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## MERTON'S MARGIN<sup>\*</sup>

Shortly before his death Merton delivered an informal talk in Calcutta in which he professed himself a spokesman for a strange kind of people, marginal persons, among whom he listed monks, hippies, displaced persons, prisoners. However, above all he spoke about monks and from a standpoint of a monk. He spoke of himself. I would like to think about Merton himself, and with him, in the light of this statement.

### *1. Marginality in the socio-historical dimension*

In his address Merton stressed that:

the monk in the modern world is no longer an established person with an established place in society. We realize very keenly in America today that the monk is essentially outside of all establishments. He does not belong to an establishment. He is a marginal person who withdraws deliberately to the margin of society with a view to deepening fundamental human experience<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>\*</sup> Transl. by A. Muranty.

<sup>1</sup> *Thomas Merton's View of Monasticism. (Informal talk delivered at Calcutta, October 1968)* in: Th. Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, London: Sheldon Press, 1974, p. 305.

A margin is a rim of a piece of paper and at the same time a point of contact with what lies beyond it. Still, a margin is a part of the piece of paper, it belongs to it, although it is situated at a certain distance from what one might call its centre. We do not fill a margin with writing, we make notes on it instead, we correct what has been written in the central area. Let's take another example. Each city has its centre, and its outskirts, i.e. its margin. Living in the city centre and taking part in problems discussed in agora gives one a sense of belonging, a certain guarantee of safety and an impression of making history. Outside the city there are unpopulated wastelands with stagnating, dangerous, and unhistorical life. Certainly, when the city is threatened, these unpopulated wastelands become a refuge. Marginality is a space category, situated in relation to a kind of centre.

Merton says that living in the margin "is essentially outside of all establishments". According to him living in the centre, in the constellation of human polis that may also be called civilisation, means living in an establishment of sorts. Here everyone has their place, plays a role, and puts on a sort of mask. Merton questioned the sense and authenticity of such life a number of times. He was also fluent at exposing false appearances of life lived in this perception of centre. He was terrified of emptiness, senselessness, hidden violence, and the hypocrisy of life in the centre of twentieth century polis that has spread nearly all over the globe. Here the establishment labels everything. According to him life in the centre is not really life since here people wander about on the surface, far from what he called "fundamental human experience". For him the centre was a world without God – an anti-temple.

After his conversion Merton set off on his search for God's space, so he left the centre for the margin – a Trappist monastery. The monastery, not only in relation to space, but also its style of life, is situated on the margin of the world, and often also on the margin of the Church. There were certainly times when monasteries took a central place in the human polis – to make decisions concerning politics, economy, and social education. There have been numerous attempts to transform both the Church and the world in various areas. Let's refrain from evaluating such undertakings here. At the end of his life Merton was convinced that this time was irretrievably gone, although in his youth he had succumbed to the utopia of monasticism of Christianity and the world.

With time he discovered that monastic life might become a worldly one, which is overly permeated with establishment, delusion and lies. So, he

criticised it, exposing false appearances, and deluded dreams of grandeur. By his very life and writings Merton was exposing the life of his society, Church, and monastery as well as his own. He was constantly moving away, towards the margins of civilisation, Church, monasticism, and himself. However, he never left those dimensions. This is the core of his paradox, so beautiful and so attractive at the same time. Merton was leaving and staying. Still, if he was setting off in the direction of polis, and he did that in writing and thought often enough, he did so while standing in the margin in full awareness of the wilderness stretching out behind his back. Merton was a man standing between the polis and the wilderness. He turned either to one or the other area, always remaining in the margin.

## 2. Marginality in existential dimension

When speaking on behalf of such people like monks, hippies, poets, displaced persons, or prisoners, he stressed:

we are deliberately irrelevant. We live with an ingrained irrelevance which is proper to every human being. The marginal man accepts the basic irrelevance of the human condition, an irrelevance which is manifested above all by the fact of death. The marginal person [...] lives in the presence of death, which calls into question the meaning of life. He struggles with the fact of death himself, trying to seek something deeper than death, and the office of the monk or the marginal person or the poet is to go beyond death even in this life, to go beyond the dichotomy of life and death and to be, therefore, a witness to life<sup>2</sup>.

Marginality results from the sense of non-meaningfulness and lack of sense; it is the consequence of being brushed by death. Being aware of the fact of death is important in that it questions everything we call life. In the face of this experience all meanings and senses offered to someone by the arrangement of living in society, in a human polis, in the centre, seem to be devoid of any solid basis. All meanings imposed by society or created by man sooner or later burst like soap bubbles, and man stands naked, poor, without meaning. Titles, positions, disguises, masks and decorations, speculation, philosophical systems – all these sooner or later lose their me-

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem, p. 306.

aning, and the man who trusted those arrangements experiences profound disappointment, yet at the same time is cleansed of illusion. He does not take part in the worldly theatre of shadows, but passes onto the margin searching for the light capable of lighting up the darkness of death and giving meaning to life.

One may look at Merton's life as at a series of consecutive delusions and disappointments, building the meaning of life and then losing it. Merton created individual phases of his existence. Sooner or later each of them gave in under the pressure of the truth of life and connected with it the fact of death. A worldly person became a monk, a monk became a writer, a writer became a hermit, a hermit became a lover and a traveller, and in the end the whole pathos of his extraordinary life ended trivially by electrocution caused by a fan. Merton was stubbornly and instinctively moving away to the margin of everything that had at first seemed significant to him. He was doing so in the belief that he is searching for an absolute, unquestionable centre. It was precisely this dynamism of constant movement towards the Absolute, this constant passage to the margin from the deluding circles of a false centre, that seems to be what makes us wonder and interests us in him today.

Merton says that living on the margin has to be chosen and devoted to. Such life also has its style, its practices and exercises. He speaks of meditation in the broad sense of this word, since it encompasses poets, monks, and hippies. One of the means of his going to the margin was his writing. A person who writes gains a certain distance to life. To write is to look at life from the distance of words. Life is the centre and writing is moving away to the margin. When life seems to lose its meaning man moves away to the margin of writing. He does not live, he writes. Nevertheless, after that he returns to life on the narrow footbridge of thoughts and words. The tension between living and writing is a typical tension that exists between the centre and the margin. Life is the centre, death is the wilderness, the margin is thinking and writing, which by means of straining to overcome the life – death tension goes "beyond death even in this life", or even "beyond the dichotomy of life and death", in order to "to be a witness to life".

At this point we touch on a certain paradox and ambiguity of marginality. One moves to the margin because one exposed the delusions of the centre. Thanks to this practice one discovers a new centre, and the previous one becomes a meaningless periphery. Yet the relation remains and some-

one who discovered a deeper dimension of truth and existence wants to pass on to the centre, wants to make the ex-centre an element circulating around the new centre which has just been created in the margin. In other words, he goes to the margin in order to deprive the centre of its lethal power, and also, in a sense, to save himself and this centre as well.

The life and writings of Thomas Merton are a perfect example of such behaviour. He used them to move away – the monastery or the hermitage were nothing but visible signs of it. Like every writer and artist, he situated himself in the margin, he gained distance, in order to be able to look at society, Church, monasticism, human existence, and himself from a privileged standpoint. It is the kind of behaviour typical of a writer, an artist, a sage. Merton can be counted among the group of "the great ones" of past centuries, who behaved in a similar manner – they were persons from the margin who spoke of living in the margin showing its tragedy and yet the beauty of its depth. Kafka's protagonists, as well as Kafka himself, Pinocchio, excluded from life, protagonists of Andersen's fables, Prince Myszkina from Dostoyevsky's *Idiot* and Dostoyevsky himself, Kierkegaard, and such Poles as for instance Norwid, or Miłosz – the returning émigré. As for older classics of such style of life, wisdom and writing, one can mention Merton's favourite Lao Tsu, as well as Seneca, Mark Aurelius, Michel de Montaigne and a number of monks from many ages. It is good to think of Merton and his written heritage in this perspective and to place him in this specific company.

### 3. Marginality in theological perspective

Going beyond the life-death dualism leads Merton to a religious dimension, in which faith, grace, and God become important. However even here Merton's experience and words are marked with paradox, a stigma of marginality. He says that

as soon as you say faith in terms of this monastic and marginal existence you run into another problem. Faith means doubt. Faith is not the suppression of doubt. It is the overcoming of doubt, and you overcome doubt by going through it. The man of faith who has never experienced doubt is not a man of faith. Consequently, the monk is one who has to struggle in the depths of his

being with the presence of doubt, and to go through what some religions call the Great Doubt, to break through beyond doubt into a certitude which is very, very deep because it is not his own personal certitude, it is the certitude of God Himself, in us. The only ultimate reality is God. God lives and dwells in us<sup>3</sup>.

The above passage discloses yet another aspect of Merton's marginality – this time it concerns faith on whose margin doubting is situated. Let us have a closer look at this issue. God, being the Absolute centre, calls man to him and grants him the grace of faith. Such a man abandons the world and situates himself on its margin. Faith leads to the margin, from where we can see that the centre is not where it seems to be. In theology this process is called conversion. Sometimes moving away to the margin takes on a form of escape – escape from the world to utopia, and then from utopia to truth, and return to the world, this, however, happens on a different level.

What is the role of doubt in all this? Why does one first go to the margin of the world with faith, and then, as a result of doubts, also to the margin of faith? Well, faith can also become a false centre – it often has and is. Faith puts on theological and ritualistic systems, power, economics, politics. Doubts come when man thinks that he has settled down in a way – he has, knows, decides, rules, and above all guarantees salvation to himself and others. Precisely at this point all sincere God-seekers experience doubts, they loose their certitude and learn true faith, the faith of God, with God and in God. Everything is burned and the other, new things grow. Transfer from the first faith dimension to the second takes place through the Great Doubt. In classical theology this process is called purification.

Yet why does it happen in this manner? Merton doesn't go any deeper in his reflections. Nevertheless, one may be tempted to surmise a few thoughts following from them. To put it shortly: God is in the centre. By creating the world in a way he withdraws from himself, creating space for the world (it is a concept of creation present for instance in Jewish thought, in Blondel, etc.). By these means God decentralises himself in a way and allows the world to exist in the centre. We say: God is beyond this world. God situates himself on the margin of the world, yet He remains in its centre. The world exists in order to discover God's centrality and its own marginality. This understanding of world history is every man's history as well, since

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem.

man, by going to the margin discovers the centrality of a so far marginalized God. Or is it that man, while discovering God, moves to the margin? Discovering the seemingly central marginality of the world and exposing them, receding into the area of naked existence where everyday life is marked with the truth about dying as well as the road of faith which leads through the abyss of doubt – all that, recalled under the name of marginality, constitutes the structure of theological existence. By learning that man becomes real, free, redeemed. I am under the impression that this is one of the main currents of Merton's life, search and thought.

All in all time and history are on the margin of Invisibility – even if we seem to think that the centre is here. What can be seen is on the margin of Invisibility, even if at the beginning it seems that the latter lies on the margin of the visible world. Human systems and ways of understanding lie on the margin of God's wisdom, His Word, and His Silence. God sent his Son to the world, to the margin of the great Empire, to teach the world about the centrality of God. However, God's Son was lead out of the city and killed by crucifixion. By His Resurrection he revealed the centrality of the humble power of God. As such He remains in the power of the Spirit, present until the end of the world. His is a marginal presence, and yet also central. Certainly, the Church has gone astray more than once, and indeed, still is, when it places itself in the centre, reaches for power and easily absolves itself of violence. Monasticism did it as well – yet Merton would go to the margin in relation to such incidents, and expose their falseness.

#### *4. Merton's marginality – paradoxes and symbol of certain existence.*

We are not justified by any action of our own, but we are called by the voice of God, by the voice of that ultimate being, to pierce through the irrelevance of our life, while accepting and admitting that our life is totally irrelevant, in order to find relevance in Him. And this relevance in Him is not something we can grasp or possess. It is something that can only be received as a gift. Consequently, the kind of life that I represent is a life that is openness to gift; gift from God and gift from others.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, p. 307.

This is how Merton perceived his own existence and gave witness to it – not only in the talk he delivered in Calcutta, but through all his life. Something inside urged him to it. There were times when he couldn't understand it. There were times when he couldn't catch up with this inner force. Nevertheless, he could never deny or disown it. He called it a gift. Being open for the gift, he himself became one.

And here we stand, faced with the paradox, the mystery of his existence. Here is a famous monk. Here is a mystic talking of silence. An American whose works find readers somewhere on the margin – in the far-away Poland. Or perhaps Merton is on the margin of Polands' central problems? Here is a peculiar Absolute-seeker, who was and still is escaping to the margin of canonical categories of holiness. And yet he continues to speak through *Conjectures of A Guilty Bystander* with great force, beyond the barrier of his death, to the people from polis of the modern world.

Merton lived on the margin of the world and on the margin of God, he lived in between and on the border. A mysterious gift that he was open to, and which captivated him, caused him to live through it somehow, and expressed it with his writings as well as his life. He had paid the price of witness, which remains on the margin of silence. Out of this margin, which allowed him to live through essential dimensions of human life, Merton still says with peculiar force and full of hope, that "there are always people who dare to seek on the margin of society, who are not dependent on social acceptance, not dependent on social routine, and prefer a kind of free-floating existence under a state of risk".<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibidem, p. 308.