

C.S. Lewis and Thomas Merton: Poetic Affinities

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I think that Thomas Merton could easily be called the greatest spiritual writer and spiritual master of the twentieth century in English speaking America. There is no other person who has such a profound influence on those writing on spiritual topics, not only on Catholics but non-Catholics, as Merton. The only contender would be the enormous popularity of C.S. Lewis. I think that they are very different kinds of persons who led very different kinds of lives. They both were greatly shaped by the English literary tradition, both of them were excellent writers, and both of them wrote out of very deep experience.¹

It is a rare day, indeed, when C.S. Lewis (1898-1963) and Thomas Merton (1915-1968) are breathed in the same breath. There are many who bow low to Lewis, and many others genuflect to Merton. Both men, for different reasons, have an ample following. Is it even possible to think of these men as having anything in common?

We do know that Lewis was quite fond of Merton. John Brown did a thesis at Union Seminary on race relations in the 1960s, and in a letter to Merton, he had this to say. 'I am rather ashamed to admit that you are the first Roman Catholic writer that I have read seriously, and then only on the recommendation of C.S. Lewis, who in a letter not long before he died, stated that he had discovered your writing, and found it quite the best spiritual writing he had come across in a long time'. Merton replied to Brown, 'Thanks for your kind letter. I am certainly happy to think that so sound a

judge as C.S. Lewis found something to like in my writing'.² Merton's interest in Lewis, though, can be traced back to a book review he did of *The Personal Heresy* in 1939.

Thomas Merton had finished his MA in English Literature at Columbia University in 1939. The thesis was on William Blake. 'Nature and Art in William Blake: An Essay in Interpretation' was a rather interesting read of Blake that few would approve or accept today. Northrop Frye's magisterial book on Blake, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (1947), had not yet been published. But, Merton was very much in the thick of literary criticism at the time, and he was ahead of his time with his interest in Blake. Merton was primed and pumped to do his PhD, and Gerard Manley Hopkins held his attention. It seemed, from a certain perspective, that Merton was well on his way to becoming an academic and

professor. A few more years of solid work on Hopkins, and a thesis behind him, and Merton would be well set on a solid vocational path.

C.S. Lewis, in the 1920s-1930s, had serious concerns about both the poetry and literary theories of T.S. Eliot. Eliot was editor at the time of one of the most influential literary magazines: *Criterion*. Lewis sent Eliot an essay to be published in *Criterion* that reflected his worries. Lewis' essay, 'The Personal Heresy in Criticism' took both Eliot and the critic E.M.W. Tillyard to task in the way they interpreted Dante and Milton. Lewis thought that it was inappropriate to use an author's writing to learn more about the author. A poem should be studied in and for itself not as a door into the soul of the creator. Lewis sent the article to Eliot in 1931. Eliot refused to publish the essay. The issue, though, would not go away. In fact, the personal heresy took on a fuller and more animated life. The essay was, finally, published in *Essays and Studies* in 1934. More articles rolled off the pens of Tillyard and Lewis, and they were published in *Essays and Studies* in 1935 and 1936. Is poetry merely a form of veiled autobiography? Lewis would have none of it. Tillyard thought there was some truth in the suggestion. The essays were finally published as *The Personal Heresy: A Controversy* (1939). Merton realized this was a book that had to be reviewed.

Merton studied at Clare College, Cambridge from the autumn of 1933 to the spring of 1934. Merton might have heard of Lewis at the time, although Lewis was at Oxford. Merton did a full course on Dante when at Cambridge, and Lewis was immersed in the medieval-

renaissance era and Dante. Lewis was, obviously, a few decades ahead of Merton on the journey. Lewis was to have a profound impact on the renewal of the classical catholic tradition to which Merton would turn as he followed the lead of prominent Roman Catholic thinkers such as Jacques Maritain and Etienne Gilson. There is no doubt that there were important affinities between Lewis and Merton. Merton's turn to the Cistercians as his monastic family in 1941 very much reflected a turn to a medieval and classical notion of the Roman Catholic tradition.

The fact that Merton decided to review *The Personal Heresy* (1939) in *The New York Times* (9 July 1939) does need to be heeded, and the fact that Merton, for the most part, sided with Lewis against Tillyard can be noted also. The main points of Merton's review do need to be briefly summarized. The review has been republished in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* (1960).

Merton had completed his MA on Blake, but he was also a poet, novelist and interested in literary criticism. This meant that he was reading and pondering some of the more pertinent theories and ideas of the time in the 1930s. There is no doubt, given Merton's area of interest, that Tillyard and Lewis articulated different and at odds views in the area of literary criticism. Merton was the novice, and Lewis-Tillyard the opposing Abbas.

'E.M.W. Tillyard and C.S. Lewis—A Spirited Debate on Poetry' can be read at a variety of levels. Merton had done his MA on Blake, and Blake had certainly engaged with Milton, and Merton walked the extra mile to situate Blake within aspects of the medieval heritage. This

meant that Merton could not but read Tillyard and Lewis. Tillyard had published two significant articles on Milton and literary theory, and Lewis had more than won his academic stripes with the publication of *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (1936). Merton flags this reality at the beginning of the review of *The Personal Heresy*.

Merton notes that, 'it is Mr. Lewis who dominates the whole subject', and 'Mr. Tillyard seems only to be presenting a mere foil for Mr. Lewis' ideas'. What, though, is the core of the issue? Merton summed it up succinctly. 'Reconstructing verses into personalities and using the images of poetry for the experiments of psychoanalysis constitute heresy...its value as poetry cannot be judged in terms of Freud or the history of language'. Tillyard, for example, in his work on Milton, had suggested that Milton's description of Satan 'was really describing himself.

Merton did lean, therefore, towards Lewis and his position, but he was also willing to recognize that Lewis might have gone too far with his notion, and Tillyard had spoken some truth. 'Some poems, however, cannot fail to communicate a vague idea of their author's personality'. This is Merton at his nimble and supple best, weighing and evaluating, unwilling to be an uncritical ideologue. Merton makes it clear that the poetry of Milton, Donne, Blake, Swinburne and Marvell are the products of different personalities and dispositions, and the poetry does say something about the authors.

Merton recognizes, in the controversy, that Tillyard does ease off from his position 'under pressure of Mr. Lewis'

arguments, but he does arrive at an interesting definition of his position'. Tillyard argues that there are 'mental patterns' that do say something about that poet's personality, and these patterns are embodied in the poems. This means that Tillyard is more interested in something deeper in the poet's soul than the mere details of biography. Merton has certainly, in the review, heard both Lewis and Tillyard well. He has refused to take uncritical sides in the debate. Both men, as literary critics, were onto something, and Merton wanted to know just what these literary directors had to say.

The core of *The Personal Heresy* seems to hinge on the meaning of "personality", and the relationship of the 'mental patterns' of a poet, the poems of the poet and the deeper significance of personality. Lewis in his logic chopping way might have missed some of the more oblique yet insightful aspects of Tillyard's thought just as Tillyard needed to deepen his definitions of poet, personality and poem. Merton's review, in a thoughtful manner, attempted to synthesize Lewis and Tillyard rather than doff to the one and dismiss the other. This approach speaks much about Merton's more dialogical and dialectical way of knowing. There is much more to Lewis-Merton affinities than a delving into the details of literary criticism.

Merton completed his controversial *Peace in the Post-Christian Era* in April 1962, but the Abbot General of the Cistercian order, Dom Gabriel Sortais, banned the book from being published. *Peace in the Post-Christian Era* probes the historic peace and war traditions within Christianity and leans in the dovish direction. Most Merton scholars

are convinced the title for the book was drawn from Lewis' 'De Descriptione Temporum'. When Lewis took the position of Professor of Medieval and Renaissance English Literature at Cambridge University in 1954, his inaugural lecture was called 'De Descriptione Temporum' (A Description of the Times'). Lewis suggested in the lecture that Western Culture was moving into a 'Post-Christian era, Christians and Classical pagans might have more in common with one another than both would have in common with non-religious secularists in such a Post-Christian world'. Lewis had, of course, argued the same point in *Abolition of Man* and *The Last Battle*.

It has been suggested and cogently argued that Lewis' coining of the term, 'Post-Christian', was at the heart of Merton's use of the neologism in *Peace and the Post-Christian Era*. Patricia Burton's compact and convincing essays on the topic, 'Editorial Note Concerning Thomas Merton's *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*' and 'Forbidden Book: Thomas Merton's *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*' (*The Merton Annual* Volume 17, 2004) make the case of Merton borrowing from Lewis. George Kilcourse argued further in 'Thomas Merton on the Challenge of the Post-Christian World' (*The Merton Journal* Volume 15, Number 1: Easter 2008), that Merton dipped his bucket deeply in the well of Lewis' thought in his use of 'Post-Christian'.

Lewis did describe the post WWII times as 'Post-Christian'. Both Lewis and Merton keenly realized that the times were out of joint, and Christians could no more appeal to either the premises or

worldview of Christianity or Christendom. If Christians were ever going to meaningfully address the reality of the Post-Christian West at a serious and substantive level as public intellectuals, a serious rethinking had to be done on how such a dialogue would take place. Both Lewis and Merton, to their credit, were at the centre of this rethinking process, and this is why they still act as mentors and models of how to think and live the Christian journey in the post-Christian world.

Lewis had a great admiration for Merton. As noted above he thought Merton was the best writer in the area of spirituality he had come across in a long time. Merton had a great admiration for Lewis. He thought Lewis was a 'sound judge' on the important issues. Merton reviewed Lewis' *The Personal Heresy*, and he was both convinced by Lewis' use of 'Post-Christian' and committed to articulate the Christian faith in a way that could meaningfully speak to those who lived in such times.

Notes

1. Lawrence Cunningham, *Soul Searching: The Journey of Thomas Merton* pp.183-4.
2. T. Merton *The Road to Joy*: p.369.

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