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THOMAS MERTON'S THEOLOGY OF *SELF*^{*}

The false self

Describing Thomas Merton's views as the theology of the self seems to be very suitable. His entire quest expressed in all his literary output can be summed up in the question about the self, about who am I!? This question accompanied him when he wrote about the European and Indian philosophies, theology, monastic life, Christian and non-Christian mysticism, yoga, Taoism, Zen or social issues.¹ It was not only an intellectual problem, but it became his constant meditation. In one of his first books, *Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton identified the false self, which he called a mask, an illusion, ego, and the empirical or external self, with hell. Hell is the cult of nothingness. It is not, however, the nothingness of our body or corporeality. For Merton, the body is not a prison, as it was for the Platonists, it is the Church of God and therefore it is holy. Freedom and joy are thus not attained through the liberation from the body, but through overcoming fear in love,

^{*} Transl. by P. Kaźmierczak.

¹ Cf. Jan M. Bereza, *Mistyka Dalekiego Wschodu a poznanie Boga w pismach Thomasa Mertona*, unpublished.

fear that leads us to creating illusions, building walls, putting on masks, acting and deepening the feeling of loneliness. The life of a monk, the life of voluntary solitude is – for Merton – a way of experiencing and overcoming the nothingness of the false self, which has been built by years of confrontation with others in order to confirm the narcissistic feeling of safety. The prayer of the monk in solitude brings him face to face with the appearances and the triviality of his own self-image as well as the inauthenticity of his life and the pretence of what we acknowledged as ‘I’ and ‘mine’. Faced with loneliness and death, which should always be on his mind the monk experiences the truth of his own ‘I’ in its entire absurdity and terror. Merton exposed this problem in the life of both ancient monks and existentialists, especially Marcel and Heidegger; he also seems to have drawn on the thought of Kierkegaard.

It must be added that the solitude of the monk is not – for Merton – a goal in itself. The solitude of the monk does not result from the negation of other people. The only motive for the solitude of the Christian monk can be love. The experience of love for all people in spite of the feeling of loneliness and miscomprehension was given to Merton. In his book *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* he describes the experience he had in the shopping centre in Louisville, when he was suddenly swayed by an unshakeable conviction that all people are his and he is theirs and that there is no strangeness between them. ‘My loneliness, however, does not belong to me, since I can see to what extent it belongs to them and that I am responsible for it to them, and not only to myself. Just because I am one with them I owe it to them that I can be alone, and when I am alone, they are not ‘they’, but my own self. Strangers do not exist’.² He calls this experience a gift. He believes it is attainable for everyone, because ‘the gates of heaven can be found everywhere’.³

Merton realised, however, that before we experience this unity with all people and God, we have to go through the often painful process of encountering the nothingness, helplessness, pettiness and illusoriness of our own false self. It is the way of humility, which he must have known well from the Rule of St. Benedict and the doctrine of St. Bernard of Clairvaux. The humble rejection of one’s self is, according to Merton, kenosis, bereavement, repulse, loss and purification taking place within. Overcoming a false

² Th. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Garden City, NY, Doubleday, 1966, pp. 222-223.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 225.

self-image, rejecting every notion of self such as I should be or as I seem to be is necessary, because this misrepresentation hides us from being known by God and separates us from His grace and thus it reinforces our persistence in sin. Merton alludes on this point to the biblical vision of ‘the fall’. In his opinion sanctity means being oneself, so it comes down to getting to know who I am that is to say rejecting my false self and discovering my true self in God. Merton identifies discovering the true self with an inner transformation, a new birth, with metanoia that is the conversion of heart and mind. It seems to be close to the religious condition of salvation. Of course, Merton is convinced that salvation is God’s gift and that he owes the discovery of his true self to God’s grace. However, he is also aware that we have to prepare ourselves to receive the gift, hence such an important emphasis on asceticism and discipline both in his teaching and in the entire monastic tradition.

Thomas Merton’s doctrine of the necessity of rejecting one’s false self appears to be merely a reformulation of the ideas of the Christian mystics, especially St. John of the Cross and St. Thomas Aquinas. They speak of the need to detach oneself and turn away from the things of the world in order to become completely unified with God. Thomas Aquinas enumerates precisely the goods of the created world in which man often seeks the fulfilment of his desires being aware at the same time that none of them can give him happiness. They are the following: material goods, fame, honour, power, pleasure, the health of the body and the natural perfection of the soul. St. John of the Cross, like Merton, is not a Gnostic and he does not claim that the created world is evil. He emphasises that the problem lies not in created things, but in us. It is not things, but the desire of them that we are to transcend. Otherwise we remain in the slavery of the mind subordinated to objects. An object can belong to the realm of things as well as to the realm of concepts, notions or ideas.

What St. Benedict in his Rule called discernment proves helpful on the way to freedom. Discerning what things are, and who God is helps us detach ourselves from the entanglement of illusory desires. Showing us the truth about creatures, discernment enables us to long for the good and the supreme happiness that is God himself. When our knowledge and our love find their fulfilment in God, then we also find joy, beauty, and good in all creation. Getting to know God is not, therefore, an escape from the world, but the confirmation of its worth in God.

The empirical self and death

In the Platonic philosophical tradition death is conceived of as the separation of the soul from the body. This concept cannot be found in the Bible. It also seems that Thomas Merton did not attach much importance to it, especially in the later period of his life. He perceives death only as 'the death' of the empirical, that is, false self. What remains is the true self or real self, identified by Merton with the person. The true self is what is real in us, what cannot be annihilated by death. The empirical self is for Merton – following the words of Christ quoted in the Gospel according to Matthew (17:25) – what we have to lose in order to attain life. As William H. Shannon observed, the new English translation of the Bible is close to Merton's understanding: 'If anyone loses his life in my name, he will find his true self. What gain is it for a man to have won the whole world and to have lost his true self or what can he give to save this self?'.⁴

Death and dying in the sense of self-denial, giving up one's own will or detachment from the world is well known to Christian mystics, especially to St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. The latter repeated so often: 'I'm dying by not dying', and he certainly did not have the common sense of death in mind. Christian spirituality is rooted in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, from them it derives its saving power as well as the encouragement to die with Christ and in Christ in order to become one with Him. The death of the false self may be called the first death. The second death, which is the end of the earthly life, affects it too, but it has no power over the true self.

The true self

According to Merton, the inner or true self is not an idea or a perfect self. It would be just another illusion. The true self is our very own self in all its uniqueness. It seems that Merton did not identify it with a soul in the Platonic sense or with the individuality of the psyche or the body. Rather, he conceived of it as a being or a substance, as created by God, though existing beyond our ordinary consciousness. However, at times, during the deepest contemplation, which is also a gift of God, the curtain falls down

⁴ Thomas Merton and the *Quest for Self-Identity* by William H. Shannon, Cistercian Studies, XXII/1987/2, p. 174.

and we can realise what we are. The inner transformation or the spiritual awakening do not create our true self, but only reveal them to our experience. Our true self exists from the beginning of our life. The discovery of the true self is the new birth in God, in Christ.

Getting to know the true self, like getting to know God, does not take place in a sensual-intellectual process, it unfolds beyond the intellectual construct of a subject and object.

The knowledge of the true self and the knowledge of God

According to Merton, the knowledge of the true or real self and the knowledge of God are conditioned by each other to such an extent that our true self is identical with God. It does not seem to be an existential identity, but a subjective experience of our total dependence on the Creator. It means – as William H. Shannon emphasises – that my subjectivity has become one with God's subjectivity.⁵ It can also mean that on the plane of the subjective experience, where the distinction between the subject and object is not known, the two subjects appear to be one. Thomas Merton stated it most emphatically in his book *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*: 'Our knowledge of God is, paradoxically, not a knowledge of Him as an object of our inquiry, but of ourselves as totally dependent on his saving and loving knowledge'.⁶ Augustine's *noverim te, noverim me* can be read as the correlation of knowing oneself and knowing God, that is to say I can only know myself when I know my total dependence on God. Likewise, I can know God only when I discover my true self, the self that has been known by God. Merton is certainly close on this point to the Rhine mystics, who spoke of the 'bottom' or the 'base' of the soul existing beyond the reflective consciousness. It seems that the issue of the unconscious (the subconscious and the hyper-conscious (superego) plays a very important role in the spiritual experience, which is a fruit of contemplation made possible by love. 'The unification in love of the simple light of God with the simple light of the human spirit – writes Merton in his book *New Seeds of Contemplation* – is contemplation.' Love, which is an act of will – as we know – acts on a higher level than the intellect, so it cannot be wholly available for the intellectual cognition. Merton surely learnt the importance of the unconscious thanks to the con-

⁵ See *Ibidem*, p. 184.

⁶ *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*; Kalamzoo, Cistercian Publications, 1973, p. 13.

temporary psychology as well as Indian philosophy, especially the philosophy of yoga, which gives priority to the state of 'concentration without consciousness' over the state of 'concentration with consciousness'. Contrary to what is generally accepted it does not mean the depersonalisation of an individual, but only the transcending of the empirical individuality understood as ego. Merton identifies the concept of a person with the true self, which is unknowable for the reflective consciousness, but is the indestructible essence of our being, recognised in God and by God.

Inner transformation and contemplation

Thomas Merton distinguishes individuality understood as the false self, which develops in isolation, and derives its strength from opposing others, from the person, identical with the true self, which is free, open to others, and builds unity with others. In the first case, solitude becomes an escape into illusion and the confirmation of selfishness, in the other, it is a gift for others. Today, observing Thomas Merton's experience of loneliness in retrospect, we can be sure that it is an unending gift for many of us.

It appears that whatever Merton wrote had a subjective dimension, that is to say he wrote mainly about his own experiences, even when he referred to the views of others. On the other hand, his works were what he shared with others. It must be said, though, that from its very nature, the path of knowledge that he followed involved the most existential aspect of our life. You cannot discover your true self without a radical inner transformation, as well as the change of your attitude to God, people and the world. Everything has its foundation and fulfilment in prayer, leads to contemplation, and flows from it. One year before his death, in December 1967 Merton said to a group of contemplative nuns: 'Our prayer should be directed within. God is not an object... God is a subject, the deepest self. He is the Basis of my subjectivity. God wants to know himself in us.'