

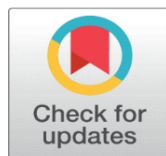
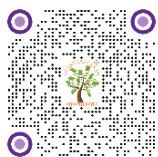


FROM ONTOLOGY OF THE SPIRIT TO EPISTEMOLOGY OF THE SELF: A CROSS-CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF NARAYANA GURU'S APPLIED ADVAITA AND THOMAS MERTON'S APOPHATIC THEOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

This article employs a comparative perspective to explore the metaphysical and sociopolitical worldviews of two perennial philosophers of the twentieth century— Sree Narayana Guru (1855–1928), an Advaitin of South India and Thomas Merton (1915–1968), an American apophatic Catholic monk. As practitioners of mystical activism, these philosophers operated on a shared premise that profound spiritual realization is not an escape from the society but an espousal of the society and demonstrated how spirituality can be successfully employed as a potent tool to fight systemic oppression and discrimination. The differences in their philosophical traditions (applied Advaita and apophatic theology) notwithstanding, there are striking similarities in their ontological beliefs, cognitive frameworks, epistemological sensitivity to the other, deconstructive critique of constructed/divisive/collective identities, and compelling ethical frameworks. It is argued that in a disgruntled world marred by ethnoreligious chauvinism, communalism, casteism, hyper nationalist revanchism, majoritarianism, political tribalism and algorithmic radicalization, their unitive-contemplative approach towards an actionable universal human ethics holds immense potential for realizing a peaceful and harmonious world sans calamitous divisions and systemic injustices.

Keywords: Guru, Merton, Ontology, Epistemology, Non, Dualism, Ego, Advaita, Comparative, Hinduism, Vedanta, Christianity, Trappist, Contemplation, Action, Apophatic

1. INTRODUCTION

The idea of mysticism as an exclusively private affair, a highly personal pursuit of inner knowledge and divine wisdom, underwent a paradigm shift at the beginning of the tumultuous twentieth century. Rather than a passive pursuit, it began to be perceived as a volitional engagement with contemporary societal and political imbroglios. For instance, William James in his work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, highlighted the practical and transformative potential of spirituality, citing the historical example of St. Teresa of Avila (346-47). In a divided, shattered

and embattled world decimated by world wars, systemic oppression, racism, casteism, totalitarianism, fascism, psychological fragmentation and nuclear annihilation, mystical activism emerged as a perfect antidote, as it foregrounded the concept of unitive experience and harmonious co-existence through radical interconnectedness. In other words, the political and cultural exigencies of the previous century shaped the architecture for a trans-cultural confluence of mystical philosophy.

Two perennial philosophers of the previous century, Narayana Guru (1855 – 1928) and Thomas Merton (1915 - 1968), can be seen as exemplary exponents of mystical activism. Though belonging to different geographical, cultural, theological and philosophical milieus, these mystics shared an understanding about the subversive potential of mysticism that could pose a bold challenge to the suppressive and oppressive structures of systemic violence and discrimination. Narayana Guru was a sage-philosopher born into a highly orthodox society in colonial India, reeling under the ills of casteist discrimination, which he strove throughout his life to transform into an egalitarian one. Born in Prades, France, Merton became a Trappist monk. He was visibly disillusioned with the secular life around him — a world marked by world wars, annihilations, cold war and nuclear proliferation — and chose a cloistered life in the Abbey of the Lady of Gethsemani, one of the most austere monastic orders in Catholicism.

Despite the apparent differences, their lives and praxes were marked by certain similarities. Most significantly, they successfully traversed the traditional chasm that divided interior contemplative life from active social engagement. The ultimate self-realisation of cosmic oneness attained after eight years of solitary meditation at the Pillathadam cave in Maruthwamalai proved to be the turning point in Narayana Guru's life. This one moment changed Guru from a *Parityagi* to a *Karmayogi*. Merton experienced a similar moment of epiphany in 1958. In a busy corner of a bustling shopping street in Louisville, Kentucky, he experienced a deeply transformative interior awakening that dissolved all boundaries between the self and the other, ushering in a sense of radical activism. Both these thinkers also made conscious choices regarding the languages they used. Guru, despite his renowned proficiency in Sanskrit, rejected that hegemonical language of the elites and instead wrote in popular languages like Malayalam and Tamil. In a similar vein, Merton rejected the jaded jargons of classical Latin and adopted a simple and lucid conversational English more palatable to the masses. Both these thinkers were also influenced by Buddhist ideas of egalitarianism and welcomed interreligious dialogues. They had great admiration for the teachings of the south Indian sage Ramana Maharshi too. While Narayana Guru composed a whole poem (*Nirvriti Panchakam*) paying tribute to this great guru of Thirivannamalai, Merton was impressed by Ramana's practice of self-enquiry (*vichara*) that annihilates the delusional ego and reveals the pure cosmic consciousness.

Despite the disparateness of their culture, language, and religious background, one finds in Guru and Merton, a unique metaphysical convergence regarding the ontological foundations of the being. Narayana guru was a *Vedantin* who learnt the *Advaita* (non-dualism) philosophy to its core and successfully extended it to real societal life to question systemic excesses and injustices. In his philosophical works like *Arivu*, *Darsanamala* and *Atmopadesasatakam*, he maintains that there is only one Absolute reality (*Brahman*)—the pure cosmic consciousness and every other thing is only a manifestation of it. Social stratifications and ensuing exploitative identities are the products of a false epistemological awareness (*Maya*) ensuing from a lack of true knowledge of the self and the world (*Avidya*). Unlike classical

Vedantins like Adisankara who saw the world as a metaphysical abstraction (*Anumana*), Guru believed that ignorance of the Absolute should never lead to discrimination and oppression in society. Guru's insistence in this regard needs to be seen in the context of the rigid and retrogressive caste system which was often naturalized by considering it a part of the transactional reality (*Vyavaharika*).

In *Atmopadesa Satakam* (Verse 24), the Guru notes:

What another experiences as happiness, is mine too;
what is pleasant to oneself is pleasant to another also;
such is the conduct of the truly virtuous;
actions that benefit oneself should likewise benefit others.

Here, Guru speaks of an ontological egalitarianism and an effacement of divisive and destructive identities, stemming from a non-dualistic understanding of the universe. In *Daivadasakam* (*Ten Verses to God*), Guru uses densely poetic metaphors to establish the essential truth of non-dualism:

Like the ocean, wind and depth
Are ourselves, our illusions,
You and your greatness, that
Awareness should come to my mind. [Sasidharan \(2020\)](#)

In these lines, Guru uses the fourfold metaphors of the ocean (*Jiva*), the wave (*Maya*), the wind (the divine power) and the depth (God) to drive home the interconnectedness and oneness of everything. It implies that there is absolutely no disconnect between humanity and the divine and any discrimination or malevolence towards the other in the transactional world is an offence against oneself and the divine. Enlightenment arises from this awareness of pure consciousness whereas divisive identities and discriminatory thoughts arise from illusions powered by ignorance.

While Narayana Guru belonged to the tradition of *Advaita Vedanta*, Thomas Merton belonged to the school of Christian Apophaticism pioneered by Meister Eckhart and St. John of the Cross. This apophatic tradition within Christianity runs parallel to the *Advaitic* tradition within Indian philosophy. Both systems try to figure out what God is not rather than trying to figure out what God is (*via negativa; neti, neti*). These philosophers share the common ground that the absolute transcendental reality cannot be interpreted at the everyday, transactional level (*Vyavaharika*) and that the destruction of illusion is mandatory if one were to seek out the ultimate, unadulterated truth of our existence.

Merton, in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, adapted the medieval Christian idea of *Scitilla Animae* (the apex/spark of the soul) and put forth a distinction between the True self and the False self. False self is the superficial illusory ego marked by a sense of distinction, hedonism, superiority complex, and a craving for power and self aggrandizement. It creates delusional attitudes based on one's race, nationality, caste, class or ideology. Merton writes about the False self: "The fake self is the self that wants to exist outside the radius of God's will and God's love—outside of reality and outside of life. And such a self cannot help but be an illusion" (*Seeds 36*). The True self, on the other hand, is our identity in God. It is eternal, pure and treasured in the love of God. Merton believed that to realize one's authentic self is to find God and to realize God is to find one's true self, echoing Narayana Guru's idea of *Atman* recognizing the *Brahman*, annulling all socially constructed identities, in the process. It was this realization that made Merton raise his voice against the vehement nationalism, inhuman racism, jingoistic war mongering and hawkish

nuclear posturing of his time. Merton wrote about his moment of Louisville epiphany thus:

"I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers ... It was like waking from a dream of separateness ... There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun." (*Conjectures* 156-57)

Though Merton and Guru belonged to two different milieus and locales, their attitudes to hegemonic identities and systemic discrimination show a striking structural convergence. Merton considered the racial segregation in America a contemporary avatar of the old system of caste (*Chaturvarna*) practiced in India—a stringent system based on the notions of purity and pollution. For instance, in the erstwhile princely state of Travancore where Guru was born, society was divided into the ritually pure higher castes (*Savarnas*) and the ritually impure lower castes (*Avarnas*). The lower castes suffered from socially discriminatory practices like untouchability, unapproachability and even unseeability so much so that Swami Vivekananda is said to have called Travancore “a mad house of castes.” Merton argued that racism and cold war nationalism that plagued America during his time were premised on false notions of racial, moral and political purity—the Afro-Americans and the Communists were construed as the impure Other that had to be segregated and obliterated. Just as the dehumanizing theory of *Chaturvarna* mandated the inhuman practice of untouchability as the moral responsibility (*Dharma*) of the *Savarnas*, the Cold war nationalists rationalized nuclear posturing as a moral and sacred responsibility of each citizen. In his *Seeds of Destruction*, Merton clearly explains that racist segregation in America is a clever strategy devised by the economically and numerically dominant White population to maintain a cultural and political hegemony over the Blacks. He considers it a well-orchestrated manifestation of the White community's False self in America. Merton remarks: "The racial problem is a spiritual problem. The white man's collective neurosis forces him to see the Negro not as a person, but as a shadow, an abstraction, or a threat to his own security" (*Seeds* 29). Guru and Merton wanted to uphold the dignity of the human subject and rejected all unreal abstractions and hostile attributions constructed to divide humanity.

Guru and Merton, despite belonging to disparate mystical traditions, thus operated from a shared premise that true contemplative spiritual awareness should lead to an actionable ethics rather than a state of solitary bliss (*Samadhi*). Fully aware that material dignity cannot be separated from spiritual well-being, Guru confronted the systemic injustices prevalent in the society and espoused a radical activism that was at once transformative and constructive. After his renowned installation of a Siva temple at Aruvippuram, Guru established several temples across present day Kerala and opened them to all castes. Later in his life, Guru ceased installing idols and instead urged his followers to establish educational institutions open to all castes and genders that could serve as temples of knowledge. While Guru literary stormed the society by directly engaging with it, Merton chose to address the world, without leaving his hermitage, through his radical and prophetic essays as well as books penned to appeal to the conscience of a morally corrupt and confused period. Through his works like *Peace in the Post-Christian Era* and *Faith and Violence*, Merton argued that the detached monk is perfectly poised to perceive the materialistic society from a distance and understand its ills fully. He validates the power of selfless action inspired by contemplation thus: “The true cell of the

monk is the center of the world... He leaves the world only to listen more clearly to its groans, and to speak a word of truth to its deceptions" (*Contemplation* 231).

Another point of convergence in their thinking is their holistic approach towards interreligious dialogue and harmony. Guru's famous maxims, "One God, One Caste One Religion for Man" and "Whichever the religion, it suffices if it makes men good" clearly articulate his openness to all religious traditions. The motto Guru chose for the World Parliament of Religions he organized at Alwaye in 1924— "Not to argue and win; but to know and let known" — neatly validates Guru's position regarding religious tolerance. As an enlightened Advaitin, Guru possessed the inner knowledge that all religions are diverse cultural expressions of the same reality of the Absolute. In verse 45 of *Atmopadesasatakam (One Hundred Verses of Self Instruction)*, Guru compares religious fanatics to blind men who touch different parts of an elephant and describe it accordingly, failing to understand it holistically:

Failing to see that the essence of various religions is one,
like the blind men who went to see an elephant,
the ignorant utter various arguments.

Contrary to the exclusivist doctrinaire orthodoxies of Roman Catholic religious practices, Thomas Merton blazed a new trail of religious synergy. His mode of contemplative introspection gravitated him to similar traditions within Eastern mystic religions—Daoism, Buddhism, Sufism and Hinduism. He believed that contemporary Christianity had become too pontifical and needed an engaging interface with other religions to invigorate itself spiritually and stay relevant in a conflicted world. Merton stated at the Spiritual Summit Conference in Calcutta in October 1968: "Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity. My dear brothers, we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity" (*Asian Journal* 308).

Comparing the worldviews of Narayana Guru and Thomas Merton is not merely an academic or intellectual exercise in comparative philosophy but carries immense practical and ethical implications for the crisis-ridden world. Both these thinkers believed that empty activism, which is not rooted in an understanding of the pure consciousness / true self will be counterproductive. To them, equally retrogressive will be a passive mysticism that takes refuge in the coziness of the cloister, turning a blind eye to the harsh injustices rampant in society. In a world torn by ethnoreligious chauvinism, communalism, casteism, hyper nationalist revanchism, majoritarianism, political tribalism and algorithmic radicalization, their unitive-contemplative approach towards an actionable universal human ethics holds immense potential for realizing a world sans superficial divisions and discriminations. To them, the ontological unity of humanity mandates the acceptance of the Other as an integral extension of the Self, and an epistemological sensitivity to this universal truth remains the true need of the hour. Guru's inscription at the Aruvippuram temple, following the historic installation of the Siva idol, sums up their unitive vision of one world, one humanity: "This is the ideal place where everyone lives in brotherhood, without any distinction of caste or hatred of religion."

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None .

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None.

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