

Thomas Merton and the Contemplative Tradition

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Thomas Merton and the contemplative tradition. Which contemplative tradition? Within the Roman Catholic Church alone there are the monastic contemplative tradition, the Carmelite one, the Franciscan one, and so on. There are traditions of contemplative prayer within the Church of England, the Eastern Churches and the Quakers. Outside the Christian Churches, there are the various Buddhist schools of meditation, the Hindus, Sufis and so on.

Thomas Merton seemed able to find something to help him on his spiritual path in most of these traditions, but to find one definition of the term 'contemplative tradition' which would include them all is not easy. Instead, I will tell a story, one which most of you probably know already. It comes from the Desert Fathers, and it has the advantage in the present context that it does not mention God.

'Abba Lot came to Abba Joseph and said: Father, according as I am able I keep my little rule, and my little fast, my prayer, meditation and contemplative silence; and so far as I am able I strive to cleanse my heart of thought: now what more should I do? The elder rose up in reply and stretched out his hands to heaven, and his fingers became like ten lamps of fire. He said: Why not become all fire?'¹

To become all fire. As Merton said at the Bangkok conference where he ended his life, 'What is essential in the monastic life is not embedded in buildings, is not embedded in clothing, is not necessarily embedded in a rule. It is somewhere along the lines of something deeper than a rule. It is concerned with the business of total transformation. All other things serve that end.'

In other words, any contemplative tradition is concerned with life, with the fullness of life. 'I have come that they might have life, and have it more abundantly', said Jesus². I am speaking here, not just of the contemplative life as lived in monasteries or hermitages, but of the contemplative dimension of any Christian life, any fully human life. St

Benedict in his 6th century Rule for monks and nuns, the Rule by which both Merton and myself have tried to live, says, 'See how, in his loving mercy, the Lord points out to us the Way of Life.'³

Benedict also says that the monk or nun is someone who is seeking God.

Since, obviously, we cannot escape from God, what he really means is that we seek union with God. I have avoided God up to now, but since I am a Christian monk, I must understand the contemplative tradition mainly in Christian terms. However, it may help any Buddhists present if I say a word about God. Our Fr. Sylvester, who had a much more scholarly knowledge of Buddhism than I have, suggested that it might help Buddhists to understand what Christians mean by God if we say that God is that of which all things are empty.

Incidentally, Christians too believe that all things are empty, empty, that is, of self-originating independent existence. So do atheists. Some of the Christians present may be surprised to know that they believe this, but that is because we do not usually think of it in those terms. But that is what we mean when we say that all things are created.

So we have spoken of the fullness of life and of the transformation through which we enter into that fullness. St Irenaeus, who was Bishop of Lyons about one century after the death of the apostles Peter and Paul, said that the glory of God is in man or woman fully alive. That has been good news for many Christians who have come across that passage in the modern Breviary, the official prayer book of the Catholic Church. We had too often in the past been taught a world-denying spirituality that appeared to centre on death rather than life. But not all people who know that passage have noticed how it continues: 'The glory of God is in a man or woman fully alive, and full life for men or women is in the vision of God.'⁴ Yes, we should live life to the full in the terms of this world, earning our living, bringing up children, travelling around, enjoying sport and the arts, much of which Merton certainly did in his early years (although we do not have to be quite as irresponsible about it as Merton sometimes was). But there is a fullness of life beyond that to be found only in the vision of God.

Since we are creatures of flesh and blood, the contemplative journey towards the vision of God, or at least the love of God – because

of course we do not see him in this life except through images – will be embodied, incarnated, in a way of life. Since we are social animals – ‘It is not good for man to be alone’ – this way of life will often be in community, the monastic community, the sangha.

For Thomas Merton, this way of life came to be embodied in the Cistercian tradition, as found at Gethsemani Abbey, Kentucky. He has told us all about his journey towards monastic life in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, which first appeared in Britain as *Elected Silence*, a slightly abridged version. When the full version was first published over here as *The Seven Storey Mountain* in 1975, a review in *The Times Literary Supplement*⁵ referred to it as the swan song of the romantic monastic revival. Since I wrote the review myself, perhaps I can explain what I meant by that.

A swan song implies, of course, that something is dying. It also implies that what is dying is beautiful. In the monastic revival of the 19th century there was much that was beautiful. We can see something of that beauty in Merton's writings, where the beauty is sometimes heightened by the romantic vision which he first brought to Gethsemani. ‘At intervals during the Mass,’ Merton writes of his first visit, ‘a monk in a cowl detached himself from the choir and went slowly and soberly to minister at the altar, with grave and solemn bows, walking with his long flowing sleeves dangling almost as low as his ankles...’⁶ That is beautiful, and something like that still happens.

Again, he writes of the Trappists, ‘They were in (God). They had dwindled down to nothing and had been transformed into Him by the pure and absolute humility of their hearts. And the love of Christ overflowing in those clean hearts made them children and made them eternal. Old men with limbs like the roots of trees had the eyes of children and lived, under their grey woollen cowls, eternal. And all of them, the young and the old, were ageless, the little brothers of God, the little children for whom was made the Kingdom of Heaven.’⁷ That's beautiful, too. Perhaps it points towards a truth. But monastic life, from the inside, isn't really like that. The Merton who wrote that never imagined that almost at the end of his monastic life he would fall in love. That was God's big joke, though why two people had to be involved in such pain is one of God's big mysteries.

So I think *The Seven Storey Mountain* is a great book, a beautiful book. It has a lot still to teach us, and it still touches us.

It is, of course, uneven. It reaches its lowest point in the ludicrous description of his time at Cambridge, which begins, ‘And so on the tide of all these circumstances of confusion I swept into the dark, sinister atmosphere of Cambridge and began my university career.’⁸ It continues in that vein for some pages. Now, I am pretty sure that at that time there were more murders and drugs, more muggings and gang fights, more prostitutes and pimps in Harlem than there were in Cambridge. Yet Merton sees Harlem with the eyes of compassion. Indeed, the pages on Harlem are one of the high points of the book, written in letters of fire. They show that his passion for social justice which is one of the ways in which he enriched the contemplative tradition was not something that developed slowly, in the monastery. He does not see Cambridge with the same compassion, even though the corruption he describes amounts to hardly more than irresponsible high spirits. That corruption is surely the reflection of his own tragedy in leading a life of dissipation which led him nowhere but hurt a number of people.

Merton changed, of course, after writing *The Seven Storey Mountain*, as anyone changes who is able to reflect upon the experience of life. But if the attitude of the early Merton to monastic life was in many ways romantic and unrealistic, there are also passages in the book which show a remarkable spiritual maturity. For one thing, he was aware that what Gethsemani offered him was not the true contemplative tradition. ‘It seems to me,’ he writes, ‘that our monasteries produce very few pure contemplatives. The life is too active. There is too much movement, too much to do ... Doing things, suffering things, thinking things, making tangible and concrete sacrifices for the love of God – that is what contemplation seems to mean here... It goes by the name of “active contemplation.” The word active is well chosen. About the second half of the compound I am not so sure. It is not without a touch of poetic licence.’⁹

How did Merton know, so early on, that this was not the true contemplative tradition? I suspect that his was an *anima naturaliter contemplativa*. Also we know that he was fluent in Latin. This meant that he could read the Fathers of the Church and especially the Cistercian Fathers, the early writers of the Cistercian Order. Few of them were available in English when he entered Gethsemani, apart from St Bernard, St Aelred,

and the Golden Epistle of William of St Thierry. Merton himself was later to be one of those who initiated Cistercian Publications, which has done so much to make the Cistercian Fathers available in English. The life of these early Cistercians was certainly rough and ascetical, and called for great generosity of spirit. At the same time, the renaissance of learning in the universities of the 12th century had given these writers a flavour which we today would call humanist and personalist. One just has to recall the importance the three writers I have just mentioned attached to personal relationships.

So I am suggesting that Merton's own temperament, his reading of the Fathers and of course the grace of God gave him the insight to understand that what was then presented at Gethsemani was not the full authentic contemplative tradition. As I understand it, from the Counter-Reformation on, the Church threw herself into devising a spirituality which would build Soldiers of Christ, ready to take the Gospel into the forests and deserts of the newly discovered continents. Contemplative prayer was left to odd-balls like John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila, shut up in their monasteries – not that Teresa was all that shut up – and still when I was young many Roman Catholic authorities considered it presumptuous of lay people to aspire to contemplative prayer. Even though things are better today, the Western Church needs to recover something the Eastern Church has never lost, the sense of the liturgy and contemplative prayer as one seamless garment. Of course, contemplative prayer is not the whole of the contemplative tradition. What that tradition is, in Christian terms, so far as one can put it in words at all, is brilliantly set forth in that marvellous book, *The Wound of Knowledge*, by the Anglican Rowan Williams, now Bishop of Monmouth.

Yet even if Merton's view of monastic life in his early days was somewhat romantic, he could already speak of monasticism and the contemplative tradition in positive terms that could hardly be bettered. 'The monastery is a school – a school in which we learn from God how to be happy. Our happiness consists in sharing the happiness of God, the perfection of his unlimited freedom, the perfection of his love.'

What has to be healed in us is our true nature, made in the likeness of God. What we have to learn is love. The healing and the learning are the same thing, for at the very core of our essence we are constituted in God's likeness by our freedom, and the exercise of that freedom is nothing else but the exercise of disinterested love – the love of God for his own sake, because he is God.¹⁰

We see there a theme which runs through all Merton's writings, from the earliest times to the end of his life, the theme of freedom. Freedom does not mean, of course, that you can do what you like. Nor does it mean what many westerners thought it meant, who took up Zen in the 60's and 70's and thought they were being free and spontaneous when in fact they were enslaved to the whim or impulse of the moment – what Alan Watts calls 'Beat Zen.' I am free when I no longer act under compulsion, either from without or from various neuroses, hang-ups or conditioning from within. Instead, I act from a centre within, the centre of my heart in the biblical and patristic sense of 'heart', which I believe is also that of the Far East. As a Christian, I believe that when I act from that centre, I am acting under the impulse of the Holy Spirit.

That does not mean that I am acting under compulsion. God, who creates my acts, also creates the freedom with which I do them. If that seems paradoxical, that is because God simply is not on the same level as events in this universe – he is not one more alongside the 1,001 things – but there is not time to go into that now. I do not know much about Sufis, but I suspect that what I have been saying has some relation to the idea of *istislam*, going to meet the Divine Will in utter compliance. The fact that true freedom is also experienced as utter compliance is part of the paradox, but anyone who has read just a few poems of Rumi must have recognized that here is someone who is free.

A great spiritual Master draws on a tradition which goes back for centuries, perhaps for millenia. At the same time, this tradition will be modified by the Master's own insights and by the cultural milieu of the time. Today, for instance, we have to recognize that, at least here in the west, we no longer live in cultural villages. We are all in a diaspora, surrounded by people with different faiths and world views to our own. I have to hold on to my own faith firmly and with sincerity, and at the same

time recognize that my neighbour holds his or her faith with equal sincerity, and may have something to teach me.

So the contemplative tradition is a river which is continually fed by new tributaries. Some of them are surprising. Writing to Rosemary Radford Ruether, Merton quotes with approval a writer who says, 'that perhaps the most contemplative monastic people in the world today are the nuclear physicists.' That was twenty years before most people were reading, or at least buying, *A Brief History of Time*. However, I have not myself found any passage where Merton enlarges on that, beyond mentioning Bohr, Schrödinger and others.

One modern tributary certainly caught Merton's attention and imagination in a big way. When I was at university, existentialist teachings were just creeping in, and I was too busy becoming a Roman Catholic to pay attention to them. When I had been in the monastery a few years, we started receiving young men who had been soaked in existentialist writings. They seemed to live in different worlds, a different mind-set. I had a lot of catching up to do. I never completely caught up, partly because by the end of the sixties, young people were more interested in the Far East, and while that too was a new language, it was one in which I felt more at home.

I do not know how Merton, shut away in Kentucky, came across the existentialists. I suppose friends supplied him with books, and of course, being fluent in French, he may have been reading the French authors before the English speaking universities got on to them. Certainly Merton became thoroughly immersed in them. You can see this by the way in which, like some other writers, he throws the word 'existential' around without always asking if it adds to the sense. After all, an existential reality is not more real than reality unqualified.

At a deeper level, the word 'dread' – I suppose a translation of 'angst' – described a key concept for Merton. It is an important concept in *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*. I do not recall coming across the word in any other writer on prayer, although of course the state of mind to which it refers is part of the traditional literature.

I must say that I myself do not feel altogether comfortable with the word 'dread' here. It may possibly correspond to how I sometimes feel before I get out of bed in the morning, but it not does not seem to fit any experience I have had in the life of prayer. I have had my own hell – we all

have to take up our cross daily, but I suspect that most of us have, at least once in our life, to make the descent into hell, as Christ did, and perhaps to live there for some time – but I would not call it dread.

However, I showed some of Merton's pages on dread to a confrère whom I first knew as a long-haired art student in the sixties. He is now a short-haired monk, but still an artist, who has sold some paintings. He wrote: 'Merton is spot on: it is totally my experience of going to the mountain . . . Yes, I can identify with dread which both needs to be owned (that is, not denied) and, as Merton says, "rejected". . . Dread/ despair/ void are things you need to go *through* and not *around*, which is pure monastic tradition as far as I am concerned. The *transcendence* is achieved through *going through*, a sort of embracing *and* letting go of all that is.'

My friend added, 'I believe no renewal can come about in monastic life without such conversion. The rest is only discussions about "life styles" and what colour hair rinse shall I choose today,' a turn of phrase which would have made Merton chuckle sympathetically.

It might be asked, Merton may have been influenced by Existentialist thought, but what has that to do with the contemplative tradition? If the contemplative tradition is thought of in terms of prayer, perhaps little, beyond the concept of dread. But Merton had learnt from the ancient traditions that the contemplative life is not just a matter of progress in prayer. This truth was not noticeable in teaching on the life of the spirit when I was young. But in fact the Fathers knew that the life of prayer is intimately connected to personal growth. To become all fire, and to become all fire through the vision of God, that is indeed our aim, even though in this life the vision of God will be more often a matter of knowing through unknowing. To discover one's own identity, to become what one already is, as St Gregory the Great put it.

Merton himself put it like this: 'The spiritual life is not just the life of the mind, or of the affections, or of "the summit of the soul" – it is the life of the whole person. For the spiritual man (*pneumatikos*) is one whose whole life, in all its aspects and all its activities, has been spiritualized by the action of the Holy Spirit, whether through the sacraments or by personal and interior inspirations.' 'The spiritual man is one who, "whether he eats or drinks or whatever else he does, does all for the glory of God"?' And Merton goes on, in words which sum up one of the main themes of

all his writings, 'This does not mean that he merely registers in his mind an abstract intention to glorify God. It means that in all his actions he is free from the superficial automatism of conventional routine. It means that in all that he does he acts freely, simply, spontaneously, from the depths of his heart, moved by love.'

Thomas Merton seems to have stuck his thumb into a good number of contemplative pies, and pulled nourishing plums out of all of them, including some unexpected ones, like the Shakers. He was certainly influenced, too, by the mystical tradition of the Eastern Church. Indeed, Merton and I were both very influenced by a work of the American theologian of the Russian Church, Alexander Schmemmann. Merton knew the book as *Sacraments and Orthodoxy*, while in Britain it was called *The World as Sacrament*. A recent reprint is entitled *For the Life of the World*, and has two important appendices. In the 60's, Secular Christianity had liberated us from the dualistic, world-denying, rather guilt-inducing spiritual tradition of the past few centuries. It taught us to find God in the market place and the workshop. However, by playing down prayer and allowing God no room to work outside the laws of nature he had himself created, it had reduced the sense of poetry and wonder in religion. Many Christians responded to this by going off to the Far East or getting involved in charismatic renewal. Schmemmann showed that in the tradition of Orthodoxy, which was basically the tradition of the ancient, undivided Church, there was a third way.

There was one contemplative tradition, however, which came to Merton, not as a tributary stream but as a broad flowing river. Buddhism drew Merton so far that some people have said that it was as well he died when he did, as otherwise not only would he have left his monastery but he would have become a Buddhist. I suspect that such people know little about Merton and less about Buddhism. It was always obvious from his writings that Merton remained a convinced Christian to the end. It is only in the last few years, though, that I have realized that towards the end of his life Merton was very much taken up with the teaching of the Sufis. They worship Allah, as we do, another indication that Merton was hardly likely to give up a theistic path.

But while I am certain that Merton did not intend to become a Buddhist, I am also sure that he found Buddhism most congenial, as well

he might do. Here is a monastic contemplative tradition which stretches back for several centuries before Christ. It has, too, within each school, a tradition of teaching, a lineage, which goes back in an unbroken line for centuries. That is a strength which Christianity lacks, although our corresponding strength is the guidance of the Holy Spirit, which gives us a great liberty.

Merton learnt a lot from Buddhism. You only have to compare the original *Seeds of Contemplation* with *New Seeds* to see what is surely the influence of Zen. My own personal contact with Buddhism has been mainly with Tibetans, but I did in the 60's try to learn something about Zen, which was the thing to do in those days. From Zen I learnt two things about my own Christian life. If I speak from my own experience, I do so in case it throws light on Merton.

First, the Zen principle of *wu wei*, no action, made me realize that I was trying to pull myself up to Heaven by my own boot straps. The Christian tradition of the past few centuries has been much too Pelagian. So Zen taught me, paradoxically, to rely more on the Holy Spirit, not to think I could do it all myself.

Secondly, Zen taught me and I am pretty sure it helped to teach Merton, about the true nature of Christian detachment. The tradition in which Merton and I were trained tended to split reality into two spheres, the worldly and the sacred. We had to turn away from the world, which included the beauty and pleasures of the world, and surrender ourselves to the sacred. This was not really the tradition of the early Church. For the Fathers, the world meant the passions, insofar as they get out of hand and enslave us – which in fact they do readily – and society, insofar as it is organized to promote greed, the lust for power, and other forms of self-centredness – the kind of thing which sells the daily papers.

Zen taught me that true detachment does not mean turning away from the things of this world. It means rather that we cease to cling to them, to grasp at them. We leave them free to be themselves. When we do that, we see the glory of God shining through them, as did two Victorian poets, Hopkins and Elizabeth Barrett Browning (a rather unlikely coupling, perhaps).

So I suspect that Merton, like myself, gained a great deal from Buddhism. I have not asked a Buddhist, but I suspect that the little parable

which gives its name to *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* expresses the essence of Zen very well. It certainly expresses the essence of Christian detachment. I would love to read it to you, but that might take us too long.

So all these various streams of the contemplative tradition entered into Merton's heart as into a mixing bowl, and from there emerged his own teaching. He had nothing new to say, nothing which had not been said by prophets, sages and poets from the earliest teachings of the Bible onwards, yet he gives it all his own particular and characteristic slant and expression.

I have recommended a brilliant book by an Anglican, Rowan Williams. Now I would like to recommend another one, this time by a Roman Catholic layman, James Finley, who wrote *Merton's Palace of Nowhere*. Finley had tried his vocation as a Cistercian novice under Merton, and it seems to me that he is able to sum up and synthesize Merton's teaching on the contemplative path in a masterly way, besides having many of his own insights to offer. In particular, Merton's distinction between the false self, which God does not know because it has no real existence, and the true self, created in the image of God, says a great deal to me. I suspect that it owes something to Buddhist teaching, although it can also be found in ancient Christian teaching, expressed in a different way.

Merton had, as I have said, this extraordinary ability to discern what was inauthentic in the tradition handed down to him, and later he was able to weave threads from different contemplative traditions into his own life. I wonder if he was able to do this partly because, somewhat like Percival in the old stories, he was given a vision of the Grail early on. Unlike Percival, who was not interested enough to ask what was happening and therefore had to wander about in the wilderness for years, Merton did know what was happening. It was October 25th, 1947, and he says, '... after communion for about thirty seconds, I suddenly knew what St Bernard talks about and St John of the Cross talks about when they say "Pure Love." ... How different from resting in God's peace within you ... this emptiness and freedom into whose door I entered for that half-minute, which was enough for a lifetime, because it was a new life altogether. There is nothing with which to compare it. You could call it nothingness, but it is an infinitely fruitful freedom to lack all things and to lack yourself in the fresh air of that happiness which seems to be above all modes of being.'¹²

After that, Merton had to go out into the wilderness himself, but he was guided by that light which burnt within his heart, as John of the Cross puts it. This light led him, years later, to his final vision of the Grail, in Sri Lanka, where he encountered those enormous Buddhist carvings, which look impressive even in photographs.

Some Christians have been shocked that Merton's great illumination took place in a Buddhist context. They need not have been. What exactly was taking place? Well, of course no one knows. I can only make a suggestion. I make it entirely on the evidence of the *Asian Journal*. Some of you may know something else which shows that I am wrong, but I will make my suggestion. Note that it was not, directly, an experience of God, but neither was it not an experience of God.

Zen uses the image of an apple. It hangs ripening on the branch for weeks, but then there comes a definite moment, perhaps a breath of wind or something and the apple falls to the ground. I think that at Polonnaruwa the apple fell to the ground. And I suggest that the reason these huge figures had such an effect on Merton was that they reflected back at him what he himself had already become without realizing it. Filled with every possibility, questioning nothing, knowing everything, rejecting nothing, the peace not of emotional resignation but of Madhyamika, of sunyata, that has seen through every question without trying to discredit anyone or anything – *without refutation* – without establishing some other argument The thing about all this is that there is no puzzle, no problem, and really no "mystery" everything is emptiness and everything is compassion.'¹³

Merton's world has exploded. Yet Merton remains the same Merton, the Merton who could enjoy beer with his friends, who could roll about the floor laughing, who could chat up a bandsman in a jazz club. As it says in that Chinese poem in *The Inner Experience*:

A sudden crash of thunder, the mind doors burst open,
And lo, there sits the old man in all his homeliness.¹⁴

Merton remains the same, homely old man. Yet the river of compassion, as Bede Griffiths calls it, the river of contemplation, has caught him up in full flood, and in a few days it was to sweep him through the doors of

eternity and into that ocean of God's love where, according to Gregory of Nyssa, there is no further shore, but we sail on and on, the wind of the Holy Spirit filling our sails, into that love, that compassion, that eternal laughter, where however much we have discovered, there is always more to come, and the voyage will have no end.

Notes and References

- 1 Thomas Merton: *The Wisdom of the Desert* (New York: New Directions, 1970), p.50.
- 2 John 40: 10.
- 3 St Benedict: Rule, Prologue, 20.
- 4 St Irenaeus: Against the Heresies, see The Divine Office, June 28th.
- 5 Genesis 2: 18.
- 6 Thomas Merton: *The Seven Storey Mountain* (London: Sheldon Press, 1975), p. 325.
- 7 Ibid. p.317.
- 8 Ibid. p.118.
- 9 Ibid. p. 389.
- 10 Ibid. p. 372.
- 11 Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1985), letter to R.R. Reuther of 4th August, 1967.
- 12 *Entering the Silence: The Journals of Thomas Merton, vol. 2* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996); quoted in a review in *Monos*, v.9/1, 1997, p.8 (Tulsa, Oklahoma).
- 13 *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (London, Sheldon Press, 1974), p.233-4.
- 14 Thomas Merton: *The Inner Experience*, Cistercian Studies, 1983, p. 7.