

## Merton and Selfhood

by

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I'm very grateful to be asked, glad to be here back in Winchester, but somewhat daunted by the task of talking to an audience already well read in Merton studies, about such a central theme as 'Merton and Selfhood'.

However, I have only myself to blame! When I was invited to identify one aspect of Merton's thought to speak on at this meeting, I went straight to this theme as I consider it to be the central theme of his life. One way or another, Merton was constantly wrestling with the question of 'identity', and with particular intensity in the years just before and after he had entered the monastery in 1941. To put it in more dynamic terms, he was engaged in a constant struggle to be free from a kind of imprisoning and distorting self-consciousness that plagued him and he believed to a greater or lesser extent, plagued all human beings. He came more and more to believe that his vocation was - in the particular conditions of western society in the 20<sup>th</sup> century - to break through to an inner freedom and love which reflected fully the Image of God in human beings, and to find that first in his own life. In *New Seeds of Contemplation*, published in 1961, he wrote

There is only one problem on which all my existence, my peace, my happiness depend: to discover myself in discovering God. If I find Him I will find myself and if I find my true self I will find Him.

This question of identity was therefore the deepest question of Merton's life, and all the questions he struggled with later, all the social concerns that filled his huge correspondence in the sixties . . . concerns with race, the bomb, the Vietnam war, etc . . . all of these can be seen to flow from it. We may say that these were the outcome, but an intensely personal struggle came first which was fundamental to everything else. In 1967, the year before his trip to Asia, he wrote to the writer of a thesis who wanted to include a long biographical section on him:

. . . I would like to remark that like every other Christian I am still occupied with the great affair of saving my sinful soul, in which grace and psychology are sometimes in rather intense conflict.

This then was his struggle. This was his 'great affair' - his quest - which was to have profound social consequences, so we are not talking about some kind of obsessive individualism. And it is surely also the struggle and the 'great affair' to which we are all called and it is of course at the heart of the mystical tradition that we celebrate today with St John of the Cross. But Merton's particular fascination for us is that he pursued this quest as a quintessentially modern person, a man acutely aware of, and in the early period of his life, deeply embroiled in and ensnared by, the illusions and what he often called the 'fictions' of our particular century, and I want briefly at the end to come back to that.

Merton's brilliance and his gift to us was that he was able to bring that sense of being trapped, and the quest for freedom - a particularly personal kind of freedom - sharply into focus through his writing, and to work out the meaning of salvation in the particular circumstances and conditions of our time and in the process he makes the mystical and contemplative tradition that was so central to him, accessible to us. As we read in his sharp, racy, and engaging prose, his story; as we sense his struggle for freedom, and as in the sixties we eventually see a man truly breaking free — 'leaping over the cliffs of

the spiritual life' as his biographer John Howard Griffin graphically puts it, we see someone who was enabled, at last, truly to live passionately without fear and self-concern, for God and for the world.

This then is the theme that I want to explore - Thomas Merton's personal story of conversion of life and what it may say to each of us.

But before we get into his story I want to suggest to you a framework which will I think help us both to understand him, and also remind us what Christian conversion may involve for all of us.

In his book, *Soul Making: the Desert Way of Spirituality*, Alan Jones reminds us that conversion is not a 'once for all event, but a way of psychological and spiritual formation that takes a lifetime.' Quoting Aelred of Rievaulx and other mystics, Jones reminds us of an understanding of the lifelong process of conversion that is threefold. He writes of the need in any mature believer's life not to just face one conversion, but three - with the process repeating itself again and again and being lifelong. So I want to look at these first, and then see how they apply to Merton's particular journey.

The first conversion, he suggests, is always hopeful, but will always tend to be a surface thing. It is a turning from muddle, darkness and chaos and an embracing of the hope of light. It is conversion to a new beginning. What attracts and draws the believer on is the promise of escape - the hope that he or she can be delivered and set free from the power of destructive patterns and tendencies, sins and vices, that have him or her in their grip. It is the promise of the new, and the stuff of countless personal testimony

In the archetypal story of liberation which is fundamental to our Jewish/Christian inheritance, the Hebrews were led out of Egypt, the land of slavery, with a simple promise - that they would find freedom in a new beautiful land - 'flowing with milk and honey'. Put very simply, this is the first stage.

The second stage is the experience of hope betrayed, when everything seems to fall apart. The Hebrews found that they had not entered a promised land after all, but a desert; and they turned their blame and their venom on their leader. The disciples in following Jesus

of Nazareth find that they have been led not to seats in his kingdom on his right and his left as they had hoped and as they discussed, and bickered about, but rather to failure, to betrayal, to deeply disappointed expectations and to a bloody cross. 'We had hoped' said Cephas, trudging wearily to Emmaus, eyes cast down, 'that he was to be the one who would redeem Israel.' But it was not to be. In Jones' words - 'the Yellow Brick Road has become the Via Dolorosa.'

And then Alan Jones reminds us that there is, hope against hope, a third stage. Purged and emptied by the desert, the Hebrew people, now forged into a community in the crucible of that desert, are led finally to their promised land. The believer, hopes disappointed and with nothing left but the nakedness of faith, eventually embraces the cross, enters a dark night of the soul, and learns to wait in stillness and silence. After much struggle, and with all desire purged, he or she finds, against all expectation, even as the darkness is somehow accepted, that light is mysteriously given - and ultimately - and perhaps at first only glimpsed, God and the Soul draw close, and eventually become One. "It was good" said Jesus "that I go away from you, otherwise the Holy Spirit, who will dwell within, will not come."

While this threefold process initially may be quite linear, each stage following the other, nevertheless in the believer's life as time passes, this pattern becomes not so much linear but spiral, the three stages repeating themselves again and again: there are times of Epiphany, when we sense we are met and called forward and the world is lit up with new possibility and hope. There are times of betrayal and darkness through which faith paradoxically can be deepened. And there are times of a much deeper resting in God when self-concern leaves us and we are able to engage more openly and honestly with others. This is the constant spiralling pattern of conversion in which formation of the soul takes place and the gift of true life or of what Merton calls 'the true self' is given.

Now I believe that Merton's life story as he tells it and as he lives it through his personal writings, reflects this ancient three-fold exodus/gospel motif, and I want to trace his journey bearing it in mind.

On a bright summer's Sunday morning in New York in 1936, Thomas Merton walked down to the little brick church of Corpus Christi, and as he put it himself 'into a new world'. Two years later on 16th November 1938 in this same church he was baptised. After the baptism, the exorcism, the signing of the cross, and the salt of Wisdom on the tongue, he knelt in the confessional and 'one by one, that is species by species, I tore out all those sins by their roots, like teeth.' The service ended with Mass and he writes, 'Christ was born in me a new Bethlehem.'

Thus this brilliant young man who was already a teacher and a writer, and yet who nevertheless had led a spectacularly chaotic and dissolute life, entered the Catholic Church. It was a road that would take him in just three short years entirely out of the world of modern America, for on 10th December 1941, he entered the Order of The Cistercians of the Strict Observance, the Trappists, and their Monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani deep in the hills of Kentucky. In his autobiography he calls it in language of romantic excess, 'the Court of the Queen of Heaven'.

As the door of the Monastery slammed shut on the world and he entered a life of silence, penance and prayer that had changed scarcely at all since the Middle Ages, he wrote that at long last all his ties with a world that had 'fed him poison' had 'snapped and broken'. He thought he was free.

*The Seven Storey Mountain*, published in 1947, was an extraordinarily compelling and romantic story, and it's still a wonderful read, and to the astonishment of everyone - not least his publishers - it sold in thousands, capturing the emotional and spiritual imagination of America emerging from the war.

However, if we are going to understand what this dramatic flight and turning away from the world meant, and what happened to him and in him in the decade after the door was shut, we have to go back into his very painful childhood and appreciate just something of how much this brilliant young man had suffered - only a small glimpse of which is revealed in the autobiography

Merton's life began well. He was born in 1915, the son of two gifted artists, in the little town of Prades in the South of France in the foothills of the Pyrenees. However it wasn't long before Merton's childhood became insecure, bleak and lonely and perhaps more troubled than he knew. Let me remind you of the bare facts. Merton lost his mother when he was aged just six years old, and then his father just nine years later. From his early years, home was a bewildering succession of very different places in America, Europe and Britain. Aged three (the idyllic beginnings in Prades could not last because of the threat of the first war) the family moved to New York where his Mother died. I'm always moved by his description of how he heard the news. She conveyed it to him by letter . . .

I took the note out under the maple tree in the back yard, and worked over it, until I had made it all out, and had gathered what it really meant. And a tremendous weight of sadness and depression settled on me. It was not the grief of a child, with pangs of sorrow and many tears. It had something of the heavy perplexity and gloom of adult grief, and was therefore all the more of a burden . . .

After his Mother died, Tom was separated from his little brother, John-Paul, who stayed with the grandparents in New York, and off he went travelling with his footloose artist father to various sites where Owen felt he could paint: first to Cape Cod, then to Bermuda, and then back to Long Island. And then very soon Owen and little Tom crossed the Atlantic to the south of France to the little village of St Antonin from where Merton was sent to the Protestant boarding school nearby in Montauban where he was deeply unhappy.

In 1926, his father, who had kept on travelling, came back from England to take his young son to Ealing, where he stayed with an old aunt and was packed off to an English prep school and from there on to Oakham, a small public school in the East Midlands, where he became an orphan. In *The Seven Storey Mountain* he records most

of this turbulence and loss. Let me remind you about how he writes about receiving the news of his father's death by telephone . . .

I hung up the receiver and the bottom dropped out of my stomach. I walked up and down in the silent and empty house. I sat down in one of the big leather chairs in the smoking room. There was nobody there. There was nobody in the whole huge house. I sat there in the dark and unhappy room, unable to think, unable to move, with all the innumerable elements of my isolation crowding upon me from every side: without a home, without a country, without a father, apparently without any friends, without any interior peace or confidence or light or understanding of my own . . .

With parents gone, he now came under the guardianship of a rather severe man, Tom Bennett, and he went on from Oakham to Cambridge, which was the nadir of his youth. Here he spent perhaps the unhappiest year of his life. The loss and grief he had experienced, particularly with his father's death, simply couldn't be absorbed, and so it was buried, and on the surface of his life he compensated by a kind of feverish energy as he indulged in a round of wild riotous parties, alcoholic excess, womanising, and eventually the fathering of a child by a local girl.

At the end of his first year, Merton was summoned to his guardian's Harley Street offices where he faced a humiliating dressing down and the suggestion that he should leave Cambridge for good. In fact he was only too glad not to go back to the place, where, other than the reading of Dante, everything else was, as he put it, 'negative', and in 1933, he crossed the Atlantic alone to Columbia University where he felt more at home in an American culture and where he made some friends that lasted his life, and where intellectual excitement returned.

However the inner wounds were by no means healed and he writes of a kind of nervous attack and collapse on a New York train and it was this, together with an element of self-disgust as well as much more positive influences - his reading and friendships - that finally turned him towards the Catholic Church and eventually the road to Gethsemani.

I have galloped through his first turbulent twenty seven years from January 1915 to December 1941, and have left many gaps - particularly his visit to Rome in the summer before he went up to Cambridge, where through the art and architecture he began to gain some sense of religious calling. So there were good things as well as dark things. But what I want to underline is that, in addition to there not being any real sense of a place that was home, gradually one by one, he lost those key adult relationships that provide a child and a young person with security. His mother died when he was six, his father when he was fifteen, then Aunt Maud who had provided him with a home base in England and of whom he was very fond, and then, when he was twenty one and twenty two, Pop his grandfather, and Bonnemaman his grandmother, with whom he had lived briefly as a child in America. As well as disease and death - (his father died from a brain tumour, his mother from stomach cancer) - there was, particularly in the Protestant Lycée in France, loneliness and bullying. Finally, with regard to his footloose artistic father to whom he was devoted, Tom had to bear in the years before he died the kind of burden and anguish that a child of his age should simply not have to bear, as his father carried on an affair with the novelist Evelyn Scott whom Tom disliked intensely, even as he was also sleeping with Evelyn's husband, Cyril K Scott (I refer you to Bob Daggy's extraordinarily revealing article in the collection of papers from Southampton, *My Heart is your Hermitage*.)

It is important to emphasise that despite all this, Merton emerged as an ebullient and resilient young man and not all was darkness and despair. At Oakham, for example, in many ways he would seem to have flourished, he edited the school magazine, played rugby, and made friends. Nevertheless, this litany of loss that he

suffered and the damage that it must have caused, which we would now understand much better with our greater understanding at the end of this century of psychoanalysis, is key to understanding him and the question of identity that he later was to struggle with and which was central to his thought - simply because his own sense of identity when he entered the Monastery was such a mess.

Unless we appreciate his past and its likely effects on him, we will simply not understand his dramatic conversion - and his turning away from the world. Nor will we understand the middle years in the Monastery, the late forties and fifties, when he underwent some kind of breakdown. Nor will we understand his journey out of what he called "the suffering fifties" into the sixties when he found an extraordinary freedom which led to him to no longer turn his back on the world but rather to turn full circle and embrace it and its concerns, with a passionate spiritual intensity that was to make him an inspiration and a teacher to so many who were involved in social protest movements that were at that time sweeping across America.

So let's try to understand his journey, bearing in mind the threefold Exodus/Gospel motif that I referred to earlier

Merton's autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, was very much the fruit of his first conversion. It is brilliant, captivating, a wonderful read and a great spiritual adventure, and yet it bears the hallmarks of someone who feels that they have spiritually 'arrived' and it emits a kind of priggish and even pharisaical self-righteousness and a despising of the things of the world. Later he was to be acutely embarrassed by it.

Clearly he felt that by entering the monastery and grasping the structures of the Trappist life he would be able to deal with Thomas Merton. By ruthlessly cutting all his ties with the world, he felt that the rigorous monastic life with all its strictures would deal with the chaotic, wild and undisciplined self that had so nearly destroyed him. The trouble was that though he changed his name when he entered Gethsemani, Thomas Merton came with him. Although it is meant to be a triumphant story of grace overcoming nature, nevertheless, even in *The Seven Storey Mountain* itself, he

acknowledged that despite the rigours of the monastery and his best endeavours, all was not well, he was still as he put it, 'shadowed' by another self, another Thomas Merton, whom he called 'the old man of the sea' who would not leave him

Nevertheless, at this stage in his life this other self is not really acknowledged or struggled with - at least at any depth. The tone of the book overall is triumphant - grace abounding to the chief of sinners. And he writes of a power of grace that is surely able instantly to transform everything. Read part of his account of the visit to the monastery of his younger brother, John Paul, whom Tom prepared for baptism:

'Once you have grace', I told him, 'you are free. When you are baptised there is no power in existence that can force you to commit a sin - nothing that will be able to drive you to it against your own conscience. And if you merely will it, you will be free for ever, because the strength will be given you, as much as you need, and as often as you ask, and as soon as you ask, and generally long before you ask for it too.'

This is the tone of most of the book. In the beauty of Gethsemani, in the silence of the community, in the austerity of the life, and in the tradition of prayer, and in the sense of at last coming home - he found peace. And this sense of arrival and triumph seems to have lasted all the way up to his ordination in the summer of 1949, which was his high point - 'the one great secret for which I had been born'. As he says his first Masses, he writes of standing at the altar with 'my eyes all washed in the light that is eternity' and becoming 'agelessly reborn'. Later he writes of becoming 'Somebody Else . . . raised to a higher and much simpler and cleaner level of being.'

This is the kind of tone that made the book such a best-seller - grace triumphant. But what was to come?



As I have read his biographies, particularly Michael Mott's and Monica Furlong's, I have often felt that insufficient attention has been given to the middle years that followed this arrival. For it would seem, from the evidence of his own writings and jottings, that the experience of the early fifties was at times quite devastating. It would seem that here in the woods and the silence of the monastic life, something happened both to him and in him that was eventually to be a turning point, perhaps his real turning point.

In these years, in what became truly a desert experience, Thomas Merton underwent some kind of silent 'disintegration' (I use his own word). As I researched for my own book, and read his entries in *The Sign of Jonas*, I sensed that here he faced, perhaps for the first time, and with scarcely any kind of psychological help, his own Shadow - and somehow he was enabled to re-own much of his immensely painful childhood experiences, which had remained hidden in him, and were the source of his anguish and his restlessness.

It would seem that over a period of about eighteen months in particular he chronicles a sense of inner disintegration. In September 1949 after the ordination he writes of being 'unutterably alone' in the midst of all living things and of a self that defiles everything if it attempts to give itself away. He writes of being alone because he is 'nothing'; of an interior fighting and of a power that 'keeps seizing my heart in its fist and wringing cries out of me . . .'; in the same entry he refers to his soul 'cringing and doubling up and subconsciously getting ready for the next tidal wave . . . all I had left in my heart was an abyss of self-hatred, waiting for the next appalling sea.' In December on the anniversary of his eight years in Gethsemani he speaks of feeling 'less clean than I did when I thought I was throwing my civil identity away.' Echoing a sense of infancy, he writes on the 15th December of working in the woods in the afternoon feeling 'lonely and small and humiliated — chopping down dead trees with a feeling that perhaps I was not a real person any more . . . feeling of fear, dejection, non-existence.' On the Vigil of St Thomas, and significantly the very mid-point of winter, the eve of the day of greatest darkness, he writes of standing in the church being stripped of every illusion about himself,

his reading, his writing, his enthusiasms. In the next entry he speaks bluntly of the death of Thomas Merton. 'They can have Thomas Merton. He's dead. Father Louis (his monastic name) — he's half-dead too.' More and more he is searching out the total solitude, a kind of nonexistence — no dependence on anything. He describes poignantly the Traxcavator pulling down the remains of the old horse barn that is half in ruins. He writes 'It is fear that is driving me into solitude . . . I am exhausted by fear.' He finds himself hanging on to the lines of Psalm 54 and writes of the strength of the liturgy 'My heart is troubled within me and the fear of death is falling upon me.' On the 30th December he writes of 'the dead rot of acedia that eats out your substance with discouragement and fear . . .' and he adds harshly, 'it makes you wish you could get something respectable with real pain attached to it, like cancer or a tumour on the brain' (significantly the two things that his mother and father died of).

Though often overlooked, all this material is, I think, immensely important. After the insecurity, the wild behaviour, the lostness, the flight, and the great spiritual arrival, maybe it was here in the silence of the woods of Gethsemani that the real work of redemption was undergone. Here the real discovery of self began. Before he entered the Trappist order, Merton was asked by a Franciscan Friar why he particularly wanted to join the Trappists. In his youthful naivety he simply replied: 'Father, I want to give God everything'. Well maybe, without really knowing how, this is precisely what he did in the silence of those woods. Perhaps here, without being to understand the process, Thomas Merton found that he did indeed give God everything — not just his time, his possessions, his life, his sexuality, his obedience (the traditional vows of the monk), but also his loneliness, the pain he carried of abandonment, his fear of not being loved, his self-hatred, his destructiveness, his bleakness, his guilt.

In that silent praying place, it would seem that all the wreckage and hurts of his early years began to be received and accepted and absorbed. The despair buried inside him and papered over by feverish drinking and womanising and activity and even

intellectual activity at last began to emerge — and be accepted. But I guess that at the time he was probably not really able to fully understand what was happening — that was probably to come later. On January 24th 1966, one week before his fifty-first birthday, Merton wrote in his journal: 'I realised today after Mass what a desperate, despairing childhood I had around the age of seven-nine-ten, when Mother was dead and Father was in France and Algeria.' Elsewhere he referred to his 'lost childhood', and Bob Daggy writes how the search for the ground of his own being became a 'major thread in the fabric of his contemplative life'. In his essay 'Thomas Merton's Recovery of the Ground of Birth', Daggy quotes from an untitled poem of Merton's written in 1966 on the subject of alienation. He wrote:

All theology is a kind of birthday  
Each one who is born  
Comes into the world as a question  
For which old answers  
Are not sufficient.

Birth is question and revelation  
The ground of birth is paradise  
Yet we are born a thousand miles  
Away from our home.  
Paradise weeps in us  
And we wander further away.  
This is the theology of our birthdays.

It was in those silent years of the early fifties that the wandering further away finally stopped and he really began to find his way home and so to enter fully into a third stage of conversion — which was to lead to the fullness of his contemplative vocation.

The dominant note of this third turning, was a kind of awakening and a seeing expressed most famously in the often quoted outburst on the corner of Fourth and Walnut, where, at long last, he

rejoiced to be part of the human race. And why was it possible for him now to love the world that earlier he had so determinedly rejected?

Because the world was no longer a threat to him. It no longer reflected back to him the chaos of his own inner life, now dealt with. That old self which had been divided — parts of it buried — was now in ruins, it had been broken into, from top to bottom. Christ had gone down into his hell and broken it open and the superficial self-dramatising Merton who had written that highly egocentric book about a pious young monk was gone.

In June 1951 Merton writes 'I have become very different from what I used to be. The man who began this journal is dead just as the man who finished *The Seven Storey Mountain* when this journal began was also dead, and what is more the man who was the central figure in *The Seven Storey Mountain* was dead over and over. . . *The Seven Storey Mountain* is the work of a man I never even heard of ...' And he goes on with wry humour, 'and this journal is getting to be the production of somebody to whom I never had the dishonour of an introduction.' Later, in his new role as Master of Scholastics, he writes: 'It is as if I were beginning all over again to be a Cistercian.' He is moving beyond 'monastic adolescence . . . with no time for anything but the essentials. The only essential is not an idea or an ideal, it is God Himself.' And in November 1951 he writes perhaps the loveliest entry of all 'God sits in the ruins of my heart preaching his gospel to the poor.'

Of course the healing was spasmodic, there were times of integration and there were times of alienation, but it would seem that in those first eighteen months of the fifties something crucial happened. The centre of his being was now no longer a divided self (with part of it often frenetically active) but at that centre — at his centre — he had discovered a 'Hidden Ground of Love' upon which he now stood, and to which he sought every day to return in his silence and his praying. Christ was now truly born in him, the heart and core of his life. At last he had begun to find his true self, and out of that knowledge he was able to see that he had been living a 'false self' — even as a religious man, perhaps particularly as a religious man.

And it led to an extraordinary surge of creative energy in the late fifties and sixties. He found that as he got into more solitude, he was able to give himself more and more fully to others in the world. And as he ploughed into a vast range of political and social concerns, the understandings of selfhood which had grown out of his very personal struggles continued to inform and guide all his thinking.

Finally, let me just hint as to how I think that this works out. Perhaps it is his idea of 'the false self' which best offers the key to his understanding of society. The false self that Thomas Merton writes about is the self that is alienated and separated from its own inner ground and so in flight into all manner of collective illusions, fictions, mythologies, falsehoods, distractions. These were favourite words for Merton which pop up again and again in his work. He used them to describe ideologies and belief systems in which human beings lose themselves. For example, he would caricature the idea of the assertive autonomous individual, the supposedly free man, setting out to create an image for himself as self-consciously different - creating an illusory self because he doesn't really know who he is. So Merton disliked the advertising men of our mass consumer society because he believed they peddled in fictions, and encouraged people in falsity and alienation.

In contrast the discovery of the true self, which is always a gift, means you are set free from this kind of flight. Instead of the collective noise and distraction that the false self seeks, the true self goes looking for itself - for its own inner ground whose name is God - and finds itself as it is found in Him, in solitude, in emptiness and in silence. These things are essential for any authentic spiritual life, as are genuine human relationships where we can express natural affections, as well as art, music, beauty.

All of us are called to this way of being, this at-one-ment with the life of God. It is the way of prayer, it is the way of freedom, it is the way of love. It is the way of the saints and it is the way of Thomas Merton who perhaps more than almost any other in our time, has trodden it ahead of us.