

Thomas Merton and "The Asian Tradition"
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My first impressions of the Thomas Merton memorial Seminar, were at odds with the Thomas Merton I knew. Our first meeting was in the Archdeacon's house, beneath the medieval grandeur of Winchester Cathedral, sipping sherry, (save for me!), with the vicar. And yet it wasn't only the inclusion of a Buddhist monk that made this gathering different. What became evident as soon as we addressed each other, was that each member of the group had his or her own passionately held belief of what Merton represented. And that each one of us represented a very different end of Merton's spiritual spectrum.

I was introduced as representing the "Asian Tradition", which was perhaps equivalent to a Trappist monk being presented to a gathering of thought and practice from the Desert Fathers and the Holy Roman Empire to Martin Luther and Jean Paul Sartre.

Keeping my robes firmly adjusted, and watching the flicker of at first conceit, then panic at the terrible responsibility that had just been ordained upon me, raise and pass away in one mind moment, I was immediately put at my ease when I realised that this wasn't an invitation to impart the canonical teachings of the "Asian Tradition" in one weekend.

I had in fact come by way of paying my own debt of gratitude to Thomas Merton. He had revealed to me through his writings the enormous urgency of radically transforming ones life via the monastic tradition. I had felt like a fellow traveller on first reading Merton. I saw Merton as the archetypal anti-hero. The rebel that I had failed to imitate in my teens, in robes? Like Merton I had been brought up in the in-between world of artists and writers. I had toyed then with the narcotic delights that had consumed our generation, vaguely assuming that there was some point to it all. I was far lazier than Merton, but like he, I had been dogged by an insistent yearning for transcendence, that all of the drugs, and all of the parties, and all of the miscreant wanderings could not fulfil. And right at that point where my life had reached it's most wayward juncture, the spiritual life intruded on me. And there was Merton. He'd been there, and more. How could I refuse?

I was surprised over the weekend to feel so comfortable in an atmosphere of intellectual openness. An atmosphere of contemplation and enquiry that I had unconsciously assumed to be absent from the established Church. Yet there remained an uncertain tension between the outward appearances of our setting, displaying all the signs of the secular authority of the Church, and the

bombshell that was Merton, constantly threatening to overwhelm the ancient fabric of the tradition that supported him. He had dared to speak for everyman.

I was grateful not to be asked to present the "Asian Tradition". I knew little of Merton's own interest in Buddhism, save what I had read in the "Asian Journal", and other jottings. I knew him best through his essays and journals that had been presented through the Christian framework, and had found that, as I continued in my life as a monk, he talked to me with a voice of one who had understood the struggle of a life of renunciation. And he spoke to me always as a friend, a man, with all the weaknesses of that condition. As a Buddhist, this has brought me to feel that I also have a friend in Christ.

One story I remembered from one of Merton's late letters was of his visit to the Buddhist scholar D.T. Suzuki in New York. He asked Suzuki who he thought was the foremost exponent of Buddhism in America. Suzuki leaned forward and gently said, "you are". Merton embodied the essence of what we call practice. His very being radiated this realisation. His works of prose, poetry and photography also shone with his enthusiasm for the "Way". His personality typified the caricature of the anarchic Zen Master, constantly playing tricks on his buffoon life disciples, i.e. us.

I was struck again during the weekend of how awkwardly Merton fitted in to the conventional Christian setting. I was reminded of this not so much in what was revealed of his struggle within the Church, and with his superiors in the monastery, (by no means unusual within strongly traditional Buddhist monastic forms), but more in the difficulty we as admirers had in accommodating him into the Christian pantheon. On the one hand he was the prophet, elucidated so clearly by Canon Allchin in his closing sermon. He was also the revolutionary, whose power to rattle the system was delivered inert with the gradual canonisation that was taking place before our eyes. Sitting next to Monica Furlong at the plenary session for the formation of the Thomas Merton Society I could hear her mutter in tones not meant to be ignored, "he would have hated all this". Why I wondered does Merton refuse to be categorised, refuse even in death to become immortalised in the refuge of our spiritual aspirations. I left with no clear answer. But it is true that the "Asian Tradition" reserves a special place for those prankster sages who set the world alight with their God intoxicated lives. Unbound by religious conventions, refusing to be categorised, they forced the world to go beyond the boundaries of definition. Perhaps this is why Merton appeared as he did in the guise of a Catholic monk, perhaps this was the lesson he had to teach the Christian faith.

Merton has already found himself a place in the Buddhist pantheon. The Tibetans know him as the "Jesus Lama". I still prefer to remember him according to the first book I read about him, "Thomas Merton, Monk and

Poet", by George Woodcock. I had packed the book for my mother's publishing house during my school years, never thinking to read beyond the title page. I suspect that all those who sat through the lectures and discussion during that dark winter weekend in Winchester, cherished their own Merton, like a warm secret held close. Because no matter how expert the "experts" were on Merton, they all in their own way were revealing themselves. And Merton was the language they used to express their understanding of the spiritual life. What a beautiful language!