

## The Country of Standing Still

Thomas Merton & John Main:  
the common-denominator

By  
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The true solitude is not something outside you, not an absence of men or of sound around you; it is an abyss opening up in the centre of your own soul. The man who has found solitude is empty. He has advanced beyond all horizons. There are no directions left in which he can travel. This is a country whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. You do not find it by travelling but by standing still.

- Thomas Merton.

The mantra is like a harmonic that we sound in the depths of our spirit, wholeness and central harmony. It leads us to the source of this harmony, to our centre, rather as a radar beam leads an aircraft home through thick fog.

- John Main.

Merton and Main, two of the greatest contemplative-mystics of the twentieth century were contemporaneous. Born within eleven years of each other, they died within fourteen years of each other; one lived to be 53, the other 56. They were both, for almost all of their adult lives, members of two great religious orders of the Catholic Church - Thomas Merton of the Cistercians, John Main of the Benedictines.

Both were skilled writers, accomplished communicators, influencing thousands of readers all over the world. Both were dedicated contemplative monks with a predilection for the eremitic way of life; and, contradictorily, both were gregarious, to the point where they were criticised by their fellow monks, admonished by their superiors. Thomas Merton was perceived, because of his seeming vacillation between the cloistered life and the writer's life, by many of his contemporaries, both inside and outside the Cistercian Order to be 'a kind of hermit of Times Square.' John Main, during his early years at Ealing Abbey, went out occasionally to good restaurants with lawyer friends in London. Questioned by his Prior on this, he retorted, with disarming sincerity, that one could be 'as close to God

enjoying a gourmet meal in a good restaurant, as wearing a hair-shirt in a monk's cell.'

Both were intensely interested in the whole concept of Eastern/Buddhist monasticism and contemplation and its influence on, and relationship with Western monasticism and contemplation. Both were perspicacious enough to see, and courageous enough to advocate the need for monastic renewal in the Western Church. Both were, together with another contemporary; the American writer Henry Miller, militant proponents of what Miller called 'the greatest journey in the world - the journey inward toward the self.' Yet for all the common-denominators, all the zeal for the same concepts, Thomas Merton and John Main never met, nor corresponded.

Incidentally, Miller and Merton, though again they never met, did correspond, towards the end of the Cistercian's short life. Merton thought highly of Miller, both as a thinker and a writer, seeing him as very much a kindred spirit. 'I am a monk and it seems to me that I am here for a reason, just as you are where you are for a reason. We are both here to live and "be" and help others with the recharging of batteries. But, there is no doubt that we spend our lives battling with mountains of crap. I love your essay on Raimu, especially where you say, "The crimes they (American movie heroes) commit in their sleep outdo the atrocities perpetrated by the most tyrannical despots." That sentence will prove, perhaps, to be the key to the twentieth century. But, does one need a key when all the doors are blown off the hinges?'

Significantly and fortuitously, the East played a huge part in the spiritual odyssey of both monks. In 1955, having just received his Law degree from Trinity College, Dublin, Douglas Main (the name John was taken later on entering the Benedictines), took up a junior post with the British Colonial Administrative Service in Malaya. Here, he met someone who was to profoundly influence the rest of his life, introducing him to another way of prayer, an eastern form of spirituality. He later wrote about that meeting, 'I was first introduced to meditation long before I became a monk, when I was serving in Malaya. My teacher was an Indian swami, who had a temple outside Kuala Lumpur.'

While John Main came relatively early to the East, Thomas Merton came to it late. He arrived in Bangkok, quite literally in the last days of his life, having searched in his reading and meditation for the sources of Eastern monastic tradition. He died there tragically. During his first days in Calcutta, before going on to Bangkok, he had written, 'I come as a pilgrim who is anxious to drink from ancient sources of monastic vision and experience. We have reached a stage,

long overdue, of religious maturity, at which it may be possible to remain perfectly faithful to a Christian and Western monastic commitment, and yet learn in depth from a Buddhist discipline and experience. I seek to learn more (quantitatively) about religion and monastic life, and become a better and more enlightened monk (qualitatively) myself.'

Ironically, the conference of Asian monastic leaders which Merton attended was organised by an international Benedictine group (*Aide à L'Implantation Monastique*), in which one of the prime movers was Dom Jean Leclercq. In 1990 I went to conduct a Homiletics Workshop for the Cistercians at Mount St. Bernard in Leicestershire, and met Jean Leclercq. He was there on a private visit, an old man, in bad health, with a travelling, private physician. We talked of Merton, and of his death in Bangkok, and Dom Jean, all those years later, said he still felt a certain responsibility, as he had personally persuaded Merton to attend the conference, though I feel certain that Merton needed little persuasion. We also talked of John Main, and of what a pity it was that the two had never met, nor even corresponded.

At the time of Thomas Merton's death, December 1968, John Main, celebrating the fifth anniversary of his ordination as a Benedictine priest, was teaching at the school attached to Ealing Abbey in London. Merton's search, and his attempt to relate these Eastern monastic traditions to Western Christianity, most definitely made it easier for John Main to talk and write about the same 'journey inward toward the self,' albeit in a different way.

The full awareness that both Thomas Merton and himself were on this same inward journey, and shared so many common-denominators, came to John Main when in 1976, eight years after the Cistercian's death, he was invited to Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky to talk to the community about prayer and meditation. This visit was to be one of the most important experiences on Main's spiritual pilgrimage. He was allowed to stay, for the duration of his visit, in Merton's hermitage in the woods near the monastery, and wrote his very moving *Letter from a Hermitage* to his friend, Lady Lovat in London. It is date-lined, Thomas Merton's Hermitage, Gethsemani, Kentucky, 13 November, and begins, 'I am here staying in Merton's hermitage out in the woods beyond Gethsemani. It is quite extraordinary how solitude brings everyone so close. I have just celebrated the most loving Mass of my life in Merton's little chapel. You were all so close to me as I prayed for you and all your family. My purpose in coming here was to talk to the community about prayer, but in fact I have learned so much myself while I've been here.'

I am certain that when John Main spent those few days and nights alone in Merton's Hermitage, celebrated Mass at the same altar where Fr. Louis had celebrated Mass on the morning he left for Asia, that he understood perfectly they were truly kindred spirits on the same great interior journey. And the clarity of that understanding gave his conferences to Merton's old community a keener edge and tighter focus.

On a visit to Gethsemani, just a few years ago, I talked with an octogenarian member of the community who vividly remembered, across a gap of over twenty-five years, John Main's words to them when he gave them his description of prayer, '... as I understand it, all Christian prayer is a growing awareness of God in Jesus. And, for that growing awareness we need to come to a state of undistractedness, to a state of attention and concentration – that is, to a state of awareness.'

Almost miraculously, as if he realised that they both shared this insight that all the elements of the spiritual life are in us all the time, just waiting to be discovered, Merton had written in Calcutta, a few days before his sudden death, 'The deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words and it is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity ... we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are!'

Despite these similarities, there were some essential differences of emphasis and approach in the matter of prayer between Merton and Main. John Main left a definite, formal teaching about how to pray; Thomas Merton did not. John Main believed implicitly in the importance of *mantra* based meditation. Thomas Merton, though he did at one time use a *mantra*, was less formal in his approach. Though they both wrote many books, Merton is more of a writer, a litterateur, than Main. Main's writings are almost exclusively about prayer and Christian meditation, are formal and deliberately transcend his personality. Whereas Merton pours his whole personality into his writings which cover a whole spectrum from Zen and yoga to nuclear war. However, essentially what both were teaching was what Cassian had taught at the beginning, and out of that they were both seeking to create a new monasticism for our time that would be more lay-orientated. The great common-denominator, for both the religious and the lay meditator, is silence. The discipline of silence led into realms of knowledge and awareness that could not have been explored in a self-conscious or speculative way. People did

not come suddenly to these insights. They began in faith and believed they would end in faith. It was all about wonder, and the wonder was there and it was growing.

Very early in their work both Merton and Main realised that only a new monasticism, revitalised by a return to its basic task of seeking God in prayer would succeed in reestablishing an authentic relationship with the contemporary world. This new relationship of the monk with the world must include a teaching function. And the ordinary people who made up this world are avid for this teaching. Centuries ago Cassian had written, 'You are on the brink of knowledge if you attentively recognise what you should ask about, and you are not far from knowledge if you begin to understand how much you do not know.'

Both men were deeply read in John Cassian and the poetry of William Blake, and were, when all the common-denominators and differences have been weighed, essentially asking the same question, 'What is the ideal structure for a monastery in our time? The structure that makes it most meaningful to most people?' Though, in his early life in the monastery Merton had considered that Main's type of imageless, contemplative prayer was only for the chosen few, he later came to believe that this type of contemplation was accessible to ordinary people. As he matured in his prayer life Merton moved more toward imageless prayer, frequently quoting a line from a prayer he had himself written for Our Lady, 'Teach me to go to the country beyond words and beyond names.' He had become, like John Main, a truly existential contemplative.

For both monks, the Cistercian and the Benedictine monastic structures were important; but only in so far as they facilitated the growth of love. Love was paramount. John Main regularly warned, in both his writings and his talks about the dangers of 'objectifying' the other person in a relationship, making him or her (or God) just an object to be used. And, in one of the most important passages ever written on human love, Merton had this to say, 'The vocation to charity is a call not only to love but to be loved. The man who does not care at all whether or not he is loved is ultimately unconcerned about the true welfare of the other and of society. Hence, we cannot love unless we also consent to be loved in return.'

And, in an equally important statement on Divine love John Main, writing to a meditator had this to say, 'I am delighted to hear that meditation has meant so much to you. There is great healing in it. As you become more quiet and go into the mystery of God, you begin to understand that the mystery is of the infinite depths of the Divine

Love which is absolutely all-sufficing. You begin to understand that you don't have to live out of your own limited resources, but out of the infinite compassion of God.'

Just recently, talking with John Main's sister, Yvonne, I was reminded, listening to her reminisce about him what a great, outlandish sense of humour her brother had. And I was reminded also of an evening in Gethsemani, in the Winter of 1965. Thomas Merton was talking with a small group of us in the Guest House. We were laughing at some joke he had made and I complimented him on his sense of humour. 'Sense of humour!' he said, with a mischievous smile, 'why, in this chaotic world a mere sense of humour is not enough. One needs a sense of the bloody ridiculous!' John Main would have liked that.

Because Merton and Main were both men with strong, charismatic personalities, not all of their contemporaries liked them. Like all great men they attracted some, repelled others. Some envied their talents and their life-styles, their writing and their leadership qualities; others were their willing and sincere disciples. And nowhere were those mixed feelings so obvious as within the communities where they lived and worked. Though they never met, their paths ran parallel, uniting them in some strange symbiotic sense; and in their deaths, they were not divided. Both were men who, in the words of Merton's letter to Henry Miller, 'spent their lives battling with mountains of crap.'

What the Jesuit, Daniel Berrigan had said of his friend Thomas Merton, is equally true of John Main, 'He was a man crazed with caring about the human condition; a voice forever crying into the North wind of indifference and despair.'

These two monks, living in two different religious disciplines were wise enough, and courageous enough to appreciate that the new monasticism, if it were to be truly meaningful, must embrace the lay-person also, must transcend all disciplines. For, meditation is a twofold thing with a twofold function. It enables you to withdraw from exterior things, from business activities, from the concerns of temporal existence; and it teaches you how to become aware of the presence of God.

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