

ONLY ONE MERTON

The following article is the first of two parts of a talk given at a Thomas Merton conference held in West Bolden, Newcastle-upon-Tyne in May of this year. It was given by the Rev'd Stephen J. Hotchen and was in response to a radio play which seemed to be saying Merton was schizoid. It is largely influenced by a book edited by M.B. Pennington, 'Toward an Integrated Humanity'; Cistercian Publications.

The title given to this essay might leave some in a little confusion. On the face of it, to say that there is 'Only One Merton' seems to be a fact about which there can be little dispute. Clearly, on the face of things there is only one Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk and writer. However, there are those who would want question whether this were strictly true. They would suggest that in Merton's life and in his thought it is possible to detect a certain amount of conflict; divergent views which betray a lack of unity in his make up! It is my purpose in this essay to show that to make this assertion is to misunderstand Merton totally.

The most striking example of the view noted above which I have come across is in a play written by Bruce Stewart, 'Me and My Shadow' which was broadcast on BBC radio 4 on the 6th February this year. This portrayed Merton as a man who had a great inner conflict and who spent much of his time trying to subdue part of his personality: Merton it seemed was almost schizophrenic. In point of fact nothing could have been further from the truth; a truth which can be demonstrated through the writing of Merton.

One of the growing number of Merton scholars, Lawrence

Cunningham, has said that '... it is hard to think of another Catholic thinker in our time with such wide ranging interests and such diverse intellectual skills.' There can be no doubt that Thomas Merton applied his mind to a very wide range of topics but this is by no means justification for assuming a divergent personality! Indeed, I shall put forward a case for the opposite view namely, that this 'catholic mind' meant that Merton was in full union with his fellow man and his environment and this is a point to which I shall return later.

The first question we might ask then is this, 'How can a man who has spent some twenty-seven years within the confines of a Cistercian monastery, three years of which were spent as a hermit, be said to be in any sort of union with the world and his fellow man', but the fact is, Merton believed that as a monk he was able to become, not only more fully integrated within himself as a person but, also more fully integrated into the world and the life of his fellow man.

Let's begin by taking a look at the way in which this monk who has renounced the world and lives his entire life in seclusion can share fully with his fellow man in the life of the world and make a valid contribution to that world.

If we are to do this, then we must turn to the image of the desert. The desert is the place of marginal life; it is the place where we come into contact with the extremes of heat and cold, of thirst and hunger; it is the place where we experience life to the full whilst standing face to face with death: as such it is the place where we are able to experience the self

to the full. This brings us to a theme which dominates much of Merton's writing; that is, the theme of the 'True Self' and the 'False Self'. The question which Merton asks is this, Does modern man retreat into the solitude of the desert or does he seek solitude elsewhere and, does he strive to find the true self or the false self? Merton contended that each of us has a particular vocation to identify the true self. It should be noted that if one is to properly find the true self then one must inevitably identify the false self. Writing as early as 1955 Merton says,

"Every man has a vocation to be someone: but he must understand clearly that in order to fulfil this vocation he can only be one person: himself."

The solitude of the desert is not then an escape from the world: to see solitude so, is to enter into ISOLATION and, to isolate oneself in this way simply to experience some kind of independence and enter into a dialogue with oneself, what might be termed a 'narcissistic dialogue' is not to enter into any kind of unity at all, but rather to enter into a process of disintegration where, a profusion of conflicting passions drives one to total confusion! The ego takes control. Merton said of this,

"Such self-contemplation is a futile attempt to establish the finite self as infinite, to make it permanently independent of all other beings. And this is madness."

This is not, I suggest, a madness which is restricted to the solitary. Modern man is tempted, not to withdraw to the

desert but, to escape into the mass of other men; into the world of 'Collectivism',⁴ that formless sea of irresponsibility which is the crowd! But, to live in a crowd, to live in close proximity to others does not guarantee communion with them. Merton observes,

"The common life can either make one more of a person or less of a person, depending whether it is truly common life or merely life in a crowd. To live in communion, in genuine dialogue with others is absolutely necessary if man is to remain human. But to live in the midst of others, sharing nothing with them but the common noise and the general distraction, isolates a man in the worst way, separates him from reality in a way that is almost painless."

It is clear to see from this that Merton did not believe that a persons external circumstances dictated his internal condition but quite the reverse, it is what we are which determines our external situation! To live ones life in separation from others is not to find **solitude**: true **solitude** can only be found within oneself and, as Merton himself might have said, this is a grace from God.

Merton believed that to truly live one must be fully human, just as Christ himself was fully human. To become fully human we must search out deep within ourselves the **true self**; we must become that which we were created to be. In St. Matthew's gospel, in the words of the 'Great Commandment' (Mt. 22:35-40) we read that our first duty or obligation as Christians is to glorify God,⁶ in becoming fully human this is precisely what we do.

"A tree gives glory to God by being a tree. For in being what God means it to be it is obeying Him. It 'consents', so to speak, to His creative love."

In just the same way, man, by becoming fully human, acts in obedience to the will of God.

However, if as we have already said, to be fully human one has to live in communion with ones fellow man how then do we realize this 'integrated humanity'? If we turn for a moment to St. John's gospel we

find that it is, in point of fact, Christ in us who affects this unity! "In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you." (Jn. 14:20)⁸ In a letter written at the suggestion of Pope Paul vi Merton states quite clearly,

"I have learned to rejoice that Jesus is in the world in people who know Him not, that He is at work in them when they think themselves far from Him."

The more fully we are able to discern Christ in us then, the more fully we share with our fellow man in his situation. God dwells in all men; we all dwell in God; so it is we dwell in one another.

Solitude was the way Merton developed an ever closer relationship with God through Christ and, as I have already said, he was convinced that the only real solitude was that which is found within oneself, interior solitude. This interior solitude is only possible for those who have accepted their right place in relation to other men and with God: for Merton this place was in the monastery living the cenobitic life. Thomas Merton, of course, was no

ordinary monk! He was a writer and he felt that his writing was an essential constituent part of his vocation to become a monk; the insights he gained from his situation in the monastery he was able to apply to the problems facing his brothers on the other side of the monastery wall.

There is in fact a considerable body of material, held at the 'Thomas Merton Study Centre' in America, which bears ample witness to the fact that Merton was, in reality, sharing his insights with many people throughout the world. There are some 3000 letter to more than a 1000 correspondents: this is in addition to the more obvious sharing of insights which he undertook through his many published works. It is however, in a phrase from one of the many unpublished manuscripts held at the Merton Study Centre that Merton takes us right to the very heart of what it is we are talking about when he says,

"To live in the fullest sense is to know and to love God the author of life in the centre of our soul." 10

It was to find this kind of life which holds God the creator at its centre, that Merton devoted his entire energy after his conversion to the Catholic faith.

It was through his theocentric life that Merton entered more fully into communion with his fellow man. In his existence as a cloistered monk, he found, and entered into, a wholeness of life which was both demanding and fulfilling; he was in fact quite clear about what he felt was the role of the monk, and describes it in the following way;

"the monk should be the man in the Church who is

not organised but is free with the freedom of the desert nomad." 12

monk must be a man who cultivates some kind of awareness or consciousness of his surroundings without actually committing himself to any particular 'Party Line' or ideology.

Having raised ones consciousness, having become aware, then there is an obligation to make known to the world this revelation, to expose the 'Spiritual Sickness' with which the world has been - is being - brought low. This Merton did in the only way he as a writer could; he wrote about it! It was as a result of this writing that he suffered the criticism of being less the monk and more the activist. It was seen as a conflict of interests, to show concern for the world whilst exercising ones vocation as a monk; as I've tried to illustrate, Merton felt that the converse was true.

It was Merton's writing which proved to be a matter of great contention within the confines of Gethsemani. He was constantly at odds with the monastery censor, or so it seemed. In a short piece written on 'Monastic Renewal' and which I use here in defence of his position as both writer and monk, Merton says of the monastic vocation:

"It is not a call to a special work within the Church. The monk is called 'out of this world' to seek God truly in silence, prayer, solitude, renunciation, compunction and simplicity the monastic life maintains something of the desert atmosphere of a life alone with God. The work of the monk is to seek God

first and Him alone." ¹³ It was through this searching for God which, as I have already said, included his writing, that Thomas Merton became more complete, moved towards being a whole person, towards a unity, with God at the centre. However, within the monastery it was a long time before the abbot and those responsible for his development realized that Merton's writing was an important and necessary part of his spirituality, perhaps it never was fully realized. For this reason his writing was seen as a reluctance, on the part of Merton, to let go of the life he

had had before entering the Abbey of Gethsemani.

As I have already stated, Merton, through his deep personal relationship with God, identified, and lived in communion with that part of humanity which spends its life in the world. Through his reading and contact with visitors to the Abbey he was able to keep himself very well informed about what was happening in the world: it was this world which, through his prayer and meditation, he held before God.

Textual Notes

1. Lawrence S. Cunningham, "The Life of Merton as Paradigm: The View of Academe," in Patrick Hart, ed. *The Message of Thomas Merton* (Cistercian Publications 1981).
2. *No Man is an Island*; Burns and Oates 1955.
3. *New Seeds of Contemplation*; Burns and Oates 1962. Chapter 8 'Solitude is not Separation'.
4. When Merton talks of collectivism in this particular context he is referring to man's tendency to equate love with conformity - a passive subservience to the 'mass-mind': see 'New Seeds' Chapter 8.
5. *Ibid.*
6. " 'Master, which is the greatest commandment of the law?' Jesus said to him, 'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second resembles it: You must love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang the whole law, and the prophets too.' "
7. *New Seeds of Contemplation*; Chapter 5 'Things and their Identity'.
8. Merton believed that because Christ dwells in each of us and we in him, then we must each, to some extent, dwell in each other. For an example of this see, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Chapter 9 'We are One Man'.
9. See *The Monastic Journey*; Sheldon Press 1977: *A Letter on the Contemplative Life*.
10. I have not seen this manuscript which is called, 'School of the Spirit'; Merton marked it, 'Not for Publication'. However, M.

Basil Pennington uses this particular Quote from the work in an article published by Cistercian Publications: Toward an Integrated Humanity, Appendix: Centering Prayer.

11. Before his conversion Merton lived a life of what can only be called 'illicitious abandon': he was received into the Roman Catholic Church on the 16th November, 1938. at the Church of Corpus Christi, Columbia.
12. Contemplation in a World of Action; Unwin Paperbacks 1980: Appendices, page 227f.
13. The Monastic Journey; Monastic Renewal: A Memorandum.