrel of the #MeToo movement variety.<sup>10</sup> I will tell you more about him at the end of the address, for his life tragically illustrates the perils of walking any spiritual path, especially as a religious leader. In spite of that, or perhaps because of it, his presentation of the particular teaching that I want to explore is penetratingly accurate. It also serves as a warning for any who undertake the inner life. In place of the word “clericalism” I want to substitute something the Tibetans call “spiritual materialism.”

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<sup>8</sup> Louis de Wohl, *The Quiet Light: A Novel about Saint Thomas Aquinas* (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> Buddhism is one of the great religious/philosophical systems of Asia, along with Hinduism, Taoism and Confucianism. It originated in the person of Sidartha Gautama – the Buddha (Awakened One) from Hinduism in the 6<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C. At that time, the central philosophical/religious question in Hinduism was how to understand the cause of “the entanglement of beings in the cycle of existence and the possibility of removing” the entanglement. (Ingrid Fischer-Scriber) The answer Siddhartha Gautama proposed, based on a singular experience of realization through meditation, was that the problem was caused by craving and ignorance and cured by a path to enlightenment of “the four noble truths, the eightfold path, training in discipline and morality and [through] wisdom and insight.” (Fischer-Scriber)

<sup>10</sup> The multiple dimensions of the trauma of sexual assault are still being discovered. The most helpful insight I found is to shift the discussion from the adjective “sexual” to the verb “assault.” That grammatical clarification produces “an unassailable truth: that any kind of sexual assault is wrong.” The stress on the act as an assault also frees us to recognize when the political imposes itself on the personal and societal and obscures the reality. See Robin Westen, “What Comes After” in *AARP, the Magazine* Vol. 62, No. 18 (December 2018/January 2019), 30-32. See also Peter Rutter, *Sex in the Forbidden Zone: When Men in Power – Therapists, Doctors, Clergy, Teachers, and Others – Betray Women’s Trust* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1997).

I will proceed in the following way. First, I will describe the path of the inner life according to the Tibetans. Secondly, I will explore what it meant by “spiritual materialism.” Thirdly, I will speak briefly about the role of the spiritual teacher – which is a singular feature in the Karma Kagyu lineage – and how dealing with self-deception is part of the “stuff” of spiritual direction.<sup>11</sup> These three elements will compose the first half of my address. Finally, I want to explore “initiation” as a spiritual practice. The Karma Kagyu lineage, like all of the Tibetan schools, places great emphasis on receiving what they call empowerments before person embarks on specific practice.<sup>12</sup> It is here that the Tibetans approach a kind of “sacramental” view of religion, which makes them appealing to lots of Catholics seeking a spiritual path.

Understanding their notion of initiation might give us insights of fresh ways to see our own spiritual practices and to remind us of the essential role of grace in the

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<sup>11</sup> The Buddhist religion is divided in to three different vehicles (lit. rafts), roughly corresponding to its development as it made its way as a missionary religion across Asia. The first and oldest the Hinayana or Theravada school. The second is the Mahayana from which the other local schools emerged. The third is the Vajrayana or Tibetan Buddhism. Karma Kagyu is one of four lineages within Tibetan Buddhism. A fourth development, technically part of Mahayana, is Japanese Buddhism in either the Zen schools or the Pure Land schools.

<sup>12</sup> Empowerments are very difficult for Westerners to understand. While there is no “god” in Buddhism, such as the Creator God of Middle Eastern monotheism, there are “gods” or non-human beings who seek the well-being of all sentient beings. Sometimes they re-incarnate as bodhisattva, humans who refrain from leaving the realm of suffering until all sentient beings are able to do so. Sometimes they are tulku – beings who were not human but chose to become human to save us. These bring “transmissions” from the root guru of a lineage, which is why lineage is so important. It is not transmission by text, but personal one-on-one transmission of the knowledge. [Christians will hear “Gnosticism” in the background, but that’s a discussion for another time. See Dan Montgomery, “Samaya and the World of Shambhala” in *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* (August 6, 2017). For an explanation of initiation/empowerment in Tibetan Buddhism in general, See the Dalai Lama, *The World of Tibetan Buddhism: An Overview of Its Philosophy and Practice*, trans. and ed. Geshe Thupten Jinpa (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 105-109.

spiritual life.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, there is a warning here about an immature or pietistic view of initiation and its dangers for spiritual integration.

In the final section of the address, I will tell you about how the Christian monastic tradition organizes the lessons Catholics need to use the insights of the Buddhist tradition I have described. At the very end, I will tell you the story of the Tibetan teacher as a concluding cautionary tale, as well as a hopeful lesson on how a religious community moves beyond scandal. Moving beyond scandal is something you will continue to face. Frankly, it's something all Catholics are struggling with right now. If, in the providence of God, you are ordained a deacon or priest, you must face this challenge, so that you can help your people face it.

## The Inner Life according to the Tibetans

Buddhism is about as different from Christianity as possible. As a religion, I usually describe it as a non-theistic spirituality. We legitimately use the term religion, because it is ultimately concerned with life beyond death and the nature of Being as such. But Buddhist doctrine is as far away from ours as possible. With my Muslim dialogue partners, we can read the Apostles Creed together and agree completely that we believe,

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<sup>13</sup> Karma Kagyu means "Oral Transmission Lineage of the Karmapas" who were a specific succession of high lamas. The Karmapa is a high lama like the Dalai Lama. It originates in the 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The tradition covers 800 years through 16 different high lamas, from A.D. 1100 to 1982. Like the other lineages, it is a particular doctrine and meditative practice, but with the added feature since the 19<sup>th</sup> century of *Rime*—a 'ecumenical' movement which regarded all traditions of Tibetan Buddhism as of equal value.

in God, the Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, who was born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, ascended into heaven, and will come to judge the living and the dead. [We also believe in] the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting.<sup>14</sup>

But if I tried to do that with my Buddhist dialogue partners, this basic summary of Christian faith is reduced to only one point: “We believe [there was a man named] Jesus Christ, who was born . . . suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried.” Apart from accepting the historicity of Jesus, not a single element of doctrine is common.

What is common, though, are the profound insights gained from monastic practice.<sup>15</sup> While theological dialogue is simply not possible, a dialogue of religious experience has proven to be quite fruitful. It is here that I want to set up my vantage point for informing our understanding of the current problems in the Church and how we can use our Christian spiritual practice to move forward.

The practice of Buddhism as a spirituality involves overcoming suffering by walking the Eight-fold Path. Buddhism was born in India. Indian religious philosophers loved to lay out elaborate and detailed schemes of thought (much like our own scholastics) and the Eight-fold path names the practical steps a person must take to

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<sup>14</sup> Thomas A. Baima “Unity, Equality, and Acceptance through Interfaith Dialogue” unpublished lecture, 2012 Interfaith Iftar, Mecca Center, Willowbrook, August 14, 2012, 2-3.

<sup>15</sup> See Norman Fischer, Joseph Goldstein, Judith Simmer-Brown, Yifa, *Benedict’s Dharma: Buddhists Reflect on the Rule of Saint Benedict*, ed. Patrick Henry (New York: Riverhead Books, 2001).

reach the goal of overcoming suffering.<sup>16</sup> The Eight steps are right understanding, thought, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration. Also, it will be virtually impossible to practice the path without the moral basis.<sup>17</sup>

What separates Buddhism from an ethical philosophy lies in the seventh and eighth points of the Eightfold Path: right mindfulness and right concentration. These are achieved by the practice of meditation.<sup>18</sup> Now, this term, meditation, has a significantly different meaning from what we Christians call “meditation.”<sup>19</sup> John Snelling gives the following as the Buddhist definition:

Meditation is the specialized activity that helps us to fully realize the Buddha’s teachings, to make them an integral part of our being rather than just a new set of ideas to be entertained theoretically in the mind. It weans us away from our usual habit patterns, particularly our involvements with our thoughts and their emotional sub-themes. At the same time, it sharpens and intensifies our powers of direct perception: it gives us eyes to see into the true nature of things. The field of research is ourselves, and for this reason the laser of attention is turned and focused inward.<sup>20</sup>

Most of the main Buddhist schools use meditation as the principal practice to achieve the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> folds of the path.

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<sup>16</sup> John Snelling, *The Buddhist Handbook: A Complete Guide to Buddhist Schools, Teaching, Practice and History* (Rochester Vermont: Inner Traditions, 1991), 46.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>19</sup> See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Letter to Bishops of the Catholic Church on certain aspects of Christian meditation” (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1989).

<sup>20</sup> Snelling, Op. cit.

## Spiritual Materialism

The term “spiritual materialism” was coined by Chögyam Trungpa, a Buddhist teacher and founder of the Naropa Institute. He was a master at popularizing Tibetan teachings for a Western audience.<sup>21</sup> He became quite famous in the United States in the 1970’s for his book, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*. Instantly a classic, it represented a new form of Buddhism – non-monastic and Western -- yet at the same time its teaching was recognizable by all the schools as authentic. Trungpa defines the terms this way:

Walking a spiritual path properly is a very subtle process; it is not something to jump into naively. There are numerous sidetracks which can lead to a distorted, ego-centered version of spirituality; we can deceive ourselves into thinking we are developing spiritually when instead we are strengthening our egocentricity through spiritual techniques. This fundamental distortion may be referred to as spiritual materialism.<sup>22</sup>

This is the first insight I want you to take from this address. Rather than speak of clericalism – which has so many loaded connotations, I suggest that we gain a better

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<sup>21</sup> The Venerable Chogyam Trungpa, Rinpoche held monastic ordination from both the Nyingma and Karma Kagyu lineages. He received the khyenpo degree (terminal degree) at Surmang Monastery and won a post-doctoral fellowship to study at the University of Oxford.

<sup>22</sup> Chögyam Trungpa, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, eds. John Baker & Marvin Casper (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1987), 3.

vantage point from this idea of spiritual materialism. The goal of integration is to overcome such a distorted ego-centered version of spirituality.

## The Guru

I do have to go off on a little tangent before I tell you about the spiritual teacher or guru in Tibetan Buddhism.<sup>23</sup> When I was ecumenical / interreligious officer of the Archdiocese of Chicago the first time (I have had that appointment twice), a very high lama came to visit Chicago. I learned that he was in the tier below that of the Dalai Lama and the Pachen Lama. He had asked to meet Cardinal Bernardin. Much to his surprise, (and I am sure, disappointment), the Cardinal sent me as his representative.

I was picked up and driven to the audience by one of his devotees, a delightful man who had once been a Catholic Christian but had apostatized to receive initiation in this particular Buddhist school. Because Buddhism is non-theistic, it is sometimes possible that Christians who adopt Buddhist methods and practices, remain authentic Christians. But this man was not a Christian any longer. He had come to reject the doctrine of the Church and was convinced that the philosophy, especially about human nature, on which Buddhism is based was true – and that Christianity was not. Hence,

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<sup>23</sup> See “No Right, No Wrong: An Interview with Pema Chodron” in *Tricycle Magazine* (Fall 1993). <https://tricycle.org/magazine/no-right-no-wrong/> This article shows the way in which a Buddhist practitioner approaches the relationship with the spiritual teacher as a vowed relationship – till death do us part. You can see in the article Chodron’s struggle to maintain the Buddhist philosophical framework that truth is self-discovered with her commitment to her own vows. There is a tension in that the violation of the five vows of the lay practitioner usually are cause for excommunication from the monastic life. I wonder if Chodron would reply differently now, in 2018 from what she said in 1993.

his move into Buddhism was intentionally apostasy.<sup>24</sup> I mention this because you cannot presume when you meet a Catholic at a Buddhist center that they are, no longer part of the Church. It takes a lot of conversation and discernment to learn if they have actually separated themselves from Christ. The reason I say this is our own belief about the durability of sacramental initiation. If you really believe what the Church teaches about baptism, then it is quite difficult to leave.

Back to the story. This now-Buddhist man was using the drive to the Center to help me understand the profound spiritual encounter I was about to have with a “living buddha.” He explained to me that this man was a *tulku* – a divine being who freely choose to reincarnate for the benefit of all sentient beings. (Buddhists don’t have a creator “god” but they have all sorts of lesser “deities,” both good and bad, running around their universe). My driver shared that this particular lineage would be of interest to me as it was “ecumenical” in the Buddhist sense of rising above the sectarianism of the schools and focusing on what was in common.<sup>25</sup> He then recited for me the man’s bibliography, which I noticed extended back long before he was born!

Now, I am very comfortable with people who hold different religious beliefs, even if I do not agree with them. But that day, I came to a limit in my interreligious tolerance. The limit is this: You don’t get to list past-life publications on your current curriculum vitae! There is no provision in Turabian to account for reincarnation!

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<sup>24</sup> CIC, canon 751. See also c. 194, par. 2, 751, and c. 1364. *Code of Canon Law: Latin-English Edition*, trans. Canon Law Society of America (Washington, DC: Canon Law Society of America, 1983).

<sup>25</sup> The Karma Kagyu School is related to the *Rime* Movement of non-sectarian Buddhism.

Humor aside, my driver was trying act as a translator between different religious systems. The spiritual teacher, or guru in Buddhism, is a unique figure, particularly in the Tibetan spiritual system. Even though we use similar words in English, there is nothing in Christianity like this role, nor can there be, and the reason is doctrinal.

The point I want you to see is that the Tibetans think the guru is a re-born saint! Now, it is true that as Christians we believe that the Church is composed of saints as well as sinners. But the reason I said that we cannot have a figure like the guru because of doctrinal reasons is because our saints were and are, with one exception, all sinners.<sup>26</sup> This is exactly what Pope Francis meant when he responded to an Italian journalist who asked him “Who is Jorge Mario Bergoglio?” Francis replied:

I am a sinner. This is the most accurate definition. It is not a figure of speech, a literary genre. I am a sinner. ... I am sure of this. I am a sinner whom the Lord looked upon with mercy. I am, as I said to detainees in Bolivia, a forgiven man. ... I still make mistakes and commit sins, and I confess every fifteen or twenty days. And if I confess it is because I need to feel that God's mercy is still upon me.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> I refer, of course, to the blessed and immaculate, the Mother of our Lord and God, Jesus Christ, who is higher in honor than the cherubim and more glorious beyond compare than the seraphim. For a full treatment of her sinlessness and the theological issues around it, see Edward T. Oakes, S.J., “Predestination, *Sola Gratia*, and Mary’s Immaculate Conception: An ecumenical reading of a (still) church-dividing doctrine” in *Advancing Mariology: the Theotokos Lectures 2008-2017*, ed. Jame Schaefer (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2018), 123-149.

<sup>27</sup> See Anthony Spadaro, S.J., “A Big Heart Open to God: An Interview with Pope Francis” in *America* (September 30, 2013). <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2013/09/30/big-heart-open-god-interview-pope-francis> accessed August 4, 2018.

Christianity cannot have gurus. The only person you should seek spiritual teaching from is a sinner, forgiven by the mercy of God. Archbishop Fulton Sheen said the best spiritual guidance came from those who are holy or those who have suffered.<sup>28</sup> We seek a fellow disciple, who is kneeling at the feet of Jesus, listening to him, learning from him, living his life. In effect, Jesus accompanies the disciple through a process of Christian initiation into a mature and fruitful relationship with God, himself and his neighbor.

I mentioned in the introduction that there is a warning here about an immature or pietistic view of initiation and its dangers for spiritual integration.<sup>29</sup> This next section explores that point, again from the Tibetan vantage point.

## Initiation

In the Tibetan schools of Buddhism, before a devotee is allowed to begin a particular meditative practice, she or he must receive empowerment from the guru for the practice. On the surface, this sounds fine. The guru, as a living buddha, transmits the capacity to the devotee to enter into the next stage of training. Where as in the early

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<sup>28</sup> Fulton Sheen, "Retreat for Priests" at All Hallow College, Dublin, Ireland.

<sup>29</sup> I am writing this paper in Fall 2018, in the midst of the revelations about Theodore McCarrick and Osel Mukpo, respectively the former Cardinal and archbishop-emeritus of Washington and the Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche (Earth Protector or "king" of Shambhala). As of this writing both have been removed from office for sexual harassment of adults and in the case of McCarrick, abuse of a minor. In both cases, a second root issue is abuse of power. See Dan Montgomery, "Samaya and the World of Shambhala" in *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* (August 6, 2017). I realized reading Mr. Montgomery's article that using the search and replace function, I could turn the article into an essay on sexual abuse in the Catholic Church by replacing Shambhala with Catholic Church and the names of the Buddhist teachers with some well-known bishops. This proves that abuse of sex and power are not the monopolies of one religious community. It also proves that there is no moral high ground. All we are left with is the commitment to protect those who are vulnerable through education and accountability.

forms of Buddhism, progress was made by taking additional vows of practice, in the third vehicle, the Tibetan, the empowerment is conferred by the guru.<sup>30</sup> If you look at the initiation of Tibetan monastics, you see this clearly. From a religious studies standpoint, this sounds a lot like Christian sacraments or ordination. Indeed, early translators even used these words (ordination) to render the Tibetan texts in English. There is a trap here of focusing on the transmission of spiritual power. Instead, we need to be aware of the Tibetan understanding of the landscape of the spiritual life as this offers an additional vantage point for us, as Christians, to understand our own experience. All empowerments in Tibetan Buddhism were preceded by significant penitential practices.<sup>31</sup> According to the authorized teachers, the integration of three dimensions of morality, meditation and wisdom was the only foundation upon which to undertake higher or more advanced practice in the spiritual life.

This point serves as a warning here about an immature or pietistic view of initiation and its dangers for spiritual integration. In Tibetan Buddhism, there is a tendency to think magically about empowerments. Sadly, this error is not limited to the Tibetans. I have heard Catholic priests say, “Isn’t it great that we don’t need to prepare and craft careful sermon manuscripts like the Protestants do? Because we have the grace of ordination, the Holy Spirit will give us the words.” I am usually speechless

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<sup>30</sup> You see something similar to the Theravadan approach if you read all of the questions on behalf of the Church in the Order of Christian Initiation of Adults. You see something like the Tibetan approach in the scrutanies and blessings. I hasten to add that these are only resemblances as the two religions understand what they are doing as quite different. But it does explain why translators used Christian words as analogies to the Tibetan practices.

<sup>31</sup> See Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche, *The Ninth Karmapa, Wangchuk Dorje’s Ocean of Certainty* (Woodstock, NY: Karma Triyana Dharmachakra, 2011).

when I have heard this said, and disturbingly, I have heard it several times. Aside from proving the point that the Western Church has a poorly developed pneumatology, I can only say “Ask the people of God if they hear *any* evidence of the Holy Spirit’s participation in your sermon, and then behave accordingly.” In this case, *vox populi, vox Dei* really applies.

What also applies is something Flannery O’Connor is reported to have said: Somebody once asked Flannery O’Connor what grace feels like and she answered: “Most of the time, God’s grace doesn’t feel like anything, and if you’re feeling something, it’s probably not God’s grace.”<sup>32</sup> Father Patrick Boyle said something similar years ago that I have always remembered. He said that in the spiritual life, grace is perceivable in its fruits. It also proves the Holy Council of Trent was right to create the seminary. Sadly, we had learned the price of a poorly educated priesthood who lacked the theological training to preach or hear confessions. The price? Northern Europe!.

Integration is also necessary as one moves into advanced practice because, in the Tibetan tradition, a student makes vows to obey the spiritual teacher without question. They even speak of the vows enduring through many lifetimes. As the contemporary

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scandals emerges, many virtuous teachers were astonished that devotees could not distinguish between legitimate requests for obedience and those that were illegitimate.<sup>33</sup>

Anyone on a spiritual path should listen carefully for pious talk which excuses poor performance, or worse, immoral behavior. This is not “right speech” in Buddhism or Christianity. If you hear yourself speaking this way, it is not piety – but deception.

This deception comes from a kind of “deity” the Buddhists do believe in. They might not have a belief in a creator-god, but they are very sure there are demons.<sup>34</sup>

When piety takes such a turn as to excuse poor behaviors, we are in the world of spiritual materialism. You can identify this “distorted, ego-centered vision of spirituality” by the way it both praises you and excuses you from accountability. As Christians, we know from the Bible that one kind of “deity” the Buddhists do believe in once said to humans, “You will certainly not die . . . your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” (Genesis 3:4-5)

The insidious thing about spiritual materialism is that it uses the very doctrine of a spiritual system to lead us away from the goal. Fortunately, we have a test to

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<sup>33</sup> See Ken McLeod, “How Samaya Works: Is samaya a commitment to do whatever your teacher says?” in *Tricycle* (Fall 2018), 67-71, 104.

<sup>34</sup> Here again, words fail us. Since there is no creator (and therefore no creatures) what these entities are is difficult to translate. As it was explained to me by a Karma Kagyu teacher, to the beginner, the deities are real entities. As one progresses it becomes clear that they are psychological realities which reside in our minds and affect us from within. Finally, the advanced practitioner, because of his or her realization of “mind” knows that they are real in the same ultimate way as consciousness – not at all. All that said, these delusions, personified as deities, reside within our minds and are truly our enemies. Their goal is to enslave us. In the language of Tibetan Buddhism, they want to harm us. That’s a pretty good definition of a demon. See Dalai Lama, *The World of Tibetan Buddhism* Op. cit., 67. For the Christian understanding of many of the same issues in the inner life (the world, the flesh and the devil), I recommend the chapter on “Spiritual Warfare” in Tomas Spidlik, *The Spirituality of the Christian East: A Systematic Handbook* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1986), 256.

diagnose this spiritual disease. The test is to measure ourselves by the three dimensions: wisdom, morality and meditation. If we are spiritually mature, we will find in us all three attributes present in a balanced, harmonious and appropriate measure. We are only as spiritually mature as the three together reveal. The deception which causes spiritual materialism comes when we mistake a false self for our true self. With this vantage point, we can now turn to the Christian monastic tradition to see what it offers us on the matter of integration.

## Thomas Merton

While we cannot have gurus in Christianity, we can have exemplary guides in the form of fellow disciples who have made progress in the spiritual quest. During his pastoral journey to the United States of America, Pope Francis delivered a talk which revealed some interesting insight into our nation.

Speaking from the podium of the United States House of Representatives, to a joint session of Congress, the Bishop of Rome said:

A century ago, at the beginning of the Great War, which Pope Benedict XV termed a “pointless slaughter”, another notable American was born: the Cistercian monk Thomas Merton. He remains a source of spiritual inspiration and a guide for many people. In his autobiography he wrote: “I came into the world. Free by nature, in the image of God, I was nevertheless the prisoner of my own violence and my own selfishness, in the image of the world into which I was born. That world was the picture of Hell, full of men like myself, loving God, and

yet hating him; born to love him, living instead in fear of hopeless self-contradictory hungers". 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>35</sup>

Merton, as a Christian monk, espoused a spirituality which, at its center, addressed the difference between the true and false self. Robert Inchausti commented that, for Merton, "our false selves are the identities we cultivate in order to function in society with pride and self-possession."<sup>36</sup> Inchausti goes on to say that in Merton's theology, "our real selves are a deep religious mystery, known entirely only to God. The world cultivates the false self, ignores the real one, and therein lies the great irony of human existence: the more we make of ourselves, the less we actually exist." Merton himself wrote:

All sin starts from the assumption that my false self, the self that exists only in my own egocentric desires, is the fundamental reality of life to which everything else in the universe is ordered. . . .<sup>37</sup> The deep secrecy of my own being is often hidden from me by my own estimate of what I am. . . .<sup>38</sup> Our nature, which is a

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<sup>35</sup> Francis, "Address of the Holy Father to the Joint Session of the U. S. Congress" Washington, D.C. Thursday, 24 September 2015

[https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150924\\_usa-us-congress.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150924_usa-us-congress.html)

<sup>36</sup> *The Pocket Thomas Merton*, ed. Robert Inchausti (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 2017), 1.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

free gift from God, was given us to be perfected and enhanced by another free gift that is not due it.<sup>39</sup>

Merton describes the way a lack of integration between morality, meditation and wisdom lead to the false self. Sadly, the description of this lack of integration he gives is exactly how many scholars today approach theology. It is the modern, university-based approach to theology, which Bishop Barron would tell us was promoted by Friedrich Schleiermacher and has burdened American theology ever since.<sup>40</sup> Merton, who figured strongly in Barron's own intellectual and vocational development, says:

To start with one's ego-identity and to try to bring that identity to terms with external reality by thinking and then having worked out practical principles, to act on reality from one privileged autonomous position – in order to bring it into line with an absolute good we have arrived at by thought: this is the way we become irresponsible.<sup>41</sup>

One of Merton's more insightful approaches to the problem of the lack of integration of the intellectual with the spiritual is rooted in alienation. Today, there is a temptation to view everything as polarized opposites. If individualism is bad, then communitarianism must be good. If one culture has some flaws, we must conceive another culture as superior. Indeed, the so-called culture wars emerges from this approach. Well-meaning and thoughtful religious leaders have been caught up in this

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>40</sup> See Robert Barron, *Bridging the Great Divide: Musings of a Post-Liberal, Post-Conservative Evangelical Catholic* (Lanham, Maryland: Sheed and Ward Books, 2007).

<sup>41</sup> Inchausti, Op. cit.

approach. Of course, the Bible, like the scriptures of other world religions, provides verses which can be proof-texted to support either position. For example, Saint Matthew recounts the Lord Jesus as saying "Whoever is not with me is against me." (Matthew 12:30) At the same time, Saint Luke writes: ". . . whoever is not against you is for you" (Luke 9:49-50) Fortunately, the Bible department will teach you not to proof-text. And, we have a Magisterium to authentically interpret the sacred page.

As I said, Merton sees the problem of the lack of integration of the intellectual with the spiritual in the deep taproot of alienation. He identifies it as a permanent part of the human condition. This means that we don't have good cultures and bad cultures, all cultures share in this defect in the human condition. And since culture emerges from people groups through their religion, language and society, alienation is inseparable from culture. Merton writes

Alienation begins when culture divides me against myself, puts a mask on me, gives me a role I may or may not want to play. Alienation is complete when I become completely identified with my mask totally satisfied with my role and convince myself that any other identity or role is inconceivable. The man who sweats under his mask, whose role makes him itch with discomfort, who hates the division in himself, is already beginning to be free. But God help him if all he wants is the mask the other man is wearing, just because the other one does not seem to be sweating or itching. Maybe he is no longer human enough to itch.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 7.

The intellectual dimension of formation does not have the goal of making us comfortable. Just the opposite. Out of intellectual discomfort may come integration, but this is only possible if all dimensions of formation work together. Theology and spirituality should be inseparable. Said another way, we separate them at great peril. Just as we need *fides et ratio*, we need theology and spirituality. We need them together because priests, like Tibetan gurus, are susceptible to the disease of spiritual materialism.

## Intellectual Conversion:

Using Thomas Merton as a point of integration can be helpful to us for a number of reasons. I agree with one of his more critical biographers, Monica Furlong, who wrote:

I am among those who regard Thomas Merton's life as a victorious one, a life that, although it was cut short by accidental death when Merton was fifty-three, was lived to a rare degree of joy and fulfillment; a life that understood and revealed much about the twentieth century and, in particular, the role of religion in it.<sup>43</sup>

Furlong describes the essence of Merton well. She tells us that:

Although he wrote some theology, Merton was less a theologian than a mystic – his deepest concern from the time of his conversion onward was the deepening of his relationship with God, and to this end he read, meditated, and conformed to the exceedingly rigid structure of Cistercian life. . . He was helped in all this

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<sup>43</sup> Monica Furlong, *Merton: A Biography* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980), xiii.

not only by Christian mysticism and spirituality but also by a wide knowledge of Oriental religions, . . . [which] in no way superseded or modified his understanding of the Christian religion or the Christian fathers, but by approaching the spiritual quest at unexpected angles, they opened up new ways of thought and new ways of experiencing that invigorated and released him (this was particularly true of Zen and Taoism, with their humor and [joyfulness]).<sup>44</sup> . . . Like Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his Nazi prison, he began to see that the highest spiritual development was to be “ordinary” to be fully [a] man, in a way few human beings succeed in becoming so simply and naturally themselves.<sup>45</sup>

It is important to remember that Merton was the subject of an intellectual conversion from secularism and relativism to “the only true Church, and to the One living God, through his son, Jesus Christ.”<sup>46</sup> For Merton, this intellectual conversion occurred reading William Blake. Furlong tells us that by reading Blake, Merton “found his way through the minefields of the Enlightenment on one hand and through the pharisaism and terror of sexuality that had marked much of orthodox Christianity on the other.”<sup>47</sup>

It was Blake, Furlong tells us, who planted the seed that later Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritan would water so that it might grow into the integration which regenerated Merton with spiritual and intellectual harmony.<sup>48</sup> Merton would write that this integration is the drama “which mystics understand to underlie the whole of

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., xvi-xvii

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., xviii

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 75.

human life.”<sup>49</sup> He then quotes Henry Adams, who said “Children and saints can believe two contrary things at the same time.”<sup>50</sup>

But Adams dictum is only reliable if it is the fruit of spiritual and intellectual harmony. The test is to measure the three dimensions: wisdom, morality and meditation, for balance, harmony, and appropriateness. We are only as spiritually mature as the three together reveal. The deception which causes spiritual materialism comes when we mistake a false self for our true self.

## Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche

I promised that at the end I would tell you about the spiritual teacher who expounded the doctrine on spiritual materialism in the West. I said that his life tragically illustrated the perils of walking any spiritual path. In spite of that, or perhaps because of it, his presentation of the particular teaching was penetratingly accurate and serves as a warning for any who undertake the inner life. Chogyam Trungpa, Rinpoche succumbed to the very problem he was so eloquent describing, “spiritual materialism.”

All this took place over the period of years after Trungpa emigrated to the West. Quite simply, he suffered from defects in human formation and nothing in his monastic training, rigorous as it was, prepared him for the license available to him in the West. To be delicate, Trungpa had a weakness for women and alcohol and when he mixed the two together, there were very bad results. Worse still, there was a tradition in his

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Thomas Merton, “Nature and Art in William Blake: An Essay in Interpretation.” Unpublished master’s thesis, Columbia University, 1939.

lineage of the “crazy teacher,” who was said to act in unconventional ways to shock a student into realization. Trungpa hid behind this facade. He was, to a certain extent protected by other senior teachers, one of who said, on the record “You shouldn't imitate or judge the behavior of your teacher, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, unless you can imitate his mind.”<sup>51</sup> The Dalai Lama, however, in 1984, had harsh words for any spiritual teacher who did not exemplify virtue. He noted that it is “the responsibility of the teacher to completely practice what he taught others and thus be a spiritual example.”<sup>52</sup> This is, of course, exactly what a bishop says to the newly ordained deacon when he hands over the book of the Gospels and says, “Receive the Gospel of Christ, whose herald you now are. Believe what you read, teach what you believe and practice what you teach.”<sup>53</sup>

Scandals abounded at the end of Trungpa’s life. It seemed that the institutions that he founded like Naropa University would fall with him. The positive lesson in his tragic story is that some of his senior students, who saw through his problems, stepped forward and purified the institutions through discipline, transparency and accountability, so that the teaching of the lineage became primary and not the teacher. It took years, but at least Naropa came out the other end of the process with a new vitality coupled with vigilance. This is an encouragement to us in the face of the sexual

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<sup>51</sup> See Fabrice Midal, *Chögyam Trungpa: His Life and Vision*.(Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, 2001), 89.

<sup>52</sup> Questions and Answers of the Dalai Lama, “Love, Altruism, Vegetarianism, Anger and the Responsibilities of Teachers” in *The Middle Way* Vol. 60, no. 2 (August 1985), 67. Quoted from Snelling, op. cit.181-182.

<sup>53</sup> *The Rites of the Catholic Church*, Vol. II, Study Edition (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 35-36.

abuse crisis, that by accepting the problem and dealing with its systemic elements, the institutions which serve a religion might be purified. All it takes is people who are committed to be part of the solution. Naropa did this once. Sadly, the problem continued among leaders in the larger Shambhala Buddhist lineage, and, like the Catholic Church, they are now having to do it again. The lesson is that spiritual materialism is not going to go away. So, it must be confronted in each generation.

## John Cassian

There is one example of confrontation with spiritual materialism from the Christian monastic tradition which provides us a path forward. I will conclude the main body of my address with comments about John Cassian, who was canonized by the Orthodox Church for his spiritual teaching.

Saint John Cassian follows the three-fold path of spiritual life which is common in the East and West. You may know it as the purgative, illuminative, and unitive ways. In the language of Western monasticism, the monk first “renounces his former way of life and prepared by asceticism, makes the interior move, as Father Brian Welter likes to say, toward the heart’s desire, which is God. Secondly, the monk practices a second renunciation, an asceticism whereby he renounces mindless thoughts. Finally, the monk renounces his own images of God so that the monk can enter into contemplation of God as he is, not as the monk wishes him to be.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 9.

The second renunciation is, in many ways, the heart of the monastic path. Mary Margaret Funk presents John Cassian's teaching on this second renunciation as a system. We renounce our thoughts, but, she teaches, in a very specific sequence designed by Cassian to bring about the second renunciation. All of this occurs in the context of *Lectio Divina*, using the three books given us by God, the books of nature, experience and Scripture. Living within the narrative of these three books provides us with the context for the second renunciation. The order is:

1. Food
2. Sex
3. Things
4. Anger
5. Dejection
6. Acedia<sup>55</sup>
7. Vainglory<sup>56</sup>
8. Pride<sup>57</sup>

This is our Christian Eight-fold Path. The test is to measure the three dimensions: wisdom, morality and meditation, for balance, harmony, and appropriateness. We are only as spiritually mature as the three together reveal. And just as in the Buddhist doctrine, the last two are critical for all the rest. If right mindfulness and right

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<sup>55</sup> Acedia is spiritual or mental sloth.

<sup>56</sup> Vainglory is an ostentatious pride.

<sup>57</sup> Of the definitions of pride, satisfaction derived from one's own achievements seems foremost for the purposes of this essay. See Tomas Spikdlk, Op. cit. for greater detail on these points.

concentration are the critical elements in the Buddhist spiritual path, this suggests that the renunciation of vainglory and pride are the final critical steps in the Christian path. Failure in these final two renunciation leads to the false self, and spiritual materialism may be the result.

## Conclusion

In tonight's address, I began by using the religious studies methodology to analyze the problem which some today are calling clericalism. I tried to show how this term is not really helpful for getting at the deeper dimensions of the crisis we face in the Catholic Church today. Father Kartje has said frequently that "we all started here," that all priests, both the virtuous and the scoundrels, started as seminarians. New policies are important, but do not reach the roots of the crisis, which are fundamentally an issue of the inner life. I have tried to show how the different spiritual approach of Buddhism provides new vantage points and perspectives to the problem of the inner life, which Tibetans call "spiritual materialism." Finally, I sought to use the ideas found in the Buddhist monastic practices as a vantage point for us to look back into the Christian monastic tradition for our own religion's wisdom for overcoming the false self.

In his book, *What is Contemplation?* Thomas Merton, after telling his readers that this is a gift God desires for every baptized believer, makes a strong statement. This is a good note on which to conclude. Merton writes:

The fact remains that contemplation will not be given to those who willfully remain at a distance from God, who confine their interior life to a few routine

exercises of piety and a few external acts of worship and service performed as a matter of duty. Such people are careful to avoid sin. They respect God as a Master. But their heart does not belong to him. They are not really interested in him, except in order to insure themselves against losing heaven and going to hell. In actual practice, their minds and hearts are taken up with their own ambitions and troubles and comforts and pleasures and all their worldly interests and anxieties and fears. God is only invited to enter this charmed circle to smooth out difficulties and to disperse rewards.<sup>58</sup>

Such is the way of the false self. The true self prays, as Merton did:

Father and Maker of Love, dwelling within our hearts in inaccessible Light, together with Thy Son, send forth the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit into our souls. Purify our minds not only of sin but of all the vanity of earthly wisdom and make us the docile instruments of Thy all-Holy Will in simplicity and truth, that the brightness of Thy Son Jesus may shine in our lives and give Thee glory. *Veni Domine Jesus!* [Come, Lord Jesus] Amen.

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<sup>58</sup> Thomas Merton, *What is Contemplation?* (Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishers, 1950), 12.