

Thomas Merton and the Mystic East

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Thomas Merton's interest in the spirituality of non-Christian faiths did not initially spring from his life as a Cistercian monk. Lawrence Cunningham, in his perceptive account of Merton's life, wrote of the young Merton: "A friend encouraged him to read Aldous Huxley's *Ends and Means*, with its argument that there is a spiritual substratum to the material changing world, a substratum that took the form of a *philosophia perennis*. This notion that there was a transcultural structure of transcendent experience hidden under all religious systems made a profound impact on him... Huxley, then, provided Merton with the notion that the religious search was an authentic and deeply human one."¹

It helped that through the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, with the words and example of Pope John XXIII, who called the Council, and the popes who succeeded him, Catholics were encouraged to take a more positive view of non-Christian faiths than they had previously done. The inter-faith journey during which Merton died would have been unthinkable even ten years previously.

Merton's interest in other faiths, and especially in Zen, might lead some people to think that he had given up belief in God. On the contrary, he wrote to the Jewish scholar, Abraham Heschel, "I am happy that someone is there, like yourself, to emphasize the mystery and the Holiness of God." Some readers might won-

der why, then, he expressed so much interest in Buddhism, and especially Zen – spiritualities which appear to get on without a notion of God. I myself put the question of God to the Tai Situ, a high-ranking Tibetan lama with good English. He replied, "It is too simple to say that Buddhists do not believe in God. What is God? It is a word of three letters – but what is behind that word?" Remembering the way in which he said that, I seem to understand something of the mystery which he expressed, and certainly there seems something of God in Tibetan temple worship as I have experienced it.

William Apel, in *Signs of Peace*, a collection of Merton's interfaith letters, tells us that when Pope Pius XI, who died in 1939, sent an Apostolic Delegate to Libya, he said to him, "Do not think that you are going among infidels. Muslims attain to salvation. The ways of Providence are infinite."² That is something which we may take for granted these days, but before Vatican II it was almost revolutionary.

Thomas Merton seems to have had a special affinity with Zen. In 1959 he initiated a correspondence with the great Zen scholar Dr D.T. Suzuki, a correspondence which led to a real friendship. Indeed, Merton managed to get special permission to fly to New York, to meet Suzuki there. In various books and articles, many of them gathered into the book *Thomas Merton on Zen*, Merton wrote

about Zen because he sensed an affinity between the Zen writers and the Desert Fathers. That may be partly because both the Desert Fathers and various Zen Masters of the past are mostly remembered by various little snippets of teaching, for instance, the Zen mondo, "What is the sound of one hand clapping?"

Anyone who reads Merton's book *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*³ or the anthology mentioned, *Thomas Merton on Zen*, published some years after his death, may be astonished at the depth of his understanding of Zen. At the same time, he was aware that the extraordinary interest in Zen many young Westerners had in the sixties (to the astonishment of their elders!) was not without its darker side. In the Author's Note at the beginning of *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, Merton says, "Where there is a lot of fuss about 'spirituality', 'enlightenment' or just 'turning on', it is often because there are buzzards hovering around a corpse."⁵

In other words, in any faith, even the spiritual search can become a feeding of the ego. This search calls for spiritual poverty, and indeed, if the search is genuine, it will lead to spiritual poverty. Without it, one may end up like the drug-sodden young westerner I once saw lying unconscious on the ground outside a Tibetan monastery, totally dependent on the compassion of the Tibetans who gave him shelter. Merton, following the teaching of Dr Suzuki, wrote: "To be absolutely naked, to go even beyond the receiving of 'an impulse' of whatever nature, to be perfectly free from every possible remnant of the trappings we have put on ourselves ever since the acquisition of Knowledge – this is the goal of the Zen training. Then and only then do we find

ourselves to be the ordinary Toms, Dicks and Harrys we had been all along."⁶ That last sentence says it all – we do not enter the spiritual path in order to become "mystics", or Masters at whose feet other people will fall down in wonder. As Christians we enter to find that in Christ we are the ordinary Toms, Dicks and Harrys we had been all along. We do not become supermen, or spiritual masters with a piercing gaze, but in Christ we know ourselves as the men or women we always had been, but illuminated by the risen Christ, in whom we live and move and have our being. Perhaps it is only when we have discovered this that we can feed the spiritual hunger of so many other people who look to the Churches to feed them.

Merton wrote to Suzuki, "...You see, that is the trouble with the Christian world. It is not dominated by Christ (which would be perfect freedom), it is enslaved by images and ideas of Christ that are creations and projections of men and stand in the way of God's freedom. But Christ himself is in us as unknown and unseen."⁷

Merton went beyond this, writing of Christ to his Buddhist friend, "We follow Him, we find Him... and then He must vanish and we must go along without Him at our side. Why? Because He is even closer than that. He is *ourselves*."⁸ Yes, the baptized Christian lives "in Christ".

Merton's concern with Buddhism cannot be left without mentioning the relationship he formed with Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk who aroused the interest of the West by his demonstrations against the Vietnam War. In Merton he found someone who sympathized with him totally.

Merton's interfaith interests went beyond Buddhism, of course. He had a special love for the Sufis (the mystical school in Islam), and indeed became friends by correspondence with a young Muslim, Abdul Aziz. Moreover, Merton had made such a deep study of the Sufis that his Abbot asked him to give a course of lectures on the subject to his community. Talking with Sufis, of course, has this advantage over Buddhism in that both sides acknowledge the God of Abraham. Merton's talks give a good impression of the rather colloquial way in which he talked to his community. However, my quotations come from private papers – I do not know if these talks have been published in book form.⁹

Merton was aware that there is a certain analogy between aesthetic experience and mystical experience. "If you sort of get into it and give yourself completely to it ... there is this self-transcendence. And this is something perfectly legitimate to any man.

"... So that one can say that mystical experience is, as it were, hearing the harmony of everything on a very high sort of spiritual-musical level, in a way. ... And you will find the Fathers of the Church talking about it in that kind of a way..."

And then Merton quotes the Sufi mystic Rumi:

"We are all parts of Adam and in Adam we have heard the melodies of paradise."

This leads on to Merton saying, "... I would say that one of the characteristic things that affects mystical awareness of God is that it is somehow subjective, that is to say, an awareness that God is within

my own subjectivity, that He is the root of my own personality, so that I do not see Him as somebody else entirely. And yet He is totally other."

There Merton expresses the paradox that underlies all mystical experience of God, or indeed any life of prayer.

If Sufis and Christians both worship the God of Abraham, so in a special way do the children of Abraham, the Jews. As I have already implied, Merton entered into an epistolary friendship with Abraham Heschel. As William Apel puts it, "Merton believed modern life had abandoned the Sacred for a shallow and potentially destructive secularism that devalued the holiness of God and God's creation (especially us humans). This expression of holiness, Merton believed, was deeply rooted in the Bible and needed to be recovered."¹⁰ In Heschel he found a Jewish scholar, a philosopher and holy man, who agreed with him completely. Both men agreed especially on the importance of prayer. As Apel also says, "The God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and the prophets came alive for Merton in his reading of Heschel. He had discovered an interfaith friend, who, like himself, desired to combine, in his own life, the biblical legacy of a personal devotion to God with a prophetic commitment to social justice and peace."¹¹

That last sentence says something important about Merton. He had hidden himself away in an austere and remote monastic life to follow a path of prayer, but always he felt drawn to bear witness to the importance of a commitment to social justice and peace.

In his Rule for monks, followed by both Merton and the present writer, St Benedict says that the newcomer to the

monastery should be tested, to see if he is truly seeking God. Heschel would have added that we are seeking God, because God first came seeking us (cf Genesis 3.9 – a Christian might add that this is what the Gospels are all about). For Heschel, as for any Christian, awareness of God can only be restored by repentance. But he writes, "The Hebrew word for repentance, *teshuvah*, means *return*, but it also means *answer*. So we return to God as our answer to God seeking us out."¹² These ideas resonated with Merton's own thought.

However, Merton's relationship with Heschel – a friendship, we might call it – was complicated by the fact that the Fathers of Vatican II were discussing the relationship of the Church with the Jewish race. Here was a marvellous chance to reverse centuries in which the Church had seemed to disregard the Jews, even, at times, to regard them as enemies of the Church because they had crucified Christ, and now it seemed, as rumours of the Council discussions seeped out, that the Catholic bishops might continue their old anti-Semitic attitude. What is notable here is that Merton actually wrote to Cardinal Bea, who was head of the Council's work on the Christian-Jewish document, and in the end the final document was more subtle than it might have been.

Merton wrote in a letter to Heschel, "I believe humbly that Christians and Jews ought to realize together something of the same urgency of expectation and desire, even though there is a radically different theological dimension to their hopes. They remain the same hopes with altered perspectives. It does not seem to me that this is ever emphasized."¹² That might be a good principle with which to start any

Jewish-Christian dialogue, although such a dialogue must, of course, be more delicate than dialogue with completely different faiths.

Merton, then, was a writer and thinker who had something important to say to us. However, it is more important that he was a man of prayer, a man who had no intention of watering down his own Christian beliefs, but who felt, nevertheless, that God has not left the non-Christian world without some witness of eternal values. Merton's own witness is enduring, for his many writings are still read.

Notes

1. Lawrence Cunningham, *Thomas Merton and the Monastic Vision*, (Eerdmans, Michigan & Cambridge, 1999), p. 9.
2. William Apel, *Signs of Peace: the Interfaith Letters of Thomas Merton*, (Orbis Books, NY, 2006), p. 18.
3. *Thomas Merton on Zen*, (Sheldon Press, London), 1976.
4. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, (New Directions, 1968).
5. *Op.cit.* p. ix.
6. *Ibid.* p. 114.
7. *Ibid.* p. 118.
8. *Ibid.* p. 94.
9. Hence I have not quoted from them.
10. Apel, p. 67.
11. *Ibid.* p. 68.
12. *Ibid.* p. 73.

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