

## UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES OF MERTON'S SPIRITUALITY

1) The first being that it is a life rather than a technique. The Christian saints and mystics demonstrate this. Progress in spirituality does not depend on one's natural gifts and the ingenuity with which one masters the tricks of the spiritual life. There are no tricks and one cannot write one's own ticket. Rather does it depend on grace and taking note of God's will. But such a life, in being a response to grace, is essentially Incarnational and Eucharistic, built on 'The Word made Flesh'. It is Christ who leads us to enjoyment and possession of God. Christ represents in himself the goal for the Christian and the activity that will lead to that goal. So the total character of Christ's life is the model for the Christian life. What this implies is not a mere imitation of Christ, but rather as a first requirement the recognition of one's own sinfulness, which can come only through grace. Only when this sinful self is destroyed, by being crucified with Christ, is the way of Christ open at the other side of Grace. What then emerges is a new creation, transfigured into the Lord's likeness, a rebirth, so that one moves forward into a dimension not previously known.

The image that Merton keeps using to describe this process is 'The Desert'. The contemplative life is preference for the desert. What he means is perhaps best described in the opening chapters of that mystical treatise, *The Theologia Germanica*, the emptying of the I, me, mine, the necessary self-emptying in order to be filled with God. This is the painful process which must precede the expansion of our consciousness in God, the necessary preliminary to that

prayer of the heart we describe as contemplation. Compunction of the heart is the spirit in which we open ourselves to God in such prayer. So the classic form of meditation is 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me a sinner', the Jesus Prayer.

2) In an age which has placed an excessive emphasis on Individualism, the second principle implicit in all Merton's spirituality, is that this life must be essentially corporate and communal. It is an important biblical principle. Our relationship, mediated through our membership of a community, the People of God. The Christian contemplative, does not come like the pagan mystic as the Alone to the Alone, but as a member of the Body of Christ into which he is incorporated by Baptism.

In his introduction to Thomas Merton's *Contemplative Prayer*, the Quaker, Douglas Steere, warns readers to bear in mind the assumed corporate context in which Merton always places his understanding of prayer. Merton himself reinforces this. 'The Christian (even though he be a monk or a hermit), is never really an isolated individual. He is a member of a praising community, the people of God . . . It is understood that the personal prayer of the monk is embedded in the life of psalmody, liturgical celebration and the meditative reading of scripture. All this has both a personal and a communal dimension'.

3) Christian spirituality, in order to be real and authentic must be alive. Not all spirituality, even when it goes under the name Christian, is living. Often it can be no more than a dead pietism, an escape route into a haven of unreality. For the individual, spirituality

becomes a dead pietism when it degenerates into an introverted cultivation of one's own soul. Then religion becomes the opium by which to escape or be anaesthetized from one's alienated self and God. Such a spirituality is no longer alive, but has become an escape route from the practical realities of one's real and actual situation.

Douglas Steere<sup>3</sup> illustrates Merton's perceptive approach to this danger in the life of prayer. Pointing out the dangers of so many books on prayer, which seem to get 'hung-up' on 'the holy particularity of the soul' and its needs, he explains how Merton avoids this by dealing with the essence of prayer, and especially by dealing with what the Germans call *Entlarvung*. What Merton means by this is 'the smoking out of the bogus interiority' of the 'Communal wool-gathering', 'of the inert primitive narcissistic security', 'of the worshipping of idols of our own making, mental idols of a God that will not disturb us'.

Merton elaborates this elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> He writes of awareness, not only in relation to God, but also in relation to self. For this to happen, and it cannot be programmed through one's own ingenuity, there must be the renunciation of the selfish and limited self and an entrance into a new kind of existence, in order to discover an inner centre of motivation and love. When this happens, to use Blake's words, 'the doors of perception are opened' and everything is seen in a new light. — Such contemplative illumination awakens one to a new awareness of oneself 'in Christ', and all life takes on a new meaning. The real sense of our own existence, which is normally veiled and distorted by the routine distractions of an

alienated life, is now revealed in a central intuition. 'What was lost and dispersed in the relative triviality of purposeless behaviour (living like a machine, pushed around by impulses and suggestions from others), is brought together in a fully integrated conscious significance'.

Such awareness leads to a true evaluation of self in the context of life as it is experienced. In fact it is an experience analogous to death and resurrection, where all illusion about self, God and the world is unmasked, the heart made pure and the doors of perception opened. Then religion cannot ever be again an 'opium' by which to escape, because spirituality will be something lived, rather than a mere adjustment to certain exterior norms of conduct, enabling the individual to play an approved religious role.

4) There is another sense in which spirituality as a dead pietism becomes an escape route. That is when it degenerates into a mere world-denying asceticism in which to hide from the vacillations and difficulties of life in the world. The goal of Christian spirituality has been defined by God's intention for the whole of creation. Therefore it must embrace every aspect of men's life in the created world. For Merton, union with God was not the whole of mysticism, because the experience is at the same time a communion with men. That means that a Christian spirituality must involve a quality of openness to the world, which enables it to find the living Christ in all human history and all human experience.

This is not to advocate an activist and secular Christianity, as expounded in the last fifteen

ears. But it does mean opening one's eyes to certain truths with which this kind of thinking was concerned - the need for an organic relationship between the sanctuary and the marketplace. The response to the world will not be in the form of losing one's own perspective, but in contributing a perspective which is not of this world, and is effectively liberated from the servitudes of the world in the negative and sterile sense. By virtue of this fact a Christian will be enabled to be more truly present to the contemporary world by love, understanding, joy, peace, freedom, tolerance, by a deep and Christ-like hope.

The Christian life-style which emerges will have at its heart a spirituality which contains a sympathetic understanding of the world's legitimate aims such as peace, individual freedom, justice and the sharing of resources in a world community. It will see these aspirations as the concern of everyone, but also because of a contemplative perspective, be aware of what Rene Voillaume describes as 'man in all his dimensions', and therefore able to see the obstacles frustrating contemporary man in his attainment of them. This must not lead to the rejection of contemporary secular man, because his struggle towards such aspirations appears to lack any concern for God. Rather must he take seriously the valid effort of secular man to aspire to such values, which, good in themselves, doubtless come from God.

\*\*\*\*\*

## NOTES

- 1)Contemplative Prayer p. 30
- 2)Ibid. p. 55
- 3)Introduction to Contemplative prayer p. 9
- 4)Contemplation in a world of action p. 176

By The Rev'd Arthur Middleton  
Rector of Boldon.

\*\*\*\*\*

## THE SCARECROW

Dragging his rood  
the scarecrow pondered  
'midst the stones  
denied their song  
and the palms hate-crushed:  
'How strange  
that one designed to repel,  
denied form or beauty,  
should, when displayed  
with agony-stretched arms,  
attract so many birds.'

## NEHUSHTAN

Galled, sore footed, plague-  
ridden,  
poisoned by the vipers of their  
own despair,  
Israel's children  
stood lost in a wilderness  
of barren dreams.  
The warped threads of memory,  
acting alchemically,  
turned dross into gold  
and wrung from their hearts  
keening psalms of longing  
for skeletal flesh pots  
and straw-less bricks.  
Elohim, distanced by his grief,  
raised the brass-bound  
scarecrow  
to save them from their  
angry suicide  
and in the callous silence  
the song went unheard:

ELOI, ELOI,

LAMA SABACTHANI?

The Rev'd J. Wheatley.