

Inclusive and Exclusive Mysticism in Thomas Merton

by
Melvyn Matthews

The first thing I want to offer is a disclaimer. I am not a Merton scholar by any means and I am very honoured to be asked to speak at this conference in the presence of so many people whose names I have just seen on the covers of books. As I said, I am no scholar but a priest/writer.

I want to concentrate in this paper on the mysticism of Thomas Merton. I want to do that because I believe that this is his greatest contribution to the religious life of the twentieth century, demonstrating that mysticism is precisely not something which begins in mystery and ends in schism, but is, rather, an essential and natural part of Christian experience and, essentially, is not just open to all but, if the church is to survive properly into the next century, required by so many more of us. Merton, as I understand him was somebody properly prophetic of the need for the church to uphold this central mystery, the mystery of the presence of God in the human soul. This prophetic message needs to be heard by the Church but sadly, at least within the present Church of England with which I am familiar, it is rapidly being forced out by emphases which are alien, that is emphases of management and money.

But I want to concentrate on Thomas Merton's mysticism in a particular way – firstly by placing it in an overall context and seeing what sort of mysticism it really was and then by asking one or two critical questions about it, raising the question of whether it was actually strong enough or deep enough to enable 20th Century Christians to live through the trauma of this age with sufficient depth. In other words, while I believe it to be essentially true that Merton made mysticism available for the layperson in the church (and, indeed, outside it), questions still remain in my mind as to whether the quality and nature of that mysticism were sufficient to enable this generation to live through what was happening in the world, and so whether Merton was a trailblazer, but inevitably, due to his circumstances rather than anything else, he had to hand the torch onto others. But first let us look at mysticism as a phenomenon in general in the modern world.

During a Lenten study group in one of my parishes we were talking about the delight which we can have in the creation. We were reading one or two of the psalms, such as Psalm 104, which speak of that. Suddenly, one of the participants, a woman of sturdy common sense, I thought, told the group about an experience of hers some years before in which everything had been quietly lit from within by a divine light. The people she encountered and even the very buildings she passed were fresh and new. She was filled with joy and peace. As she spoke, I realised that she was describing a mystical experience in which she had glimpsed divine presence.

And I began to reflect that in this woman of sturdy common sense, this was something which she, as it were, took in passing. And research shows that what came to her comes to very many more people than we had imagined.

Mysticism has not disappeared from the modern world. Those who may at one time have expected that a rational, critical and essentially non-mysterious version of Christianity would settle over the Western world and mercifully relieve it of all superstition and similar psychological excesses have been gravely disappointed. Every day we hear of experiences such as that of the lady in the Lent group. Now this is remarkable, I think, by any account. Twenty or thirty years ago the mainstream Church consciousness was broadly ecumenical and practical in temper. Cooperation, good works and service, at home and abroad, was the order of the day. There was a plain piety about, which eschewed experience and elevated action. These were the days when Dag Hammarskjöld, then Secretary General of the United Nations, wrote in his diary, 'In our day the road to holiness inevitably lies through the world of action'. The emphasis showing that mystical experience was regarded as something of a private matter or of no real importance. Indeed mystical experience was even thought to be risky, an indulgence in which might warp or disturb the judgement of sensible, action-oriented Christians. The Doctrine Commission of the Church of England wrote as recently as 1987 ...

Those who believe in God ... testify to a variety of 'religious experiences' from a general sense of the holy or numinous, on the one hand, to a sensation of being directly addressed by a transcendent being, on the other. Not only is such experience open to the charge of being subjective, it also appears to be unequal if not haphazard in its distribution. Many profound believers claim to be ignorant of it; many powerful experiences fail to result in a solid faith ... such experience is often ambiguous¹

The deeply sceptical tone of those remarks towards 'religious experiences' was not uncommon at that time. But there has been a shift of feeling over the years since then, I think. There has been a growth of Pentecostal experience within the mainstream churches and a much deeper awareness – and I believe this to be a major factor – of the presence of evil and tragedy in the world. But we have become much more aware of the importance of religious and mystical experience and much more aware that it is more widespread than we had recognised.

The Alister Hardy Unit on Research into Religious Experience which was set up in the late 1970's pursues this, and Hardy's book is entitled *The Spiritual Nature of Man*². This unit conducted a large number of interviews and collected a great deal of evidence from people in all walks of life and of all faiths and none to show that mystical experience was not far from the common man. What is clear from the evidence is that most people do have religious or even deeply mystical experiences, which when they have had a chance to reflect on and think about, they value and live by. What people do not do is relate these experiences very closely to

Church life. The institutional life of the Churches and religious experience is often disconnected.

It is not that modern life removes these experiences but modern life makes them difficult to talk about. Listen to this account, originally quoted by Alister Hardy . . .

A friend persuaded me to go to Ely Cathedral to hear a performance of Bach's B Minor Mass. I had heard the work, indeed I knew Bach's choral works pretty well . . . The music thrilled me, until we got to the great Sanctus. I find this experience difficult to define. It was primarily a warning - I was frightened. I was trembling from head to foot and wanted to cry. Actually I think I did. I heard no 'voice' except the music; I saw nothing; but the warning was very definite. I was not able to interpret this experience satisfactorily until I read some months later Otto's book, *The Idea of the Holy*. Here I found it: the 'numinous'. I was before the Judgement Seat. I was being weighed in the balance and found wanting.³

Here is another one . . .

My first remembered experience of the numinous occurred when I was barely three. I recall walking down a little lane beside our house in Shropshire. The sun was shining, and as I walked along the dusty lane, I became acutely aware of the things around me. I noticed a group of dandelions on my left at the base of the stone wall. Most of them were in full bloom, their golden heads irradiated by the sun, and suddenly I was overcome by an extraordinary feeling of wonder and joy. It was as if I was part of the flowers and stones and dusty earth.

This mirrors the experience of the lady in the parish Lent group. There is in these experiences often a sense of being at one with things, which is vividly illustrated by the diaries of Admiral Byrd who manned an Antarctic weather station in 1934. He asked to go there alone, not because he was unhappy - he was actually a very successful and outwardly contented man - nor because he wanted to be a meteorologist - he was already one of some distinction. He simply wanted space in his life. 'I wanted something more than just privacy in the geographical sense ...' And in his diary he records . . .

Took my daily walk at 4 pm today in 89° of frost ... I paused to listen to the silence ... the day was dying, the night was being born, but with great peace. Here were imponderable processes and forces of the cosmos ... harmonious and soundless. Harmony, that was it! That was what came out of the silence - a gentle rhythm, the strain of a perfect chord, the music of the spheres perhaps. It was enough to catch that rhythm, momentarily to be myself a part of it. In that instant I could feel no doubt of man's oneness with the universe.⁴

When he returned home, Admiral Byrd wrote ... 'I live more simply now, and with more peace.'

A recent television programme featured people who had been kept hostage for considerable periods of time in different parts of the world. It didn't include Terry

Waite or Brian Keenan, but a number of other, lesser known, people. It was interesting to see the effect of this experience upon them. There was a hedonistic journalist who became very serious, returned to church, became quasi-mystical, much to the puzzlement of his wife. Another man mended his marriage. There were other examples. And Brian Keenan, whose account of his captivity includes moments of sheer mystical awareness⁵, now lives on the West Coast of Ireland in semi-seclusion. They 'live more simply now and with more peace'.

Others have not had to go so far to experience something of the transfiguration which Byrd writes about. Two poets in the English tradition who write about this are Thomas Traherne and Edwin Muir. Traherne was a country Rector in Herefordshire, and wrote at the time of the Restoration. His 'Centuries' are a miracle of awareness of the divine within all things. He writes poetry, but best is his prose, especially this classic passage from his *Third Set of Centuries* where the whole creation, including the people he sees, are transfigured by the inward light and love of God.

The corn was orient and immortal wheat, which never should be reaped nor was ever sown. I thought it had stood from everlasting to everlasting. The dust and stones of the street were as precious as gold. The gates were at first the end of the world; the green trees when I saw them first through one of the gates transported and ravished me; Their sweetness and unusual beauty made my heart to leap and almost mad with ecstasy, they were such strange and wonderful things The men ! O what venerable and reverend creatures did the aged seem ! Immortal cherubim ! and young men glittering and sparkling angels and maids strange seraphic pieces of life and beauty ... Boys and girls tumbling in the street and playing were moving jewels ... Eternity was manifest in the light of day and something infinite behind everything appeared which talked with my expectation and moved my desire ...⁶

Edwin Muir, a Presbyterian from the Orkneys, in his poem, *The Transfiguration*, writes a very Merton-esque poem . . .

So from the ground we felt that virtue branch
Through all our veins till we were whole, our wrists
As fresh and pure as water from a well,
Our hands made new to handle holy things,
The source of all our seeing rinsed and cleansed
Till earth and light and water entering there
Gave back to us the clear unfallen world.
We would have thrown our clothes away for lightness,
But that even they, though sour and travel stained,
Seemed like our flesh, made of immortal substance,
.... Was it a vision ?
Or did we see that day the unseeable
One glory of the everlasting world
Perpetually at work, though never seen
Since Eden locked the gate that is everywhere
And nowhere ?⁷

This all puts Merton into an ongoing context. In his journal *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Merton gives an account of one of his central experiences which of course we all know which occurred after he had been at the monastery for some eighteen years. It bears much resemblance to the accounts of Traherne and Muir and others that I have quoted. Let me just remind you of it. He was in Louisville to see about some printing for the monastery. He writes,

In Louisville at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the centre of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realisation 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, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness.⁸

William Shannon comments that this experience, often recounted, sums up many of Merton's other mystical experiences.

This vision could be described as a kind of theophany, as he sees the spark of divinity in each of these persons. 'It was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the person that each one is in God's eyes.' He reflects that if only they could see themselves as they are, if only all of us could see each other that way all the time, war and hatred and greed would disappear from the face of the earth. In fact, if we truly saw one another as we are in God, we would almost be ready to kneel down and adore.⁹

Which reminds me of the Hasidic saying that in front of each person, preceding them down the street, are two angels. These angels are calling out "Make way, Make way, Make way, for the Image of God." I like quoting that to my parishioners when they are having a row. It doesn't get me very far !

I have recounted these contemporary experiences in order to demonstrate plainly that they are commonplace. They happen if not to all of us then to many in the midst of the most ordinary circumstances. They are not restricted to those who are 'mystics'. Secondly, I have wanted to show that what ordinary people experience in these moments is not different from what poets, artists and professional religious people such as Merton also experience. Then, thirdly, it is clear that these experiences are deeply luminous, formative, and that people want to go on living under their influence. In other words, although the 1987 Doctrinal Commission may have been right to say that these experiences are 'haphazard', in the sense that they cannot be predicted and so come to us suddenly, the Commission was not right when it said that these experiences are ambiguous or fail to result in a solid faith. Precisely the opposite seems to be the case.

In looking at mystical experience we have to understand that mystical awareness of God is not awareness of God as separate from his creation, as if God was a special sort of being who was 'seen' by special people by means of 'special'

experiences. In other words Christian theology at least does not support the view that there are certain 'religious' people who possess a 'religious receptivity' which enables them to tune into God, while other people lack this faculty. This is actually quite a difficult point for us all to come to terms with because of the popular view that religious experience comes only to a few privileged people. Rowan Williams, Bishop of Monmouth, who was Professor of Theology at Oxford before he became bishop, writes,

The Christian God is not an object in the universe and not, therefore, a possible competitor for space in it. So it would not be true to say that we sometimes experience God 'neat' as it were, and sometimes at second-hand . . . All our experience is experience of the world - of things, of persons. Experience of God is to learn to see these things and these persons in a certain context - a context for which we can never find adequate description and which must never be reduced to being one item among others.¹⁰

I think it is Herbert McCabe, the Dominican theologian, who says God and the universe do not make two. In another place, Bishop Williams takes issue with the idea that mysticism is really a special sort of experience. He says,

Mysticism should not be taken to describe a cross-cultural, supra-credal specific experience, but a jumble of attempts to perceive how consciousness is drastically reconditioned by the living out in depth of a particular religious commitment.¹¹

The reconditioning of consciousness - I think that's one of the things that Merton went through. I think we can see that Williams is trying to say that if you live the faith through and through you will begin to 'see' things differently or you may have moments when you 'see' things differently, perhaps because you have been looking at everything, or trying to look at everything, from the point of view of God. Your inner eye has been opened and you begin see things as they really are. But you are still the same person, and still the same person looking at the same reality.

Perhaps I can clarify this a bit by talking about the work of a modern Catholic theologian, von Hügel. Von Hügel was an aristocratic Catholic thinker who lived in North London at the turn of the century and wrote very quaint letters of spiritual direction to his niece, telling her to keep up her horse-riding and things like that. He wrote a lot of philosophy of religion. He sought to rehabilitate the 'mystical' element in religion. And he made an important distinction, which I want to develop, between 'inclusive' and 'exclusive' mysticism.

What he called exclusive mysticism is the sort of mysticism in which the soul finds itself alone with God in a unitive experience. This is probably what most ordinary Christians would regard as the real thing, but he regarded it as mistaken. That was because it tends to suggest that human experience of this world is a distraction from the real task of knowing God. We have to 'exclude' ourselves from experience and normal reality in order to find God. Inclusive mysticism, on the other

hand, is that sort of mysticism which is reflected in those extracts which I quoted from earlier, where the world is shot through with a divine light and the person experiences a total unity with that transfigured world. In this 'inclusive' view, all human experience has a hidden potential for bearing God and sees nothing as wasted and everything as a potential gateway for God. In other words inclusive mysticism is living a life at its greatest possible depth. Inclusive mysticism would also reject the view that there is a separate mystical faculty in the human personality by which we may know God.

Von Hügel says that whereas all mysticism contains a turning away from multiplicity and contingency in a single-minded quest for the one thing necessary, an 'exclusive' mysticism will pursue this goal to the exclusion of reality, but 'inclusive' mysticism will do it through reality. I must admit that my observation of people who came on retreat when I was Director of the Ammerdown Conference and Retreat Centre and my conversations with them lead me to know something of the relevance of von Hügel's distinction. So many of them came on retreat with the sole intention of completely forgetting about whatever it was that was troubling them and escaping to the comfort and security of a retreat house. I am sure that the respite did them good but what they were not looking for was a transfiguring of their normal experience, rather an obliteration of it.

A similar distinction is made by the Danish thinker Kierkegaard in his description of what he calls the Knight of Faith. Kierkegaard, as you know, was an unusual man who lived a reclusive existence but who, perhaps through his reclusiveness, came to understand something of the interior and hidden nature of faith. And it's interesting that there has been a resurgence of scholarship on Kierkegaard to look at his mystical tradition. In a famous essay of his, *Fear and Trembling*, he talks about the Knight of Faith who renounces the finite yet continues to live in it. The Knight of Faith, he says,

... takes delight in everything and whenever one sees him taking part in a particular pleasure he does it with the persistence which is the mark of the earthly man. He looks and acts like a tax collector and yet the man has made and every instant is making the movements of infinity. He resigned everything infinitely, and then he grasped everything again by virtue of the absurd ... He constantly makes the movements of infinity, but he does this with such correctness and assurance that he constantly gets the finite out of it.¹²

Von Hügel enlarges on his concept of the inclusive mystic by talking about love. He says that the exclusive mystic is so clear that the infinite has to replace the finite that he supposes that religion has nothing to do with politics, for example. But von Hügel pleads that personal identity is not secured by opting out of science or society but by continual purification of our engagement in the world. So the exclusive mystic opts for the love of God only where God is 'not loved perfectly until he is loved alone.' But von Hügel pleads that we should follow what he calls 'a second more difficult and rarer conception', where

God is placed not alongside creatures but behind them, as the light which shines through a crystal and lends it whatever lustre it may have ... He is loved here, not apart from but through and in them. ¹³

Now to go back to Thomas Merton. He picks up a great deal of this and reinterprets it within the mainstream tradition of Catholic spirituality. The interesting and important thing about Merton's mysticism is that it underwent an enormous transformation within his lifetime. In his younger days as a monk he was set upon the traditional post reformation track of Catholic spirituality whereby the mystical way was an ascent to God for the professed contemplative. He was embarked upon what von Hügel would have called the 'exclusive' mystical way. The crowning achievement of that period of his life was his study of St John of the Cross which he called, fittingly enough, *The Ascent to Truth*.¹⁴ He writes there in very exclusivist terms,

First of all the contemplative life demands detachment from the senses . . . Essentially, mystical experience is a vivid conscious participation of our soul and of its faculties in the life, knowledge and love of God himself . . . God is not loved perfectly until he is loved alone.

And we know that Merton thought that such experiences were not available to the ordinary lay person living outside of the cloister, at least at that stage of his life. But then later Merton moves to an explicitly inclusivist view. In *New Seeds of Contemplation* he writes, and the difference is palpable,

Detachment from things does not mean setting up a contradiction between things and God - as if God were another 'thing' and as if his creatures were his rivals. We do not detach ourselves from things in order to attach ourselves to God, but rather we become detached from ourselves in order to see and use all things in and for God. ¹⁵

Merton goes on to say that this is an entirely new perspective which many sincerely moral and ascetic minds fail utterly to see. 'There is no evil in anything created by God, nor can anything of his become an obstacle to our union with him'. Much of this shift in Merton's thought is recorded by his biographers and commentators. It is remarked upon by Merton himself in the opening chapter of *The Sign of Jonas*. There he says that after having written that study of St John of the Cross, *The Ascent to Truth*, he moved to a more intuitive and poetic awareness of God. It is interesting to speculate on just what it was that caused this dramatic development and his biographers speculate about it endlessly. My own simple view is that gradually Merton became a more integrated and happy person and that he naturally discovered an 'inclusive' way to God as his delight in the countryside and his delight in his own self replaced the war that he had been waging with himself in the earlier part of his life.

I think it might be worth mentioning in passing that some of Merton's shift from exclusive mysticism as a young enthusiastic Catholic to inclusive mysticism was helped by his reading of the English mystics particularly Thomas Traherne, Julian of Norwich and others. And, of course, he was assisted in that by our President, Father Donald. It is worth looking at one or two further aspects of Merton's exposition of inclusive mysticism. He says that the obstacle to our union with God is not 'this world' but 'the false self'. The false self is . . .

the tenacious need to maintain our separate, external and egotistical will. It is when we refer all things to this outward and false self that we alienate ourselves from reality and from God.

My false and private self is the one who wants to exist outside of the reach 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.

Sin, he says, is living as if this illusory false self is true.

Thus I use up my life in the desire for pleasures and the thirst for experiences, for power, honour, knowledge and love to clothe this false self and construct its nothingness into something objectively real. And I wind experiences around myself and cover myself with pleasures and glory like bandages in order to make myself perceptible to myself and to the world.¹⁶

He then moves into that very moving meditation, which I am sure you know, upon the resurrection of Lazarus and how when coming out of the grave you have to unwind your bandages. At the resurrection Christ left the grave clothes behind and was only identified by the love of God, not by the things he had acquired.

So for Merton the mystical way is one which becomes more and more inclusive. More and more he sees all things as held in God and 'mysticism' as the way to enable us to see that this is the case. For him, mysticism is redemptive - it brings us to the truth about ourselves. It is not a means of liberating yourself from the world but a means, possibly even the pre-eminent means, by which the soul is liberated from falsity.

But however important Merton's journey from exclusive to inclusive mystic, I think there are still some unanswered questions. Is he still at the end of his life, if not élitist, at least a separatist? That is does he still not feel that even if mysticism is open to all and involves an awareness of all things, that it is still better to be separate in order to fully realise this truth? Does he not think that at least in the monastery the conditions for the contemplative life are entirely present. William Shannon asks this question in his book, *Thomas Merton's Dark Path* when he says:

Merton seems never to have quite abandoned the élitist view of contemplation that for all practical purposes restricted it to the monastic life. It is not that he thought that monks were superior people or that they loved God more than those who were

not monks. It is simply that he believed that 'life in the world' does not provide the atmosphere in which contemplation can flower. Yet he was not entirely consistent, for in book after book, written for a general readership, he invites his readers to enter into the contemplative experience.¹⁷

My own view is that Merton's ambiguity remains because he remained, inevitably, intellectually who he was.. I do not believe he should have left the monastery in response to Rosemary Radford Ruether whose feisty correspondence with him I think is worth reading, and come out of it to join the barricades of the 1960's. His answers to her were, I believe, entirely convincing. Merton remained unable to complete his mission of bringing mysticism to the masses not because he remained physically a monk but because he was in no real position as the person he was, and this is no blame to him, to engage in some of the great issues that modern society presented. And I want to point out two particular areas, two particular issues. The first is the question of human suffering in the face of God, the depth of which was brought home by the unveiling of the nature of the Holocaust. And the second is the questions raised by modern science about the absurdity of the universe. Is it random or not? Obviously these questions are linked. Merton did not, to my mind, enable those who had been fired by his contemplative vision to take these questions to their real end. Is it possible to be a contemplative when faced personally with suffering as massive as that faced by the Jews, and others, in the Holocaust? Is it possible to be a contemplative, particularly an inclusive contemplative, when faced with evidence of the absurdity and apparent random cruelty of creation and the created order? These are the real questions which my scientific and historical colleagues when I was Chaplain to a university posed to my enthusiasm for Merton, and I think they have to be answered in some way or another.

I believe that inevitably Merton was limited but that others have taken up the flame - notably two women mystics who I want to bring to your attention ... and I am very glad that Peter King is here, who has also brought Etty Hillesum to our notice with his book.¹⁸ Because my thesis is that Etty Hillesum and Annie Dillard take Merton's position a great deal further and show - in the case of Etty, a greater capacity to bring a contemplative dimension to bear upon the problem of suffering - in the case of Annie Dillard, a greater capacity to bring a contemplative awareness to bear upon the apparent randomness of the created order. Both come to positions which are more purely theological because they are unhindered by the questions of ecclesiology and the preoccupations of church order which I believe hindered Merton's development.

Let us first of all look at Etty Hillesum. Etty Hillesum, as you know, was a Jewish intellectual in Amsterdam who was eventually taken to Auschwitz where she died. Her Diary remains, called *An Interrupted Life*. She suffered from the ghettoisation of Dutch Jews and during that time worked for the Jewish Council in Amsterdam. Her intellectual influences were first of all her friend and eventually her lover, the therapist, Julius Spier, Rilke, the German poet, and, interestingly, St. Augustine, the New Testament and the Psalms.

She went through a spiritual development which was not a great deal different from that of Merton – from pure hedonism and a degree of confusion to one of enormous awareness of God in her life and the capacity of the mystic for compassion. Early in her diaries she speaks of her confusion and uncertainty but ends with the capacity to give. The diary opens with her saying:

I should think to be counted among the better lovers, and love does indeed suit me to perfection . . . but deep inside me something is still locked away...

Everything has gone wrong again . . . Inside I am totally at a loss, restless, driven, and my head feels close to bursting again . . .

But then at the end of her diary movingly she finishes

We should be willing to act as a balm for all wounds . . . I have broken my body like bread and shared it out among men. And why not, they were hungry and had gone without for so long. . . .

And she speaks about the peace of prayer

I also feel a compelling directive force deep down, a great and growing seriousness, a soundless voice that tells me what to do and forces me to confess. I keep talking about God the whole day long ...

I think what weakens people most is fear of wasting their strength. If, after a long and arduous process, day in and day out, you manage to come to grips with your inner sources, with God, in short, and if only you make certain that your path to God is unblocked, then you can keep renewing yourself at these inner sources and need never again be afraid of wasting your strength.¹⁹

A great shift from her earlier confusion.

Michael Downey in an article in the *Merton Annual* called this a remarkable transformation. The comparison with Merton ends, though. While Thomas Merton talks more of sin and mercy, Etty speaks of suffering and compassion. There is little sense of guilt in Etty. This may be part of her background but it is deeply refreshing. Downey says:

Born of a vulnerable yet intelligent heart faced with the enormity of the suffering of her people, Etty affirmed that the human person is strong enough to bear everything which enters human life. "There is room for everything in a single life. For belief in God and a miserable end ... it is a question of living life from minute to minute and taking suffering into the bargain ..."²⁰

Downey, in his essay, suggests that Merton and Hillesum are inverted images one of the other and whereas he gives a great deal of emphasis to the similarities, in the end he says something very important.

I have no intention of rehearsing the criticisms of Merton which have been advanced by others, e.g., Rosemary Radford Ruether, regarding the difficulties involved in maintaining a simultaneous commitment to the monastic life and to emancipatory praxis in view of the pressing needs and urgent demands of the age. But the balance between these two, at times, competing poles – the active and the contemplative – is something which Merton seems to have arrived at more in theory than in fact. And if my claim that Hillesum moves beyond self-absorption more fully than Merton does seem audacious, it may seem downright flippant to Merton devotees to suggest that in the period of preparation for serving others, and at the stage of actually fashioning her life as a sacrifice in redemptive love [because Hillesum went to Auschwitz willingly with her friends], Hillesum achieves a more mature integration of the contemplative and active dimensions of her life than Merton seemed to manage.²¹

Hillesum becomes freer.

And then briefly on to Annie Dillard. Annie Dillard is a quite different character, an American young woman, a plain scientist, who spent a year like Thoreau away as a hermit in the countryside. She wrote of it in her book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. She spent a year there learning how to see and much of what she says is similar to what Merton says. She talks about the experience that people have of seeing after they have been blind for many years . . .

When the doctor took her bandages off and led her into the garden, the girl who was no longer blind saw “the tree with the lights in it”. It was for this tree that I searched through the peach orchards of summer, in the forests of fall and down winter and spring for years. Then one day I was walking along Tinker Creek thinking of nothing at all and I saw the tree with the lights in it. I saw the backyard cedar where the mourning doves roost charged and transfigured, each cell buzzing with flame. I stood on the grass with the lights in it, grass that was wholly fire, utterly focused and utterly dreamed.²²

But she goes on to recognise the total ambivalence of nature, of how nature consumes itself, and is much more reflective about the process of nature and its entire mutual cruelty. Again she is a sort of inverse image to Merton but at the end she comes through to praise. Merton's appreciation of nature by comparison is much more innocent and I believe that there could be if we are not careful a direct line from Merton through to New Age thinking, Matthew Fox and the Nine o' Clock Service. His reliance upon Traherne is too strong. Modern science purges.

So Hillesum and Dillard are two modern mystics who reached the same point of awareness that Merton reached. They are both inclusive mystics but what

they include in their mysticism was greater. Hillesum reaches out to include the suffering of the Holocaust. Dillard reaches out to include the ambiguities of creation as revealed by modern science. As such they speak more surely to our age. I don't think we should blame Merton for his inability to be as inclusive as they were. He was, after all, a man of a certain generation. But whether their inclusiveness was greater because of their gender and their lack of allegiance to church is what I shall leave you to grapple with.

Notes and References

1. *We Believe in God* (London, Church House Publishing, 1987)
2. Alister Hardy, *The Spiritual Nature of Man*, (Oxford, OUP, 1979)
3. A number of these experiences are quoted in John V Taylor, *The Christlike God*, (London, SCM Press 1992)
4. Cited by Anthony Storr, *The School of Genius* (London, André Deutsch, 1988)
5. See his encounter with an orange in his account of his captivity in Lebanon - Brian Keenan, *An Evil Cradling* (London, Hutchinson, 1992)
6. Thomas Traherne, *Selected Writings*, (Manchester & New York, Carcanet Press, 1980)
7. Edwin Muir, *Collected Poems*, (London, Faber & Faber, 1960)
8. Th. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (London, Burns & Oates, 1995)
9. William Shannon, *Silent Lamp* (London, SCM Press, 1993)
10. In a book review cited by John V Taylor, op.cit.
11. Rowan Williams, "Butler's Western Mysticism: Towards an Assessment", *Downside Review*, 1984, cited by Nicholas Lash, *Easter in Ordinary* (SCM Press, 1988)
12. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (Princeton, USA, Princeton University Press, 1941)
13. Friedrich von Hügel, cited by Nicholas Lash, op.cit.
14. Th. Merton, *The Ascent to Truth* (London, Burns and Oates, 1962)
15. Th. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (London, Burns & Oates, 1962)
16. Extracts from *New Seeds of Contemplation*.
17. William Shannon, *Thomas Merton's Dark Path*, (New York, Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1988)
18. Peter King, *Dark Night Spirituality: Thomas Merton, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Etty Hillesum*, (London, SPCK, 1995)
19. All these extracts are from Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life* (USA, Washington Square Press, 1985) or, as published in England, *Etty, A Diary 1941-43* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1983)
20. Michael Downey, "Penning Patterns of Transformation: Etty Hillesum and Thomas Merton" in *The Merton Annual*, Volume 4, 1991)
21. *Ibid.*
22. Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, (New York, Harper Row, 1974) (London, Jonathan Cape, 1975)