

Attending to the Presence of God: Thomas Merton and *Le Point Vierge*

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We encounter Thomas Merton's realization of *le point vierge*, the hidden point at the center of his true self where his spirit touched God, through the copious meditations which flow from his journals and books. He empties himself in self revelation as he pours himself out onto the page with lines which transform into hot brands to sear the mind that encounters them. Emanating from this virginal point, those lines share the spiritual quest of this monk, prophet, social activist—this seeker of the no-face of the living God. As if on a flowing river, his lines carry us on a meditative barge through his youth, his monastic life, his journey to the East, his death. They cascade like a waterfall flowing from its source at *le point vierge* and, if we enter into their contemplative rhythm, they could ferry us to God.

Thomas Merton's poetic prose propels us on this journey as he trumpets:

Here is an unspeakable secret. Paradise is all around us and we do not understand. It is wide open. The sword is taken away, but we do not know it: we are off 'one to his farm and another to his merchandise.' Lights on. Clocks ticking. Thermostats working. Stoves cooking. Electric shaver's filling radios with static.

'Wisdom', cries the dawn deacon, but we do not attend.¹

Heeding the cries of the dawn deacon, Merton silently attends to the presence of God to become a transparent messenger of wisdom, born in solitude, and encourages us to embrace paradise through our own pursuit of wisdom. In this essay, I reflect upon some of his writings, which focus upon his attending to the presence of God, in the hope that they may bear the fruit in us of knowing that all around is paradise. To know, we must ask: *What prevents us from realizing that all around is paradise? If our false self is the barrier, what are the means to the recovery of our true self? What is the true self?*

Merton teaches that we have a choice of two identities: the external mask of our false self or a true self which can attend to the presence of God.

We have the choice of two identities: the external mask which seems to be real and which lives by a shadowy autonomy for the brief moment of earthly existence, and the hidden, inner person who seems to us to be nothing, but who can give himself eternally to the truth in whom he subsists. It is this inner self that is taken up into the mystery of Christ, by His

love, by the Holy Spirit, so that in secret we live 'in Christ'.²

What prevents us from realizing that all around is paradise? Our choice of an exterior mask or our false self, originating in sin and fruitlessly questing to be a god, blinds us. Authored by original sin and sustained by our infidelities to reality, the false self centers relationships on itself and estranges us from God and consequently from others, as well as the natural world. At its core, this false self wishes to be a god.

... we seek what one might call a relative omnipotence: the power to have everything we want, to enjoy everything we desire, to demand that all our wishes be satisfied and our will should never be frustrated or opposed... It is a radical falsity which rots our moral life in its very roots because it makes everything we do more or less a lie.³

This radical falsity births a selfhood that God does not know and according to Merton, 'that is altogether too much privacy'.⁴ This external mask creates a lens through which one falsely sees creation only in relationship to oneself, and which separates us from the reality of creation.⁵

Arising from our true self, an interior voice accuses us of this infidelity to our innermost being and to God, generating a struggle within. We drown that voice by engaging in distractions. In a world of overwhelming sensory barrage, we should be reminded of Merton's view that these distractions suppress our discontent and delay the confronting of our false self.

We, thereby, delay facing our self-hate arising from the lie we make of our lives.

And behind the smokescreen of amusements and projects, the inner dissatisfaction marshals all its forces for a more terrible assault when the distraction shall have been taken away. At last, the spirit that has fled from itself all its life, is stripped of its distractions at death and finds itself face to face with what can no longer be avoided; there is nothing now to prevent it from hating itself utterly, and totally, and forever.⁶

Merton existentially views this false self to be a cramp of non-entity and nothingness which leads to despair. Merton infers that, 'In the end, as we realize more and more that we are knotted upon nothing,

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...the cramp is a meaningless, senseless, pointless affirmation of non-entity... a makeshift identity which is nothing.⁷ Furthermore, 'What he really seeks and needs—love, an authentic identity, a life that has meaning—cannot be had merely by willing and by taking steps to procure them.⁸ What cannot be achieved by willing can be received as a gift if we are open

to it. Merton insists, 'In order to be open, we have to renounce ourselves, in a sense we have to die to our image of ourselves, our autonomy, our fixation upon our self-willed identity. We have to be able to relax the psychic and spiritual cramp which knots us in the painful, vulnerable, helpless "I" that is all we know as ourselves.'⁹ Although our false self barricades our realization, our true self touching God at *le point vierge* knows that indeed all around is paradise.

What are the means to the recovery of our true self? The Holy Spirit through the modalities of prayer, grace, silence and solitude leads us to the recovery of our true self.

The journey to our true self entails a life of prayer. Merton believes prayer leads us to our center where we can experience the mercy of God.¹⁰ It opens the door to self-knowledge which allows the Holy Spirit to shine upon the alleyways of our dark interior.¹¹ Prayer leads us to union with God and communion with others.¹² Prayer allows the community to touch God and God touch the community. For Merton, 'The mind that prays in me is more than my own mind, and the thoughts that come up in me are more than my own thoughts because this deep consciousness when I pray is a place of encounter between myself and God and between the common love of everybody.'¹³

The recovery of our true self requires grace. Merton observes: 'Once we find ourselves in the state of "knowledge of good and evil" we have to accept the fact and understand our position, see it in relation to the innocence for which we were created, which we have lost and which we can regain.'¹⁴ Grace restores our

innocence through the promptings of the Holy Spirit, our source of grace, our guide and our destination. Realizing that the 'only source of the spiritual life is the Holy Spirit,'¹⁵ Merton believes grace prompts us to seek the truth of ourselves and our lives as we seek the Truth that is God.

Through grace, we recover our true self by the work of Christ in us who transforms us by shrouding himself with the wounds of our sins. Merton states, 'The Christ we find in ourselves is not identified with what we vainly seek to admire and idolize in ourselves—on the contrary, He has identified himself with what we resent in ourselves, for He has taken upon Himself our wretchedness and our misery, our poverty and our sins.'¹⁶ By actualizing the recovery of our hidden identity in Him, Christ transforms our self-hate to love which promotes peace within us and thereby with others.¹⁷ Through the power of the Holy Spirit, grace liberates us from sin's creation, the false self.

Silence and solitude allow us to relax the psychic and spiritual cramp of our 'I' to immerse ourselves in the mystery of our identity in God, for, 'When we are quiet, not just for a few minutes, but for an hour or several hours, we may become uneasily aware of the presence within us of a disturbing stranger, the self that is both I and someone else.'¹⁸ Silence is healing since '... silence makes us whole if we let it.'¹⁹ Silence guides us to the solitude of our true self and the ground of our being where we encounter God and peace.²⁰ In this solitude, the inner door of one's heart opens, allowing the Spirit to flow and Love be spoken.²¹

In our journey to our true self, Merton cautions against particular ways or meth-

ods. Instead, he suggests we cultivate an attitude of openness.

...an 'outlook': faith, openness, attention, reverence, expectation, supplication, trust, joy. All these finally permeate our being with love in so far as our living faith tells us we are in the presence of God, that we live in Christ, that in the Spirit of God we 'see' God our Father without 'seeing'. We know him in 'unknowing'. Faith is the bond that unites us to him in the Spirit who gives us light and love.²²

What is the true self? Merton believes our true self is our real but hidden identity in Christ, in which our spirit and God's spirit become one. This point of union is *le point vierge* which is the hiding place of God within us, inaccessible to our meddling but realized by those who see God through grace and purity of heart. By the recovery of our innocence before God, we see through spiritual eyes that paradise is all around, that every point is equidistant to God, that God's light shines through the natural world, and a blazing light like a diamond resides in everyone. Our true self fosters a life without care, a life of peace and union with others, and communications that become communion.

In Merton's view, the Spirit leads us to the core of our being and awakens us to our true identity in Christ.

Each one of us, in some sense, is able to be completely transformed into the likeness of Christ, to become, as he is, divinely human,

and thus to share His spiritual authority and charismatic power in the world.²³

When we come to know our true self, we, in some degree, have returned to paradise as a new person with a measure of the innocence present before the fall. Merton states he 'who has realized in himself purity of heart...has been restored in some measure to the innocence lost by Adam.'²⁴ Merton's experience at the corner of Fourth and Walnut reflects this innocence. Through the lens of his recovered true self, he realizes *le point vierge* as a point of poverty and nothingness which is the Glory of God within us. Consequently, he sees other persons radiating a heavenly light.²⁵

At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God...This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us...It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely... I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere.²⁶

In writing of this experience, Merton uses the phrase, *le point vierge*, which has its origin in the teachings of a ninth century

Sunni mystic. Al-Hallaj taught that the core of the human heart was accessible only by God, but that our spirit may touch God at the virginal center of this core, *le point vierge*. At the time of his experience at Fourth and Walnut, Merton was reading the writings of Al-Hallaj as popularized by Massignon with whom Merton corresponded.

The recovery of the true self awakens us to the mystery of the presence of God. For Merton, an initial awareness of this presence led him to the Catholic Church: 'My conversion to Catholicism began with the realization of the presence of God in this present life, in the world and

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myself, and that my task as a Christian is to live in full and vital awareness of this ground of my being and of the world's being.'²⁷ Through the Church with her liturgy and sacraments, he found the grace to break through his false self to his true identity in Christ.

As we attend to the presence of God, the spirit mothers us into a spiritual being that grows in union with God. That is, '...the spiritual awakening of mind and heart...is an awareness that we are not merely our everyday self but we are also one with One who is beyond all human and individual self-limitation'.²⁸ This spiritual rebirth is continuous, beginning

on earth and growing with the intensity of our union with God. For Merton, 'The true Christian rebirth is a renewed transformation, a 'passover' in which man is progressively liberated from selfishness.'²⁹ We become one flame burning with an ever increasing brightness.

To find the presence of God within ourselves, we do not need to journey into strange lands, or seek some exotic vantage point. For, '...we do not need to leave the point where we are and seek it (God's presence) somewhere else, but to forget all points as equally irrelevant because to seek the unlimited in a definite place is to limit it and hence not to find it.'³⁰ The only relevant point is the center of ourselves in which we '...return to the heart, finding one's deepest center, awakening the profound depths of our being in the presence of God who is the source of our being and our life'.³¹ It is our encounter with this presence which accelerates our maturity as persons of God. Before this presence, '...all the burdens of our autonomous self disperse'.³²

The interior journey to our true self and God is reserved for all. Also, the availability of this deep presence of God and in mystery Christ at the center of our being is not limited to the professed Christian. Merton declares that, 'I honestly think that there is a presence of Christ to the unbeliever...The Lord who speaks of freedom in the ground of our being still continues to speak to every man'.³³

By attending to the presence of God, Thomas Merton bore 'immense fruit in the souls of men (he) will never see on earth'.³⁴ That fruit manifests itself in us as we engage him by entering into the contemplative rhythm of his words. Much

more than just receiving the instruction of his writings, we are caught up in his contemplative experience and brought to our own ever deepening realization of the presence of God. His prayerful writings are animated by the union of his spirit with that of God. Through them, the Holy Spirit can direct our spiritual formation, deepen our attention to the presence of God, and awaken us to the transparent mystery of God shining through all.

The thing that we have to face is that life is as simple as this. We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent, and God is shining through it all the time.... You cannot be without God. It's impossible, it's just simply impossible. The only thing is that we don't see it. This again is what we are here for.³⁵

The Holy Spirit also can deepen our communications with one another to become communion through which we recover our unity.

And the deepest level of communication is not communication, but Communion... we are already one.³⁶

We, like Merton, can aspire to become transparent bearers of God's presence and radiate the flame of God's love to enkindle the hearts of others. Through our encounters with them, we may awaken to realize Merton's insight that 'we are already one...and what we have to recover is our original unity.'³⁷ We may seek to build in our own communities the monas-

tic ideal of persons in contact with God radiating his presence and peace into the world where we create, '...a new creation, an earthly paradise in which God once again dwells with men and is almost visibly their God, their peace and their consolation.'³⁸

Attending to the presence of God in our lives will bring us to peaceful union and unity with our brothers and sisters and allow us to see the 'one truth shining forth in all of its manifestations'.³⁹ If we heed the cries of the dawn deacon, we, like Thomas Merton, will attend to wisdom and recover our true self.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York, Image Books, 1968), p.132.
2. Lawrence Cunningham, *Thomas Merton. Spiritual Master The Essential Writings* (Maywah, NJ, Paulist Press, 1992), p.255.
3. Thomas Merton, *The Silent Life* (New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1957), pp.13-15.
4. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York, New Directions Books, 1972), p.33.
5. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p.294.
6. Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart. (New York, Image Books, 1974), p.101.
7. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p.224.
8. *ibid.*
9. *ibid.*
10. Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York, New Directions, 1989), p.160.
11. *ibid.* p.160-161.

12. *ibid.* p.136
13. *ibid.* p.135.
14. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York, New Directions, 1968), p.128.
15. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (New York, Doubleday, 1971), p.271.
16. Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey*, p.102.
17. *ibid.* p.101.
18. Thomas Merton, *Essential Writings*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, 2000), p.74.
19. *ibid.* p.77.
20. *ibid.* p.77.
21. *ibid.* p.78.
22. James Finley, *Merton's Palace of Nowhere* (Notre Dame, Ind., Ave Maria Press, 1978), p.93.
23. Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience*, ed. William H. Shannon (San Francisco, Harper, 2004), p.38.
24. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York, New Directions, 1968), p.131.
25. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p.158.
26. *ibid.* p.158.
27. *ibid.* p.320.
28. Merton, *Essential Writings*, ed. Christine M. Bochen, p.65.
29. *ibid.* p.66.
30. Finley, *Merton's Palace of Nowhere*, p.127.
31. *ibid.* p.99.
32. *ibid.* p.139.
33. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p.326.
34. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York, Harcourt, Brace, & Co., 1948), p.462.
35. Merton, *Essential Writings*, ed.

- Christine M. Bochen, p.70.
36. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, eds. Naomi Burton, Brother Patrick Hart & James Laughlin (New York, New Directions, 1968) p.308.
37. *ibid.*
38. Merton, *The Monastic Journey*, pp.66-67.
39. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, (Notre Dame, Ind., University of Notre Dame Press, 1998) p.207.

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