

Sydney College of Divinity

**A Comparison and Contrast of Medieval and Modern Spirituality  
With Relevance for Today**

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## SP412R – Studies in Historical Spirituality

## Assignment #3

**A Comparison and Contrast of Medieval and Modern Spirituality****With Relevance for Today**

This essay compares and contrasts the spirituality of the writings/teachings of three representative characters of the medieval period (Hildegard of Bingen, Catherine of Siena, Catherine of Genoa) and two of the modern period (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Thomas Merton). Contemporary relevance for personal and communal/ecclesial spirituality is addressed in the conclusion.

**Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179)**

One of the significant and unique elements of Hildegard of Bingen's writing is her *cosmological spirituality*, especially as seen in *De operatione Dei* ("The Book of Divine Works").<sup>1</sup> Three essential parts of her cosmological spirituality are science, mysticism/prophecy, and art – and therein she is never anti-intellectual or anti-science; she urges heart knowledge, not just head knowledge, as well as an awakening to justice; and encourages creativity for all people since humans are co-creators with God.<sup>2</sup> In part, her spirituality can be seen as a cosmological gift in a time of excessive anthropocentrism.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to the undue preoccupation with the human, Hildegard sees the powerful interconnectivity of all things and affirms the entire universe – the psyche and cosmos,

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<sup>1</sup> M. Fox, ed., *Hildegard's Book of Divine Works with Letters* (Santa Fe: Bear & Co., 1987), xi.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, xi-xiii.

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

humanity and divinity, nature and humanity.<sup>4</sup> Finally, as Fox writes, Hildegard recognizes that “neither science nor theology is enough to awaken a people – it is the artist’s gift to do the awakening” to get it into the minds, hearts, imagination, and bodies of the people.<sup>5</sup>

A lesser known aspect of Hildegard’s writing is her later work on purgatory. According to Newman, one of the central figures in the development of a *spirituality of purgatory* during the twelfth century is undoubtedly Hildegard of Bingen.<sup>6</sup> Unlike Catherine of Genoa, who also wrote an important work on purgatory, Hildegard’s view of purgatory is future-oriented, and does not pertain to suffering in this life. Rather, it is for souls destined to be saved (provided they have died in a state of contrition), but have not completed the penance owed for their sins.<sup>7</sup> Another striking difference with Catherine of Genoa is the cosmological aspect of purgatory in Hildegard’s writings. Newman summarizes Hildegard: “Human sin has defiled not only souls but the matter of the world, so the elements themselves must be purged along with sinners”.<sup>8</sup>

Hildegard’s life is one of a mystic-in-action, testifying to a balance between *contemplation and action*. Her work, *De operatione Dei*, is more a mystical work, dominated by mystical cosmology.<sup>9</sup> By contrast, her letters provide deep insights into her prophetic challenges to influence her culture and church – and show her enormous

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., xi-xii.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., xii.

<sup>6</sup> Barbara Newman, “Hildegard of Bingen and the ‘Birth of Purgatory’”, *Mystics Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (September 1993): 91. This is a remarkable article as far as indicating areas of further research possible in the writings of Hildegard of Bingen. The key text is *Liber vitae meritorum* (“The Book of Life’s Merits”), written between 1158 and 1163, a work neglected even by Hildegard scholars but yet gives one of the fullest treatments of the subject to date [page 91].

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 92. Her purpose in the *Liber vitae meritorum* is pastoral: disclosing vices promotes moral discernment, visioning purgatory inspires fear, and teaching penance supports the Church’s penitential system.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 93. Although the purgatorial cosmology is implied in *Liber vitae meritorum*, it more fully developed in Hildegard’s other works [page 93]. Hildegard’s late writings on purgatory provide an important link between her spirituality and that of later religious women [page 95].

<sup>9</sup> Fox, *Hildegard’s Book of Divine Works with Letters*, xiv.

influence at all strata of society.<sup>10</sup> Hildegard used her gifts and talents to the utmost. She was a poetess and painter, musician and healer, playwright and social critic, theologian and prophet, as well as mystic and abbess.<sup>11</sup>

However, in the life of Hildegard, while one sees a spirituality of *personal consecration*, it is not marked by the stern or harsh asceticism seen in the lives of Catherine of Siena and Catherine of Genoa. In 1106 (at age eight), Hildegard's parents placed her under the tutelage of Jutta of Spanheim, who lived an eremitical life adjacent to the monastery.<sup>12</sup> Some time between 1112 and 1115, Hildegard took religious vows (when the monastery became a convent).<sup>13</sup> Consequently, her life would have been highly ordered as prescribed in the Benedictine Rule for Monasteries.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, the *ecclesial spirituality* of Hildegard was one marked by loyalty to the Church, yet unafraid to address issues of injustice. She is angry at “bungling abbots”, and as Fox notes, “laments how the clergy have separated themselves from the people and have rendered their hearts lukewarm instead of loud on behalf of the oppressed”.<sup>15</sup> Over her lifetime, her letters testify that she was a mover and shaker in relation to the Church in Germany – and show her outrage, cajoling, and criticizing in relation to Church reform.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., x-xi, xiv.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., ix.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., x. Atherton, in the introduction to his work, *Hildegard of Bingen: Selected Writings*, notes that Hildegard was aged eight at the time she was put into the care of Jutta of Spanheim – a pious noblewoman – presumably at her household in nearby Spanheim itself. Rather than immediately entering an anchorage, it now seems likely that she remained at Spanheim for a number of years while Jutta looked for a suitable convent. Jutta then became a recluse attached to the monastery of Disibodenberg in 1112, taking Hildegard and another young dedicatee with her.

<sup>13</sup> Mark Atherton, trans., *Hildegard of Bingen: Selected Writings* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), i.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., xiii.

<sup>15</sup> Fox, *Hildegard's Book of Divine Works with Letters*, xvi.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., xiv.

### Catherine of Siena (1347-1380)

One of the dominant features of the spirituality seen in the writings/teachings of Catherine of Siena is its *christocentric* nature – unlike that of Catherine of Genoa (born a century later) whose spirituality was mainly theocentric. Max Saint summarizes: “At the heart of her teaching we always encounter Christ crucified and in particular the thought of his blood, the sign of his obedience to the Father’s will and of his love in our salvation”.<sup>17</sup> In fact, many of Catherine’s writings are to a large extent meditations on Christ crucified.<sup>18</sup> In her book, *Dialogo* (her dialogue with God), Catherine describes Christ as the bridge which has to be crossed – from earth to heaven – by those who are to find God.<sup>19</sup> God incarnate is so often at the centre of her visions.<sup>20</sup> In her absorption with Jesus, the blood shed on the cross became the supreme sign of divine love and the chief motive for ours, as well as summing up all her understanding of Christianity.<sup>21</sup> To conclude, for Catherine the blood of Jesus is the clue to the whole meaning of God in relation to man.<sup>22</sup>

One also sees exemplified in Catherine of Siena a spirituality of *personal consecration* – her life’s example teaches the value of discipline as a basis for spirituality, as with Catherine of Genoa. Even before she was sixteen, she had consecrated her life to God.<sup>23</sup> After taking the habit of the Sisters of Penance of St. Dominic, she lived secluded in a small room of her father’s house, devoting herself to prayer and practising severe

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<sup>17</sup> Max Saint, “Catherine of Siena”, in *The Study of Spirituality*, ed. Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainbright, and Edward Yarnold, SJ (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 312.

<sup>18</sup> K. Foster and M. Ronayne, eds., *I, Catherine: Selected Writings of St. Catherine of Siena* (London: Collins, 1980), 16.

<sup>19</sup> Ursula King, *Christian Mystics: The Spiritual Heart of the Christian Tradition* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1998), 89.

<sup>20</sup> Foster and Ronayne, *I, Catherine*, 16.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>23</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *The Mystics of the Church* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 153.

asceticism”.<sup>24</sup> Hers was a life of complete consecration to the purposes of the Spirit.<sup>25</sup> She remained conscious of her own shortcomings and always lived a life of penance.<sup>26</sup>

(Unfortunately, her naturally good health became injured by the austerities she practised.<sup>27</sup>) To understand the basis for Catherine’s continued rigorous self-discipline, another important aspect of her teaching must be noted here and that is the need for self-knowledge – for her, the way to God begins with self-knowledge.<sup>28</sup> Her self-knowledge led Catherine to recognize her moral frailty and from it derived her fierce physical asceticism – a self-hatred as a concomitant of the love of Christ.<sup>29</sup>

Notwithstanding Catherine of Siena’s austerity, she taught and lived a spirituality in which *contemplation* was balanced with *action*. After about four years of solitary absorption in God, she left her cell in obedience to Christ to devote herself in service for the sick poor of Siena – to thereby pass on to them the grace and assurance she had received.<sup>30</sup> With her self-knowledge – understanding her own nothingness apart from God having made her for love – Catherine realized that one must go out in loving service.<sup>31</sup> This she exemplified in her political involvement and her continued devotion to apostolic work among the poor.<sup>32</sup> Max Saint concludes: “A consequence of her affective devotion and her complete self-abnegation was a courageous active charity. She became a teacher

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 154. K. Foster and M. Ronayne in *I, Catherine: Selected Writings of St. Catherine of Siena* (London: Collins, 1980) give a similar description on page 13. After this period, later in Catherine’s life, Underhill notes that “the power of human character has seldom been more strikingly exhibited” [page 155].

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>28</sup> Foster and Ronayne, *I, Catherine*, 29-30.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>30</sup> Underhill, *The Mystics of the Church*, 154.

<sup>31</sup> Saint, “Catherine of Siena”, 312.

<sup>32</sup> Underhill, *The Mystics of the Church*, 159.

simply out of love, having the imperative need to communicate her own experience to others”.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, in Catherine of Siena one witnesses an extraordinary *ecclesial spirituality*.<sup>34</sup> For her, the Church “holds the keys of the blood”, and the blood reaches people in the Eucharist.<sup>35</sup> She understood the Church as the kingdom of God on earth.<sup>36</sup> Even though Catherine passionately loved the Church,<sup>37</sup> she had great concern for it – her sanctity having become so well respected as to involve her in the troubled affairs of the Church at a time of great ecclesiastical degradation.<sup>38</sup>

### **Catherine of Genoa (1447-1510)**

One of the significant elements of the spirituality of Catherine of Genoa is *purgatory* – the soul’s purification after death<sup>39</sup>. The basis of her teaching is that purgatory is the final joyous cleansing of the soul from the effects of self-love.<sup>40</sup> In many ways, notes King, Catherine participated in purgatory during her own life – “in a marriage she did not desire, in her care for plague victims, in her nervous illness, and also in her soul’s realization of its own imperfections”.<sup>41</sup> She accepted the suffering of her long, painful terminal illness as a foretaste of the joy of purgatory.<sup>42</sup> According to Egan, Catherine in *Purgation and Purgatory* collects her sayings and teachings about spiritual purgatory both

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<sup>33</sup> Saint, “Catherine of Siena”, 312.

<sup>34</sup> Foster and Ronayne, *I, Catherine*, 23.

<sup>35</sup> Saint, “Catherine of Siena”, 312.

<sup>36</sup> King, *Christian Mystics: The Spiritual Heart of the Christian Tradition*, 85.

<sup>37</sup> Underhill, *The Mystics of the Church*, 157.

<sup>38</sup> Saint, “Catherine of Siena”, 312.

<sup>39</sup> Underhill, *The Mystics of the Church*, 166.

<sup>40</sup> Max Saint, “Catherine of Genoa”, in *The Study of Spirituality*, ed. Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainbright, and Edward Yarnold, SJ (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 314.

<sup>41</sup> King, *Christian Mystics: The Spiritual Heart of the Christian Tradition*, 90.

<sup>42</sup> Saint, “Catherine of Genoa”, 314.

here in this life and in the next life.<sup>43</sup> To her, purgatory is God's fiery love that cleanses, heals, and transforms a person so that their being is then God.<sup>44</sup>

Another particularly noteworthy aspect of Catherine's writings is her *theocentric spirituality* in which she stands virtually alone among the renowned Catholic women mystics.<sup>45</sup> "Not Christ", notes Underhill, "but the Infinite God, is the centre of her devotion; . . . God is for her Light, Fire, Love; a living, all-pervading, peaceful Ocean of Reality".<sup>46</sup> This focus of her mysticism is in part due to the influence of a Platonic mindset, as well as the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite.<sup>47</sup> Earlier in her life, at age 26 (during a Lenten confession in 1473), she had a sudden, overwhelming experience of God as pure love.<sup>48</sup> In other words, she underwent a profound mystical experience characterized by close union with God.<sup>49</sup> Unlike many mystics who follow a sequence of purification, illumination, and finally union with pure love, Catherine's transformation into God seems to have happened almost instantaneously.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, Catherine also experienced the process of purgation, illumination, and deification in her life on earth.<sup>51</sup>

Even though one can strongly support Catherine of Genoa's primarily theocentric spirituality, there is also evidence of a *christocentric spirituality*. Underhill writes about Catherine's eucharistic devotion in terms of her "intense love of the Eucharist".<sup>52</sup> Egan states that after her conversion, "the cross-bearing Christ appeared to Catherine and further

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<sup>43</sup> E. Egan, ed., *An Anthology of Christian Mysticism* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991), 405.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 406.

<sup>45</sup> Underhill, *The Mystics of the Church*, 166.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> King, *Christian Mystics: The Spiritual Heart of the Christian Tradition*, 90.

<sup>48</sup> Egan, *An Anthology of Christian Mysticism*, 404.

<sup>49</sup> King, *Christian Mystics: The Spiritual Heart of the Christian Tradition*, 90.

<sup>50</sup> Egan, *An Anthology of Christian Mysticism*, 404.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 406.

<sup>52</sup> Underhill, *The Mystics of the Church*, 166.

deepened her conversion”.<sup>53</sup> It was a vision of Christ, bleeding from his wounds, and carrying his cross on his shoulder.<sup>54</sup> The experiences of God’s love, and Christ’s redemptive shedding of blood, opened her eyes to the inseparable union with pure love and Christ.<sup>55</sup> King documents “that from 1475 onwards she [Catherine] received communion almost daily, a practice extremely rare in the Middle Ages for those other than priests”.<sup>56</sup>

Furthermore, Catherine of Genoa’s life demonstrates (and thereby teaches) a spirituality underpinned with self-discipline – or, a spirituality of *personal consecration* to God. Understanding that the purpose of her life was to destroy all self-love (in order to be filled with divine love), this transformation demanded an ever more rigorous self-discipline.<sup>57</sup> An example is her practice of extraordinary fasting.<sup>58</sup> Egan notes that “during Advent and Lent, for approximately 23 years, Catherine subsisted solely on water and daily Eucharist”.<sup>59</sup> Underhill concurs that Catherine practised severe austerities and that she spent many hours daily in prayer.<sup>60</sup>

As with Catherine of Siena, Catherine of Genoa also balanced ascetic discipline with active service to the ill and poor<sup>61</sup> and thereby practiced a spirituality in which *contemplation* was combined with *action*. Despite her spiritual self-discipline, she continued to nurse the sick with zeal,<sup>62</sup> and had a passion for active and apostolic work.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Egan, *An Anthology of Christian Mysticism*, 404.

<sup>54</sup> Saint, “Catherine of Genoa”, 313.

<sup>55</sup> Egan, *An Anthology of Christian Mysticism*, 406.

<sup>56</sup> King, *Christian Mystics: The Spiritual Heart of the Christian Tradition*, 90.

<sup>57</sup> Saint, “Catherine of Genoa”, 313.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Egan, *An Anthology of Christian Mysticism*, 405.

<sup>60</sup> Underhill, *The Mystics of the Church*, 163.

<sup>61</sup> King, *Christian Mystics: The Spiritual Heart of the Christian Tradition*, 90.

<sup>62</sup> Saint, “Catherine of Genoa”, 313.

<sup>63</sup> Underhill, *The Mystics of the Church*, 162.

To be filled by divine love on the one hand, meant to destroy all self-love on the other.<sup>64</sup> Indeed her life epitomizes heights of mystical contemplation together with remarkable outgoing love and compassion<sup>65</sup> – a mystical love expressing itself in her empathy for the poor, sick, and suffering of Genoa.<sup>66</sup> Underhill summarizes aptly: “Her life was a perfect illustration of St. Teresa’s maxim that ‘to give our Lord a perfect service Martha and Mary must combine’”.<sup>67</sup>

Finally, unlike her predecessor Catherine of Siena, Catherine of Genoa does not display a marked *ecclesial spirituality*. She was loyal to the hierarchical Church despite the laxity and decadence that permeated it.<sup>68</sup> However, she did not become involved in its political concerns.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, Catherine rarely went to confession, looking to interior inspiration without priestly direction.<sup>70</sup>

### **Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945)**

In Bonhoeffer’s writing one recognizes a *christocentric spirituality* (unlike Merton whose spirituality may be described more as theocentric). In his view, Christ is the centre of human experience, human history, and nature – and by whom alone experience, history, and nature can be understood.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, the real presence of Christ exists in the Word, the sacrament, and the community.<sup>72</sup> As far as the cost of discipleship in today’s world, for Bonhoeffer it demanded a total response – lip service or church membership was not

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<sup>64</sup> Saint, “Catherine of Genoa”, 313.

<sup>65</sup> Underhill, *The Mystics of the Church*, 164.

<sup>66</sup> Egan, *An Anthology of Christian Mysticism*, 404.

<sup>67</sup> Underhill, *The Mystics of the Church*, 164.

<sup>68</sup> Egan, *An Anthology of Christian Mysticism*, 405.

<sup>69</sup> King, *Christian Mystics: The Spiritual Heart of the Christian Tradition*, 90-91.

<sup>70</sup> Saint, “Catherine of Siena”, 313.

<sup>71</sup> E. Robertson, “Bonhoeffer, Dietrich”, in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. G. Wakefield (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983), 56.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

enough.<sup>73</sup> Wakefield observes that “Bonhoeffer’s Christ in the midst of the world was the Christ of Good Friday, calling on men to share God’s own sufferings in the midst of creation”.<sup>74</sup>

Furthermore, Bonhoeffer’s writings bear witness to an *ecclesial spirituality*. For him, the Church is a community in which each person encounters Christ in his fellow men.<sup>75</sup> His book, *Life Together*, focuses on the discipline and balance of Christian community life.<sup>76</sup> Robertson sums up the book by writing that in it Bonhoeffer describes “the privileges of community life, not as the wish dream of an ideal, but a divine reality. Christ is present in such a community by the love of its members for one another”.<sup>77</sup> He was aware, however, of the contemporary and future challenges facing the Christian church, and how the church was to exist “for others”.<sup>78</sup> Apart from his criticism of the Church (its failure, for example, to deal with racism), he made proposals for the renewal of its structure.<sup>79</sup>

Also, Bonhoeffer’s writings evidence a spirituality that is in balance between *contemplation* and *action*. At the core of his spirituality is an overwhelming sense of the presence of God in Christ at the centre of the ordinary ways of the world – something he learned in his prison cell.<sup>80</sup> Notwithstanding his deep faith and sanctity,<sup>81</sup> for Bonhoeffer

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<sup>73</sup> Mary Craig, *Candles in the Dark: Seven Modern Martyrs* (Bath: Chivers Press, 1994), 41.

<sup>74</sup> Gordon S. Wakefield, “Protestantism”, in *The Study of Spirituality*, ed. Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Edward Yarnold, SJ (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 535.

<sup>75</sup> Craig, *Candles in the Dark*, 13.

<sup>76</sup> R. Zerner, “Bonhoeffer, Dietrich”, in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2d ed., ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2001), 182.

<sup>77</sup> Robertson, “Bonhoeffer, Dietrich”, 56.

<sup>78</sup> Zerner, “Bonhoeffer, Dietrich”, 181.

<sup>79</sup> Robertson, “Bonhoeffer, Dietrich”, 56.

<sup>80</sup> Wakefield, “Protestantism”, 534-535.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 535.

faith is involved in the whole of one's life.<sup>82</sup> His prison letters describe a Christian as "a man for others".<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, he taught that God needs humans as instruments for accomplishing his renewal of the world.<sup>84</sup>

Lastly, in looking at Bonhoeffer's life, one can see an *ecumenical spirituality* – although not as developed as for Thomas Merton. After a short time in New York at Union Theological Seminary, Bonhoeffer returned to Germany and taught in Berlin – and at the same time became increasingly involved in the young ecumenical movement.<sup>85</sup> He was simultaneously involved in service to the *Abwehr* and also cultivating ecumenical contacts across the lines of war.<sup>86</sup>

### **Thomas Merton (1915-1968)**

An important element of spirituality in the writings of Merton is *contemplation* – which he regarded as the highest form of prayer.<sup>87</sup> For him, two forms of contemplation exist: active and passive (infused) contemplation.<sup>88</sup> King captures the essence of Merton's contemplation when she writes that "the task of contemplation is one of self-emptying so that God can take full possession of the human being. . . . Contemplation is the union of the human mind and will with God in an act of pure love which brings us into obscure

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<sup>82</sup> Zerner, "Bonhoeffer, Dietrich", 182.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>84</sup> Robertson, "Bonhoeffer, Dietrich", 56.

<sup>85</sup> J. B. Webster, "Bonhoeffer, Dietrich", in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 107.

<sup>86</sup> Geoffrey Wainwright, "Types of Spirituality", in *The Study of Spirituality*, ed. Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Edward Yarnold, SJ (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 600.

<sup>87</sup> P. Pearson, "Everyone Is Called to Contemplation", *Priest and People* 5, no. 6 (June 1991): 221.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

contact with God as he really is”.<sup>89</sup> According to Merton, infused contemplation is given to the soul to the degree it has emptied itself of its false concerns through meditation.<sup>90</sup>

Related to contemplation, Merton also presents a *spirituality of being*. This is in contrast to mankind’s emphasis on technology and on doing.<sup>91</sup> The relationship between contemplation and being is summed up by Pearson: “When a person has learnt to be, through contemplation, their actions will then spring from the depths of their being where they are united with God and not from their ego-centre”.<sup>92</sup> In Merton’s view, people can be so obsessed with *doing* that they have no time or imagination left for *being* – and consequently people are valued only for their usefulness (what they *do* or what they *have*).<sup>93</sup>

In addition, Merton has contributed to spiritual theology with his *apophatic spirituality*. In this regard, he is in the same category as other great Christian mystics who describe God as “nothing”, because infinity places God beyond any “thing” that a person can know, conceive, or express.<sup>94</sup> However, he reinterprets apophaticism and makes it more applicable to contemporary men and women<sup>95</sup> – those in search of the life of the spirit in the barren spiritual landscape of post-modernity.<sup>96</sup>

In the writings of Merton is also clearly seen a spirituality of balance between *action* and *contemplation*. As a monk grounded in the mystical tradition, he nevertheless

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<sup>89</sup> King, *Christian Mystics: The Spiritual Heart of the Christian Tradition*, 199.

<sup>90</sup> Pearson, “Everyone Is Called to Contemplation”, 221.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> B. Pennington, “Thomas Merton and Centering Prayer”, *Studies in Formative Spirituality* 10, no. 1 (February 1989), 38.

<sup>94</sup> Pearson, “Everyone Is Called to Contemplation”, 222.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>96</sup> L. Dupre and D. Saliers, *World Spirituality – Christian Spirituality: Post Reformation and Modern*, vol. III (New York: Crossroads, 1991), 160.

became more and more committed to a prophetic spirituality of action for justice and peace.<sup>97</sup> Merton wrote that action and contemplation should grow together into one life and one unity – and become two aspects of the same thing.<sup>98</sup> Many of his books and articles, for example, emphasize the interconnection of contemplation and justice.<sup>99</sup> Dupre and Saliers fittingly summarize: “The Christian, even the monk, he [Merton] insisted, is freed from the world *for* the world and is obliged, in whatever manner possible, to speak, write, and act in behalf of the oppressed for a non-violent Christian ministry of peace and justice”.<sup>100</sup>

Further, an *ecumenical spirituality* is unmistakably evident in Merton’s writings. In his last years, his radical openness to other spiritual traditions opened him to dialogues with traditions of the East (Zen and Tibetan Buddhists).<sup>101</sup> In fact, he became erudite in the religions of the East.<sup>102</sup> Koyama’s comment, “In him [Merton] the spirituality of the West met that of the East”, testifies to his ecumenicity.<sup>103</sup>

Finally, Merton’s writings also show an *ecclesial spirituality*. He made a purposeful effort to retrieve the full scope of the mystical traditions in the two-thousand-year history of Catholic spirituality and to integrate them, where feasible, into workable spiritual options for contemporary life.<sup>104</sup> His spirituality is therefore, as Dupre and Saliers sum up, “embedded in the mystical, intellectual, and institutional realities of

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>98</sup> Pearson, “Everyone Is Called to Contemplation”, 222.

<sup>99</sup> Kenneth Leech, “Spirituality and Social Justice”, in *The Study of Spirituality*, ed. Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Edward Yarnold, SJ (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 583.

<sup>100</sup> Dupre and Saliers, *World Spirituality – Christian Spirituality*, 161.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> E. Adams, “Merton, Thomas”, in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2d ed., ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2001), 763.

<sup>103</sup> Kosuke Koyama, “Interplay with Other Religions”, in *The Study of Spirituality*, ed. Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Edward Yarnold, SJ (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 559-560.

<sup>104</sup> Dupre and Saliers, *World Spirituality – Christian Spirituality*, 160.

Catholicism”.<sup>105</sup> On the other hand, as with Bonhoeffer, Merton also expressed criticism about aspects of ecclesiastical life (in this case monastic life). He recognized that monastic reform, as with Church reform in general, could not simply be cosmetic – rather, it had to get to the very foundations.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>106</sup> L. Cunningham, “The School of Charity: A Review Essay”, *Cistercian Studies* 25, no. 4 (1990): 335.

### Relevance for Today

Table 1 below encapsulates in tabular form the spirituality of the writings/teachings of the three medieval and two modern individuals addressed in this essay.

Table 1. Medieval and Modern Spirituality

<u>Hildegard of Bingen</u> (1098-1179)	<u>Catherine of Siena</u> (1347-1380)	<u>Catherine of Genoa</u> (1447-1510)	<u>Dietrich Bonhoeffer</u> (1906-1945)	<u>Thomas Merton</u> (1915-1968)
personal consecration	personal consecration	personal consecration		
	christocentric spirituality	christocentric spirituality	christocentric spirituality	
ecclesial spirituality	ecclesial spirituality	ecclesial spirituality	ecclesial spirituality	ecclesial spirituality
contemplation and action	contemplation and action	contemplation and action	contemplation and action	contemplation and action
			ecumenical spirituality	ecumenical spirituality
		theocentric spirituality		
spirituality of purgatory		spirituality of purgatory		
				contemplation/ spirituality of being
				apophatic spirituality
cosmological spirituality				

Source: Broken Bay Institute, *Studies in Historical Spirituality (SP412R): Readings*, vol. 2 (Pennant Hills, NSW: The Broken Bay Institute, 2008) and other sources listed in the Bibliography.

Table 2 below is a composite spirituality (based on Table 1), and suggests that these areas of spirituality have a relevance for contemporary personal spirituality and ecclesial spirituality, as appropriate for each.

Table 2. Medieval and Modern Spirituality: A Composite for Today

<u>Spirituality</u>	<u>Personal Relevance</u>	<u>Ecclesial Relevance</u>
1. Personal consecration	√	(not applicable)
2. Christocentric spirituality	√	√
3. Ecclesial spirituality	√	√
4. Contemplation and action	√	√
5. Ecumenical spirituality	√	√
6. Theocentric spirituality	√	√
7. Spirituality of purgatory	√	√
8. Contemplation/spirituality of being	√	√
9. Apophatic spirituality	√	√
10. Cosmological spirituality	√	√

Source: Broken Bay Institute, *Studies in Historical Spirituality (SP412R): Readings*, vol. 2 (Pennant Hills, NSW: The Broken Bay Institute, 2008) and other sources listed in the Bibliography.

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