

C. S. Lewis and Thomas Merton: Soul Friends

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Separate Solitudes

C.S. Lewis (1898-1963) and Thomas Merton (1915-1968) have tended to have different followers and devotees. Many are the articles, books, conferences and societies that hold high Lewis and the Inklings, but such a committed tribe often know little about Thomas Merton. Similarly many in the Merton clan often know little about Lewis and his literary circle. This essay will, hopefully, transcend such tribalism by exploring some of the thematic affinities between Lewis and Merton and examine some the explicit references both men made about one another.

Rowan Williams has published books on both C.S. Lewis and Thomas Merton and he points in a thoughtful, positive, though sometimes critical way, towards honouring, the contributions that both men have made to our modern Christian faith. *A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton* (2011) and *The Lion's World: A Journey Into the Heart of Narnia* (2012) are fine explorations into the ethos and probing world of Lewis and Merton. In short, the time has come when the separate solitudes that Lewis and Merton have dwelt in, often appealing to different clans in the Christian family, needs to be overcome. As Williams recognises:

Thomas Merton, like C.S. Lewis and Simone Weil, has not been best served by his most ardent admirers. ... The trouble comes when those admirers, rather overwhelmed by the sheer volume of material, feel obliged to defend everything their heroes wrote, formal and informal, so that the fallible and multi-coloured humanity of the writer becomes fixed and frozen.¹

My first foray into comparing and contrasting the lives and writings of C.S. Lewis and Thomas Merton was a short article, 'C.S. Lewis and Thomas Merton: Poetic Affinities', in an earlier edition of this journal (Advent 2010: Vol. 17, No. 2). There were few essays at the time on Lewis and Merton, and my own contribution only laid down guidelines and pointers for a wider exploration. This article expands on some of these themes, but again, it will be but a pointer—a book or thesis needs to be written on the topic that judiciously weighs the areas of affinity and differences, both in style and content, between Lewis and Merton.

Lewis, Modernity and *Ad Fontes* ²

The Enlightenment project that we have come to call Modernity has tended to fragment in three different directions: right-of-centre scientific rationalism, left-of-centre mythic romanticism and a *via media* synthesizing humanism. The form of the Enlightenment that has tended to dominate in many academic settings and the larger culture is the first of these, an approach to knowing and being that favours the empirical, inductive, deductive and logical method. The promise of such an approach is objective information and knowledge which can be verified or disproved using an experimental method. Such an approach has had a predictable tendency to disenchant the world, to banish mystery and to be committed to clear and distinct ideas. We can see the seeds of such a way of knowing in Late Medieval scholasticism, protestant confessionalism and, in a more fully developed form, the philosophical commitment of Descartes and of Francis Bacon. Thus the right-of-centre form of the Enlightenment rose to the ascendancy and came to dominate and colonize other ways of knowing, including the romantic and humanist forms of the enlightenment. Lewis and Merton were born into a world with such a prevailing view of reality, and throughout their faith journeys they grappled with and through such a method and paradigm. There have been types of Christian apologetics that have attempted to prove the validity of the Christian faith within the premises of scientific rationalism, but Lewis and Merton were too wise and subtle to genuflect uncritically to such a one dimensional way of knowing.

Lewis was born in 1898, and the dominant philosophical mood at the time was scientific rationalism, logical positivism and hard facts. He was drawn to such a way of knowing by William Kirkpatrick, one of his earliest teachers, to whom logic was front and centre. The more Lewis was drawn into such a vortex, the more he came to see that logic both revealed and concealed much. But he was also a great lover of myth,

including the myths of many of the great civilizations of the world. Myth gave him life, unfolding reality to him in a meaningful manner, whereas logic and sheer reason seemed to debunk the life giving qualities of myth. Much of Lewis' struggles in his twenties were between which faculty within would he hear and heed: reason and logic or imagination and myth.

The drying-up of Lewis' life tended to occur the more he isolated and elevated reason and logic above imagination and myth. Lewis saw himself, when young, as a poet, and these tensions were painfully played out in his earliest published works *Spirits in Bondage* (1919) and *Dymer* (1926), volumes of poetry that clearly show the tensions between the hope and possibilities opened up by myth and the cynicism and skepticism that reason often delivers. A close study of these poems enables us to get a feel for the young Lewis' quest for deeper meaning, and of his anger and frustration at finding all the portals to such places being closed. Few readers of Lewis' mature prose works have read the groping, doubting, probing poems of the 1920s.

Lewis was at Oxford in the 1920s where the positivist approach dominated the intellectual terrain. These were years in which Lewis both accepted the insights offered by logic but also came to see that such an approach obscured and concealed many of his deeper longings and desires for meaning that myth delivered. Many of the paths and byways that Lewis took on such a pilgrimage were, as he came to an awareness of the depth and richness of Christianity, spelled out in an insightful but rather dry way in *The Pilgrim's Regress* (1933). Later in life he was to acknowledge the inadequacies of the book, but it was his first attempt to clarify his philosophical journey to Christianity by tracking and tracing his journey on attractive byways that ultimately did not hold his heart and head. *The Pilgrim's Regress*, like Merton's more popular, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948), were, in time, seen by their authors as immature manifestos of their faith journey.

Lewis saw that significant aspects of the modern world view closed off ways to give meaning and purpose to one's life; and thus began an exploration into other periods of history when the portals between time and eternity were more transparent and lucid. This is what led him to become a Medieval and Renaissance scholar—a turn, in short, *ad fontes* of the Christian faith and the Classical world. The problem with the right-of-centre way of modernity was its reductionism and narrowing, a negating of alternate ways of being and knowing—the Medieval and Renaissance way was more spacious and generous, open minded of heart and head,

layered in ways of knowing and Biblical interpretation.

The publication of *Allegory of Love* (1936), *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (1942) and *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama* (1944) established Lewis as a Medieval-Renaissance scholar—his reflections on Spencer's allegorical *The Faerie Queene* positioned Lewis well to keep in balance the tensions between reason, imagination and memory. But it was Lewis' intellectual strivings with the challenges of rational modernity that enabled him to become a nuanced Christian apologist when at Oxford.

The Socratic Club at Oxford was started by Stella Aldwinkle in 1941, and Lewis was the main attraction from 1941 until 1954 when he left for Cambridge. There he invited many of the opponents of Christianity and agnostics to speak and argue their case. A list of the main speakers at the Socratic Club from 1942-1954 takes in most of the main doubters of the time—Lewis understood their concerns and reasons for keeping a distance from Christianity—he had been there, and he still had his ongoing questions about the faith journey. But, there was more to Lewis than merely the rational apologist. Steeped and saturated as he was in the Classical-Medieval-Renaissance tradition, the best of the Christian humanist way was at the centre and core of his thinking. For Lewis there was more to knowing than merely the tensions and clashes between reason, imagination and memory. There was also the turn to the contemplative way of knowing and, deeper still, the transformation of the old dying self to the new, vital and eternal self, these themes being played out with wisdom and subtlety in *Till We Have Faces*, *Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Screwtape Letters*, *Letters to Malcolm*, *The Great Divorce* and in his neglected trilogy of science fiction novels.

The posthumous publication of Lewis' *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Macrobius, Pseudo-Dionysius and Boethius are important to note), and his essay on 'Old Books' in Sister Penelope's translation of Athanasius' *On The Incarnation*, makes it abundantly clear why the past had yet much to reveal to the moderns who had missed much by their narrow vision. Lewis, appointed to the chair of Medieval and Renaissance English at Cambridge, gave the inaugural address in November 1954. There can be no doubting Lewis' swipe at the modern project—he calls it 'chronological snobbery', and he sees himself as an 'Intellectual dinosaur'. Certainly the *ad fontes* commitment cannot be missed. Lewis made it clear that the English Renaissance was not, as some 'progressives' made it appear, an enlightened break from the dark middle ages, but a thoughtful 'Golden

Period' that brought together the best of Western Christian thought and culture—such an approach was diametrically opposed to the notion of the secular and humanistic Renaissance that challenged a feeble Christianity. Lewis was convinced that it was these ancient wells that still had much health-giving waters for both the individual and for society.

It was this turn to the more ancient *vita contemplativa* as a response and criticism of the western addiction to the *vita activa* that puts Lewis on the same page as Merton. It is Lewis' turning to the classical sources that takes him deeper than merely the contested differences between imagination, memory and reason as ways of knowing, from an ethos dominated by the *vita activa* to the counter-cultural *vita contemplative*, pointing the way to deconstructing the thin pretensions of modernity and its utilitarian notions of the self and identity. Lewis probed deeper and further into these issues, and this helped to fuel his interest and explorations into the roots Anglican, Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christianity. For Lewis the contemplative way in such traditions was the root of our new being from which the nutritious and life-giving fruit of eternal life would emerge. If one takes an axe to the contemplative roots, as modernity has, the fruit becomes insipid and thin. It was in the contemplative way that openings and clearings occurred, and silence and stillness, inward purity of heart, grace and love unlocked the door into the deeper reaches of the soul.

Merton, Modernity and *Ad Fontes*

There has been a turn in the last twenty or so years by moderate and thoughtful evangelical and reformed Christians towards an older and deeper way that existed before the reformation. The *renovaré* and *ressourcement* movements, in their different ways, reflect and embody such a turn. But before such a turn Lewis and Merton were already drinking from the ancient wells and pointing others to such sacred historic sites. This was not a nostalgic and sentimental turn to the past—this was much more a visiting of those places and portals where deeper truths for the soul, church and society could be found.

Merton was born in 1915, and he had many an affinity with Lewis, although he was much more the artistic and intuitive contemplative than Lewis. Unlike Lewis he never felt an overweening need to enter into the rationalist Christian apologetic fray. This does not mean that Merton did not face, head on, the challenges of reason and science—he merely questioned the means by which reason and science were defined. Merton's parents were artists and Merton, in many ways, was very much

the artist and poet in a way Lewis never was

The tale of Merton's early years was spelled out in an evocative and literary way in his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948), which details the often tortuous route he took to becoming a Cistercian monk in 1941. Merton was, in his late teens and early twenties living *la dolce vita* of sorts, but in his brief year at Cambridge University, he took a course on Dante's *Divine Comedy*; and it was but a few years later that Merton was reading Jacques Maritain and Etienne Gilson on Thomist theology and medieval intellectual life. Merton knew well the dissipation and fragmentary nature of the western *vita activa*, and his decision to join the contemplative Cistercian order in 1941 was very much an immersion into a form of communal contemplative life.

Merton had written an earlier and unpublished semi-autobiographical novel, *The Labyrinth*, in which he reflected on the maze in which he found himself in the modern world of scattered interior subjectivity. Reason and science, simply put, did not address the deeper longings for meaning and purpose. The doorway into the deeper contemplative catholic vision of inner insight drew Merton, and Dante's levels of ascent and descent spoke clearly to Merton about ordering desires, *ordo amoris*, rather than indulging each and all as occasion expected. It is quite appropriate, therefore, that the title of Merton's published autobiography was drawn from Dante.

Thomas Merton, like C.S. Lewis, was drawn to the Classical Christian tradition as an antidote to the rationalism, scientism and thin activism of the west. The turn to the *vita contemplativa* became, in a substantive sense, Merton's vocation. Merton probed deeper and deeper in his life and writings into the fullness of the Christian contemplative way—probably no other Christian writer of the 20th century has written more about the contemplative journey. Merton, in short, did more than most in recovering and revealing to his readers the forgotten paths and trails of the Christian contemplative and meditative way. Book after book on contemplation and the relationship between contemplation and transformation rolled off the presses from the late 1940s until his death in 1968; and many more were assembled posthumously from essays, articles and other writings.

Merton's turning to the sources (*ad fontes*) was as much about a turn to an age that honoured the contemplative way of being as it was about being open to living the *vita contemplative* in our modern world. However, once he had joined the Cistercians, all for Merton was not plain sailing. His ongoing contemplative journey often placed him in a position

in which he had to face his Abbot, Superiors and fellow monks on the way they had, by multiple religious practices, undercut the silence and solitude needed to become contemplatives. Thus, from the 1950s onwards, Merton was casting about for a monastic order that was more committed to the contemplative life—hence the appeal of the Carthusians, the Camaldolese and the eremitical life.

The deeper source was not, of course, restricted to a particular period of time; rather it was much more about recovering an older way of living into the *unio mystica* in Christ. In this sense, Merton's contemplative existentialism was about living into the fullness revealed by his theological and doctrinal explorations. As Master of Scholastics and subsequently as Master of Novices at Gethsemani, Merton was responsible for the formation of aspiring monks, and, as such, he was convinced that they had to understand and live into and from a contemplative journey. Merton, not only as a teacher but also, as a spiritual director, tried to open up and share with others new dimensions of the faith journey that had been forgotten. In this sense, he was recovering the discarded image whose loss Lewis had so lamented. But Merton made it clear that contemplation was not just for monks—it was, in fact, a countercultural NO to the addiction of the *vita activa*.

The reason that Merton had an affinity with the writers of the Beat movement was that they, like him, saw through the pretension and egoism, the will to power and aggressiveness of the *vita activa*. Each of them, in their different ways, was attempting to retrieve some form of contemplative living. In this they were trying to redress, if not reverse, the balance between the active and the contemplative life; the emphasis in our times being placed more and more on the active. As Hannah Arendt writes in *The Human Condition*:

Perhaps the most momentous of the spiritual consequences of the discoveries of the modern age and, at the same time, the only one that could not have been avoided ... has been the reversal of the hierarchical order between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*.³

I think it can be legitimately suggested that both Lewis and Merton were soul friends in their quest to recover an older way of being and knowing. Their interest in the Classical-Medieval-Renaissance and Humanist forms of Christianity was not merely a nostalgic turn against the philistine world of right wing modernity; the commitment to another time period

and ethos was more about finding the texts, leaders and visionaries that held high the contemplative as the primary vocation from which the active life should emerge, not the reverse.

In our age there is a tendency to pit spirituality and various types of contemplation, meditation and mysticism against religion with the former being idealized and the latter denigrated. Both men were much too wise to buy into such a dualism—when such a move is made, spirituality often becomes its own lucrative form of religion in a post-Christian age.

Lewis and the Church

Mere Christianity has been one of Lewis' best sellers and much appreciated works on apologetics. The title of the book has often been used as a means of suggesting that Lewis was not particularly enamoured about the secondary issues that divided Christians into denominations; he was more concerned with the essential nature of 'mere Christianity'. There can be no doubt there is much truth to such a claim. Lewis often avoided entering into the claims that separated Anglicans, Roman Catholics, Orthodox and various types of protestant schismatic denominations. In short there was a form of 'mere Christianity' to which all could affirm and assent. But Lewis' notion of the Church cannot be reduced to a transdenominational 'mere Christianity'.

Lewis was convinced that it was virtually impossible to claim to be a follower of Christ and be isolated from the Church, the *corpus Christi*. Those who separated Christology from Ecclesiology did not understand the core of Christology. This did not mean that Lewis was an uncritical fan of the institutional church. Grounded and rooted as he was in the life of the Church of England at the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, he did understand the intricate relationship between life in Christ, the parish and the institutional church as a trying and complex one. 'The Weight of Glory', 'Transposition' and 'Membership' are but three of Lewis' essays on the meaning of church life and the process of divinization just as *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* and the much larger tome, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, highlight Lewis' engagement with larger theological, liturgical, ethical and church life issues.

Merton and the Church

Merton's turn to Christianity and his commitment to the Cistercian way was but a deeper commitment to a form of a Catholic way of thought and life. Merton, like Lewis, would have found the notion of spirituality contra

religion naïve and reactionary; and both men were committed to the classical catholic form of Christianity as embodied and developed in the Roman Catholic and Anglican traditions.

Merton's parish, in some ways, was the monastery, but as more and more people visited Gethsemani or engaged in correspondence, Merton's parish became the larger world—the same was true with Lewis. Both Lewis and Merton sent forth many thoughtful probes into the institutional reality of their traditions and, in the process, faced many demanding challenges and often opposition for so doing. Merton's frequent clashes with his abbot, with the head of the Order in France, and his many censures drew from him many soul-testing comments in his often raw and graphic journals. All too clearly Merton understood that there was an ongoing tension in the life of the body of Christ in which loyalty to formal, material and spiritual unity clashed with the claims of an individual's call to holiness. Merton has been called a 20th century prophet; part of the prophetic vocation and charism is to live the tension of prophetic criticism and pastoral unity—never an easy vocation.

Merton had, like Lewis, a truly irenic ecumenism, though they both would have rejected the modern liberal late 20th century understanding of church unity. Both men were fully grounded and rooted, as mentioned above, in the ancient sources of contemplative Patristic Church life, Merton to a greater extent than Lewis. Merton reached out, again and again, to the Orthodox, Anglicans and various protestant denominations in his search for deeper sources of the contemplative journey, a more unified ecclesial life and a more prophetic public witness. Thus he could write:

If I can unite *in myself* the thought and devotion of Eastern and Western Christendom, the Greek and the Latin Fathers, the Russian and the Spanish mystics, I can prepare in myself the reunion of divided Christians. From that secret and unspoken unity in myself can eventually come a visible and manifest unity of all Christians.⁴

Merton understood that to renew the clerical, monastic and lay life of the historic church a solid grounding in the classical life of faith was imperative; hence his explorations into the earliest roots of Christian thought and church life. The riches brought forth from such a forgotten way were the gift to the modern world of the communion of the saints. Thus Merton became, in many ways, a conduit between the past and the

present. There was, in short, more to 'mere Christianity' than just 'mere' and it was this 'more' that Merton offered to Christianity, sadly so often at war with itself.

Public Witness and Interfaith Dialogue

There has been tendency to either ignore Lewis' more public concerns or reduce him to an American republican. Needless to say, there is much more to Lewis than such a simplistic view. *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* and 'Social Morality' in *Mere Christianity* point in directions that transcend the left-right political tribalism just as, in many ways, *Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra* and *That Hideous Strength* are astute works of political philosophy when read from a certain perspective. In fact, a careful reading of *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* and *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* makes the case well for how the Christian mind might be shaped and formed, work continued by his friend and fellow writer Harry Blamires.

Lewis also had full and expansive understanding of the wideness of God's grace, encapsulated well in the final scene of *The Last Battle* when Aslan speaks kindly and warmly to Emeth the dwarf and Puzzle the Donkey. The final section of the 'Tao' in *Abolition of Man* has much to say about common grace and natural law. Lewis' lengthy correspondence with Bede Griffiths, one of the leading writers on interfaith dialogue in the 20th century, and the poet Kathleen Raine point in directions that few have explored in relation to Lewis.

There can be no doubt that Merton was much more explicit in the political realm than Lewis—his poetry and prose on black civil rights, American imperialism, ecological issues, nuclear war, poverty and the Cold War touched many raw nerves. Merton was one of the most important American and Roman Catholic doves of the latter half of the 20th century.

Merton also went much further than Lewis in the area of interfaith dialogue. His vast correspondence, books and articles on Zen, Taoism, Sufism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Judaism all point the way to an approach to interfaith dialogue that goes beyond the models of inclusive vs exclusive, pluralism vs syncretism. Merton did not think God's grace could be bottled into our all too human interpretive paradigms.

Lewis and Merton: Explicit Connections

If there is a variety of implicit affinities between Lewis and Merton, there

are also a few explicit connections that exist between them.

Merton wrote a review of *The Personal Heresy* by E. M. W. Tillyard and C.S. Lewis which was published in The New York Times in July 1939.⁵ This book is solely in the realm of literary theory, being a debate about the fundamentals of poetic theory, where, in Merton's opinion, C. S. Lewis clearly won the high ground.

Father Patrick Reardon was a novice under Merton. In his memoir of Merton which is highly critical of Merton's move away from traditional Catholic teaching, he records that 'it was Merton who handed me my first book by C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, remarking, "You need to read this."' ⁶

But there is not a single reference to Lewis in the indices of any of the seven volumes of his Merton's journals, and only one reference of significance in any of the five themed volumes of his letters.

In Lewis' acceptance lecture for the chair of Medieval and Renaissance studies at Cambridge in 1954 entitled 'A description of our times', Lewis used term 'post-Christian world', probably the first time the phrase was used publicly. This phrase was picked up by Merton and later used for the title of his censured work, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*. As he wrote in 1962 in a reflection for the Sisters of Loretto, 'And Christian dissent is all the more essential as we enter what C. S. Lewis has called the *post-Christian era*.' ⁷

But Lewis clearly read Merton, appreciated his work, and recommended it to others. He had a long and meaningful friendship with Bede Griffiths, and in a letter to Griffiths in December 1961, he wrote, 'Have you read anything by an American Trappist called Thomas Merton? I'm at present on his *No Man is an Island*. It is the best new spiritual reading I've read in a long time.' ⁸ And in the same month, responding to Mary Willis Shelburne, he replied, 'I've been greatly impressed by the work of an American Trappist called Thomas Merton—*No Man as an Island*. You probably know it.' ⁹

The final letter in *The Road to Joy* was written to John Brown, who did a thesis on race relations in the 1960s and who, in a letter to Merton, he had written, '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 on August 7, 1968, '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.' ¹⁰

Conclusion

Both men clearly read and found much to appreciate and inspire in each other's works. But they never corresponded let alone met. We must be grateful that these probing writers explored four areas of affinity, *ad fontes*, the church, public witness and interfaith dialogue; and that each, in their own way, shared with us through their writings, their thoughts and insights on these matters so relevant to our contemporary world.

Notes

1. John Moses, *Divine Discontent: The Prophetic Voice of Thomas Merton*, Foreward by Rowan Williams (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), np.
2. *Ad fontes* – Latin for '(back) to the sources'. It implies a retrogression, a movement back towards an origin.
3. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 289.
4. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (London: Sheldon Press, 1977), p. 20.
5. The review is included in: Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1984), pp. 476-478.
6. See: <http://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=24-05-050-f>
7. Thomas Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation* (New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1992), p. 283.
8. *The Collected Letters of C S Lewis, Vol 3: Narnia, Cambridge, and Joy, 1950-1963*, ed. Walter Hooper (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2007), pp. 1304f.
9. *The Collected Letters of C S Lewis, Vol 3*, p. 1307.
10. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy – Letters to New and Old Friends* (London: Collins Flame, 1989), p. 369.

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