

# THE NEVERTHELESS RELIGION

Robert Granat

*Suddenly there is a point where religion becomes laughable.  
Then you decide that you are nevertheless religious.*

Thomas Merton wrote that, jotted it into his journal two days after this Catholic priest's enlightenment experience at a Buddhist shrine and four days before his death at a monastic gathering. He died right after he'd delivered a talk quoting a Tibetan Rinpoche: "From now on everybody stands on his own two feet."

"This," said Merton to the monks, "is what Buddhism is about, what Christianity is about...You cannot rely on structures. The time for relying on structures has disappeared. They are good and they should help us and we should do the best we can with them. But they may be taken away and if everything is taken away, what do you do next?"

Within the hour all Merton's structures were taken away. Not merely religious structures, his very life, alone, in his room. What he did next was die.

Though he left it as a question, a koan for his hearers to ponder, Merton knew what to do next. As did Eckhart, Chuang-tzu, Augustine, Hakuin, Nachman, Rumi, countless others. They all knew. But Thomas Merton was one of us. He spoke the words we speak, saw the world we see, felt the Zeitgeist we feel. He knew this impoverished affluence, this data-rich ignorance, this nuclear-powered impotence. He pulled his life out of the same existential muck-pit we're in. The big difference between Merton and most of us is that he worked at it full-time, while we mostly work part-time.

"What do you do next?" Boil it all down to pure essence and that's what it comes to: what do you do next? In words, the answer is just as simple. Lots of people know the answer in words, including me. You do next what is next to do. If your dishes need washing you wash them; if your neighbor needs helping you help him; if war needs protesting you protest. If it's time to live you live and if it's time to die you die. If you can't see what to do next you wait and do nothing.

All you have to do is look, see what's next, and do it. What demands the greatest effort, what requires the great discipline, what causes the great pain, is the eye-training. Training your eye to see what really does come next. Because it has got to be your vision, not other people's visions, that does your seeing, the way it has to be your flesh that carries you through your existence, nobody else's. Because only what you see for yourself is real seeing for you and only what you do for yourself is real doing for you. You've got to walk the road yourself because you're the only being in the whole universe who is precisely where you are.

No, you can't rely on structures, though, as Merton says, they're good and they can help and we should do the best we can with them while we've got them.

Structures aren't just religions. They're everything temporary. Communities, relationships, ideas, feelings, bodies, personalities, nations, physical existence, the earth, the sun itself—they're all temporary.

So what's left? What's left is what is. What really is; what finally, ultimately, authoritatively is. That's where the faith comes in. That's why this is a religion nevertheless, not just rational analysis.

You've got to trust what is. Even if your head can't conceive the vaguest notion about it, your heart has got to trust it and rely on it. There's nothing else really, and until you do trust Isness you're thrashing blind in the muck-pit.

To trust what it means to affirm your own life, means to stand on your own two feet. Not your pathetic ego-self, but your common isness, because what is, includes you too. What is, is in everything—or, more accurately, everything is in what is—it's got so much more room. What comes next is also in what is, if we've got the eyes to see it.

*The religion of what-is/what-comes-next is the Nevertheless Religion; the new religion that's so old it looks like new; the timeless religion whose time has come; the religion that comes next, for which the earth has become ripe. The religion of the seeing eye, the hearing ear, the trusting heart.*

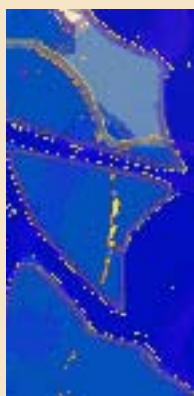
Naturally, we're going to get excited and talk a lot when we discover it, but after a while we'll quiet down and start working at it. It takes work too, since it's not a

Sunday religion or an hour-every-morning religion, or even a seven-times-a-day religion. It's a minute-by-minute religion, which you only stop practicing when your own structures are taken away—and maybe not then.

Of course such a religion is far too much for all the likes of us. Which means that the likes of us must itself be completely overhauled—and there are time-proven methods of training at that job—so that what is now obviously impossible can become not merely possible but natural, organic, even effortless. The capacity to do what's needed has been graciously built into our components.

Our kind has done it; our kind continues to do it; and any one of us can start doing it any time, if we want to. If we really want to.

WHAT  
DO  
YOU  
DO  
NEXT?



**ROBERT GRANAT** has published two novels: *The Important Thing* and *Regensis*, and numerous essays and other writings. His interest in Buddhism goes back many years; his concern with "the important things" even further.