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## THOMAS MERTON'S CONTEMPLATIVE VISION

*There is in all visible things an invisible  
fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness,  
a hidden wholeness.*

Thus begins one of Merton's most beautiful and mystical poems, a poem that captures the essence of his contemplative vision. Merton's intuition of the "hidden wholeness" that grounds and connects all things is his deepest spiritual insight and the wellspring of his many and varied works, spiritual and religious, poetic and political. It is also the lens through which he experienced people and events around him, allowing him at times to see through to the truth of things with astonishing clarity.

I wish here to explore Merton's contemplative vision – the what and the how and the why of it – in the hope that this inquiry will throw some light on Merton's spiritual journey and on our own. Merton's insights in this regard flowed out of his living, and they reflect the same dynamic development that we see in his person.

Robert Giroux, Merton's friend and the editor of *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948), once remarked: "I have known many gifted writers, but none

who developed and grew as fast and as deeply as Merton did."<sup>1</sup> Merton recognized this growth in himself. In a 1966 letter to Robert Menchen, he wrote: "There has been a great deal of change in me, during the course of my monastic life. I would say that my interests have deepened and broadened as time went on. I have become more and more interested in all different forms of religious and monastic experiences... I have also become more deeply concerned with basic issues in the world situation."<sup>2</sup> In the same letter, in response to the question of what advice he would give to someone contemplating a career change, Merton wrote:

I would say that there is one basic idea that should be kept in mind in all the changes we make in life, whether of career or anything else. We should decide not in view of better pay, higher rank, "getting ahead," but in view of becoming *more real*, entering more authentically into direct contact with life, living more as a free and mature human person, able to give myself more to others, able to understand myself and the world better.<sup>3</sup>

Anyone wishing to explore a particular aspect of Merton's thought is faced with the challenge of dealing with a Merton whose views are continually evolving, never reaching a final and definitive formulation. His views on contemplation are no exception in this regard. At the same time, we can detect certain constants in Merton's approach to contemplation, certain themes that run through his writings and that reappear in ever fresh formulations, in keeping with his own deepening understanding. This paper will focus on a few of the central aspects that characterized Merton's contemplative vision.<sup>4</sup>

### *Merton's ontological awakening*

Merton's insight into the fundamental nature of reality emerged gradually over the course of his life, sparked in 1938 by a chance encounter with

<sup>1</sup> Robert Giroux, "Seven Storey Mountain" Still Going Strong After Fifty Years, *Merton Seasonal* 23.1 (1998), p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Merton, *To Robert Menchen*, 15 Jan. 1966, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon, New York: Harvest-Harcourt, 1995, p. 255.

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>4</sup> For another treatment of this topic, see Patrick Hart's introduction to *The Message of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart, Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1981, pp. 1-13.

Etienne Gilson's *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*. Merton was a graduate student at Columbia University at the time. In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he described how he came upon the book and the revolutionary effect it had on his life.<sup>5</sup>

Gilson's text introduced Merton to the Catholic concept of God's Being as *aseitas*. "In this one word," wrote Merton, "which can be applied to God alone, and which expresses His most characteristic attribute, I discovered an entirely new concept of God....Here was a notion of God that was at the same time deep, precise, simple and accurate and, what is more, charged with implications which I could not even begin to appreciate."<sup>6</sup>

Father George Kilcourse, commenting on this pivotal experience in Merton's life, writes:

The implications of the discovery that God's very nature was simply "to exist" would lead Merton to a new horizon from which to appreciate God's love for creation, and especially human nature's capacity to participate in a free, loving response to God. From this point on, Merton would be an incurable ontologist, hungering to share the life of this God whose nature it is to exist, to create, and to summon humanity to love. A year before his baptism, ontology was already in the marrow of Merton's Catholic bones.<sup>7</sup>

Merton's ontological awakening played a crucial role in his spiritual development. His whole spiritual life from that point forward was infused with the awareness of God as pure Being. This awareness gave his life and thought a foothold in reality and imbued his writings with a depth that is so often lacking in popular works on spirituality. It also helped him avoid saying foolish things about God and the spiritual life, because he understood that no finite word or concept can adequately capture the infinite mystery of God or our encounter with that profound reality.

The distinguished philosopher Father Mieczysław Krapiec, OP, whose name is familiar to many in this audience at KUL, makes a very interesting point concerning the value of philosophy to theology and religion when it

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, New York: Harvest-Harcourt, 1976, pp. 171-75, 204.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem 172.

<sup>7</sup> George Kilcourse, *The Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993, p. 50.

comes to talking about God – a point that Merton also grasped. Krapiec says that philosophy, by means of metaphysical analogy, can disclose for us the necessity of the existence of God as pure Being, but cannot give us access to the inner life of God.<sup>8</sup>

We are able, however, to speak meaningfully of God by means of metaphorical analogy, and revelation is couched primarily in such language. When, for example, we say God is the “Good Shepherd,” we transfer to God the normal earthly meaning of this term, but divested of all imperfection and as equivalent to pure Being. The primary value of such religious metaphors, says Krapiec, lies not in their cognitive content, but in their ability to evoke in us appropriate attitudes and actions in relation to God.<sup>9</sup>

Philosophy, because it reveals the limits of our knowledge of God and shows us the metaphorical nature of our positive assertions about God, prevents us from falling into crass anthropomorphism. Philosophy also helps us avoid embracing notions of God that are inconsistent with God’s Being, whose very nature it is to exist.<sup>10</sup>

Merton was aware of these distinctions and observed them in his thinking and writing. Moreover, he appealed to them to help him explain the Christian understanding of God to people of other religious traditions. On one occasion, for example, Merton recommended to his Buddhist friend Daisetz Suzuki that he use the word “analogical” rather than “mythical” when referring to the Christian concept of God. To many readers, said Merton, “mythical” might connote “a kind of conscious and deliberate deception,” whereas when we use analogy “we describe something that we do not and cannot know directly, by a reference to something that we do know.”<sup>11</sup>

Merton then went on to explain to Suzuki the use of analogy in reference to God: “The terms ‘being,’ ‘power,’ ‘love,’ ‘wisdom,’ etc., applied to God are all *analogies*. We know what being, power, etc., are in the world of experience, but the things that we thus know are so infinitely far from the

<sup>8</sup> Mieczysław A. Krapiec, *Metaphysics*, trans. Theresa Sandok, New York: Peter Lang, 1991, p. 477.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, p. 484.

<sup>10</sup> See ibidem, pp. 478, 483–485.

<sup>11</sup> Th. Merton, *To Daisetz T. Suzuki*, 24 Oct. 1959, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. by William H. Shannon, New York: Harvest-Harcourt, 1993, p. 568.

‘being,’ etc., of God that it is just as true to say that God is ‘no-being’ as to say that He is ‘being.’”<sup>12</sup> Concluding this brief lesson on analogy, Merton quipped: “I would heartily recommend the use of the words ‘analogy’ and ‘analogical,’ as thoroughly acceptable to Christian theologians, while ‘mythical’ will give them all a fit of apoplexy.”<sup>13</sup>

Merton’s interest in ontology was stimulated by thoroughly practical concerns, having to do with how to live as an authentic human being, how to enter into dialogue and communion with other human beings, and, how to relate to the ultimate ground of our Being. Anne Carr points out that all of Merton’s “many books, essays and poems register the immediacy and concreteness of personal engagement,”<sup>14</sup> and the same can be said of his approach to metaphysical thought.

Merton valued ontology as means for illuminating what he called “metaphysical experience.” He was not interested, he said, in “abstract metaphysical systems.”<sup>15</sup> The sort of experience Merton has in mind here is captured in a passage from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*: “One who has experienced the baffling, humbling, and liberating clarity of this immediate sense of what it means to *be* has in that very act experienced something of the presence of God. For God is present to me in the act of my own being, an act which proceeds directly from His will and is His gift. My act of being is a direct participation in the Being of God.”<sup>16</sup>

Among the many benefits Merton saw to adopting an ontological perspective was its value in facilitating interreligious dialogue, for on the ontological level we all find common ground. In a letter to Zen scholar Masao Abe, Merton specifically recommended including the ontological perspective in the dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism:

I think that one ought also to consider the level of *ontology* (though some would hold there is no such thing). I think the dialogue...will be most fruitful on the plane not of abstract metaphysical systems but on the plane of what I

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, p. 568.

<sup>14</sup> Anne E. Carr, Preface, *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham, New York: Paulist, 1992, p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> Th. Merton, *To Maseo [sic] Abe*, May 12<sup>th</sup>, 1967, in: *Witness to Freedom*, p. 332.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, New York: Doubleday, 1966, p. 201.

would call metaphysical experience – that is to say, the basic intuition of being, the direct grasp of the ground of reality, which is essential to a true and lived metaphysics.<sup>17</sup>

Merton then expressed his conviction that “the basic metaphysical intuition is close to the kind of religious intuition which opens out into mysticism. On this level I think we come very close to what Buddhism is saying... In Christian metaphysical-and-mystical experience there is something very close to Zen.”<sup>18</sup>

### *Contemplation cannot be taught*

*There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss  
the ground.*

Rumi

One valuable lesson Merton teaches us about contemplation is that it cannot be taught. There is no “how to” manual that will show us how to bring about a contemplative experience of God. Merton says that it is as impossible for one person to teach another how to be a contemplative as it is to teach another how to be an angel.<sup>19</sup>

Why can contemplation not be taught? Because it occurs in a realm that is ultimately beyond our control, the realm of mystery.

Contemplative experience, as the lived experience of God’s own self-revelation to us, is a gift. We cannot cause it to occur. “We must realize to the very depths of our being,” writes Merton, “that this is a pure gift of God which no desire, no effort and no heroism of ours can do anything to deserve or obtain. There is nothing we can do directly either to procure it or to preserve it or to increase it....At best we can dispose ourselves for the reception of this great gift.”<sup>20</sup>

In this regard, the experience of God has something in common with the experience of love between human persons. Human love also occurs in the realm of mystery; we cannot control its emergence. Love between persons

<sup>17</sup> *To Maseo Abe*, p. 332.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>19</sup> Th. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, New York: New Directions, 1972.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 230.

is a process of mutual self-revelation, a reciprocal giving and receiving of the gift of self. As philosopher Bernard Boelen points out, we do not choose to love; we surrender before it. “Authentic love always comes as a mutual surprise,” and strikes us “with a sudden feeling of wonder at the unexpected and overwhelming gift of Self.”<sup>21</sup>

“True contemplation,” says Merton, “is not a psychological trick but a theological grace. It can come to us *only* as a gift, and not as a result of our own clever use of spiritual techniques.”<sup>22</sup> “In the spiritual life there are no tricks and no short cuts.”<sup>23</sup> If the experience of God is a gift, and “not something that one can turn on like a light,”<sup>24</sup> then we should be suspicious of all formulas that claim to be able to produce this experience in us. Merton advises us not to look for a method or system, but to “cultivate an ‘attitude,’ an ‘outlook’: faith, openness, attention, reverence, expectation, supplication, trust, joy.”<sup>25</sup>

Just as we are unable to control or predict the gift of God’s self-revelation to us, we are also unable to dictate the content of that gift. Merton says that we must accept God as God comes to us, in God’s own obscurity and silence.<sup>26</sup> We must, as Eckhart says, “let God be God.” When we are in the presence of the inexhaustible mystery of Being, we are “beyond our own knowledge, beyond our own light, beyond systems, beyond explanations, beyond discourse, beyond dialogue, beyond our own self.”<sup>27</sup> And there, beyond all beings and things, we encounter the ground of our Being, which is itself No-thing!

One of Merton’s starkest descriptions of this encounter with the nothingness of Being occurs in *Cables to the Ace*, where he writes:

*Gelassenheit*: Desert and void. The Uncreated is waste and emptiness to the creature. Not even sand. Not even stone. Not even darkness and night. A burning wilderness would at least be “something.” It burns and is wild. But the

<sup>21</sup> Bernard J. Boelen, *Personal Maturity: The Existential Dimension*, New York: Continuum-Seabury, 1978, p. 164.

<sup>22</sup> Th. Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, New York: Doubleday, 1996, p. 92.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 37.

<sup>24</sup> Th. Merton, *To Mr. Omloo*, 12 Oct. 1965, in: *Witness to Freedom*, p. 323.

<sup>25</sup> Th. Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 34.

<sup>26</sup> Th. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 230.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 2.

Uncreated is no something. Waste. Emptiness. Total poverty of the Creator: yet from this poverty springs everything. The waste is inexhaustible. Infinite Zero. Everything comes from this desert Nothing. Everything wants to return to it and cannot. For who can return "nowhere?" But for each of us there is a point of nowhere in the middle of movement, a point of nothingness in the midst of being: the incomparable point, not to be discovered by insight. If you seek it you do not find it. If you stop seeking, it is there. But you must not turn to it. Once you become aware of yourself as seeker, you are lost. But if you are content to be lost you will be found without knowing it, precisely because you are lost, for you are, at last, nowhere.<sup>28</sup>

It is significant, I think, that Merton introduces this passage with the German word *Gelassenheit*, a word reminiscent of the Martin Heidegger's thought, with which Merton was familiar. For Heidegger, *Gelassenheit*, or releasement, is the disposition that enables us to receive the gift of Being. Bernard Boelen, elaborating on this theme, says that *Gelassenheit* is the hallmark of the mature personality. All that we have and do in life, says Boelen, will ultimately remain meaningless unless we transcend it all "in a courageous resolve to open up to Being in a creative act of Self-surrender as 'releasement' unto Being."<sup>29</sup> This creative act of Self-surrender is a response to a call that arises from the very depths of our being, where we open up to meaning and Being beyond ourselves. "Here," writes Boelen, "man achieves authentic Self-identity by his courageous resolve to open up to the whole of Being and to allow himself to be led by its cosmic luminosity in which he begins to participate."<sup>30</sup>

In *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, Merton appeals to the simple image of a window to describe the letting go and self-emptying necessary to dispose ourselves to receive the gift of Being. A window "is nothing but a hole in the wall, but because of it the whole room is full of light."<sup>31</sup> This, then, is how we dispose ourselves to receive the gift that comes to us in contemplative experience. Merton frequently returns to this theme of the need to let

go of everything, to empty ourselves, to lose ourselves in order to find God and to find ourselves and all things in God.

We have been examining why contemplation cannot be taught from the point of view of the nature of contemplative experience as a gift that is beyond our control to produce at will. There is, however, another significant reason why contemplation cannot be taught, a reason having to do with the nature of the person who is the recipient of this ineffable gift. Here, as everywhere, St. Thomas' old adage applies: whatever is received is received according to the mode of the recipient (*quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur*). As persons, we are each unique and "irreducible," to borrow a favorite term from Karol Wojtyła's philosophy of person.<sup>32</sup> Contemplation, says Merton, is "an intuitive awakening in which our free and personal reality becomes fully alive to its own existential depths, which open out into the mystery of God."<sup>33</sup> Just as no two persons are alike, so, too, no two persons become fully alive and fully themselves in exactly the same way.

Merton's works reflect a deep appreciation for the freedom and uniqueness of human persons in their search for meaning and fulfillment. We see this attitude reflected, for example, in his preface to the Japanese edition of *Thoughts in Solitude*, where he writes: "These pages...certainly do not pretend to do the reader's thinking for him. On the contrary, they invite him to listen for himself."<sup>34</sup> He offered his thoughts to the world in much the same manner as Herakleitos, of whom Merton wrote: "His words would be neither expositions of doctrine nor explanations of mystery, but simply pointers, plunging toward the heart of reality."<sup>35</sup> What Merton said about

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Karol Wojtyła's article *Subjectivity and the Irreducible in the Human Being*, in: *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, by K. Wojtyła, trans. Theresa Sandok, New York: Peter Lang, 1993, pp. 209-217. *Podmiotowości i 'to, co nieredukowalne' w człowieku*, in: *Ethos* 1.2-3 (1988), pp. 21-28.

<sup>33</sup> Th. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 9.

<sup>34</sup> Th. Merton, *Preface to the Japanese Edition of "Thoughts in Solitude"*, in: *Honorable Reader: Reflections on My Work*, ed. by Robert E. Daggy, New York: Crossroad, 1991, p. 111. This remark sums up Merton's views on the purpose of education in general, a theme he developed more fully in *Learning to Live*, in: *Love and Living*, ed. by Naomi Burton Stone and Patrick Hart, New York: Farrar, 1979, pp. 3-14.

<sup>35</sup> Th. Merton, *Herakleitos the Obscure*, in: *A Thomas Merton Reader*, ed. by Thomas P. McDonnell, New York: Image-Doubleday, 1974, p. 265.

<sup>28</sup> Th. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, New York: New Directions, 1968, p. 58.

<sup>29</sup> Boelen, p. 125.

<sup>30</sup> Boelen, p. 132.

<sup>31</sup> Th. Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, New York: New Directions, 1969, p. 53.



poets in *Raids on the Unspeakable* applies equally to those who would pursue the contemplative life:

When the poet puts his foot in that ever-moving [Hera-  
klitean] river, poetry itself is born out of the flashing water. In  
that unique instant, the truth is manifest to all who are able  
to receive it.

No one can come near the river unless he walks on his  
own feet. He cannot come there carried in a vehicle.

No one can enter the river wearing the garments of public  
and collective ideas. He must feel the water on his skin. He  
must know that immediacy is for naked minds only, and for  
the innocent.

Come, dervishes: here is the water of life. Dance in it.<sup>36</sup>

### *Contemplation is for everyone*

*Every man knows how useful it is to be useful.*

*No one seems to know*

*How useful it is to be useless.*

Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*

Søren Kierkegaard once remarked that being an authentic human being is a rare sort of greatness – not because so few are called to it, but because so few achieve it. Merton shared Kierkegaard's view in this regard. He wrote: "We are all called to become fully real... by attaining to a reality beyond the limitations of selfishness, in the Spirit."<sup>37</sup> We attain to this reality through contemplation as the lived experience of the ground of our Being. Contemplation, then, is for everyone... and yet it eludes most of us.

Somehow in the Catholic Church the notion arose that contemplation was for a select few, the special vocation of monks and mystics. The rest of us, we were told, served God by living an "active" life "in the world." Merton, to his credit, never subscribed to such a view and did all in his power to dispel the notion that contemplation and action are somehow incompatible. Already in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he wrote:

<sup>36</sup> Th. Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, New York: New Directions, 1966, p. 161.

<sup>37</sup> Th. Merton, *Preface to the Japanese Edition of "The New Man"*, in: *Honorable Reader*, p. 136.

There is only one vocation. Whether you teach or live in the cloister or nurse the sick, whether you are in religion or out of it, married or single, no matter who or what you are, you are called to the summit of perfection: you are called to a deep interior life, perhaps even to mystical prayer, and to pass the fruits of your contemplation on to others. And if you cannot do so by word, then by example.<sup>38</sup>

Returning to the same theme some years later, he wrote: "Contemplation does not exist only within the walls of the cloister. Every man, to live a life full of significance, is called simply to know the significant interior of life and to find ultimate significance in its proper inscrutable existence, in spite of himself, in spite of the world and appearances, in the Living God."<sup>39</sup> Thus, far from regarding the contemplative life as the prerogative of a select few, Merton viewed it as the norm for all human beings—regardless of doctrinal or cultural differences.

To a Methodist correspondent, he wrote: "I think that deep experience of God should normally be the common thing for Christians."<sup>40</sup> He told his Moslem friend Abdul Aziz that, while it is important to try to understand the beliefs of other religions, it is far more important to share "the experience of divine light, and first of all of the light that God gives us even as the Creator and Ruler of the Universe."<sup>41</sup> One of Merton's most beautiful articulations of this universal call that arises out of the depths of our Being is found in a letter to the Indian poet and philosopher Amiya Chakaravarty, to whom he dedicated *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*:

I do really have the feeling...that you have seen something that I see to be most precious – and most available too. The reality that is present to us and in us: call it Being, call it Atman, call it Pneuma... or Silence. And the simple fact that by being attentive, by learning to listen (or recovering the natural capacity to listen which cannot be learned any more than breathing), we can find ourselves engulfed in such happiness that it cannot be explained: the happiness of being at

<sup>38</sup> Th. Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 419.

<sup>39</sup> Th. Merton, *Preface to the Argentine Edition of "The Complete Works of Thomas Merton"*, in: *Honorable Reader*, pp. 39-40.

<sup>40</sup> Th. Merton, *To Mrs. Nunn*, Jan. 10<sup>th</sup>, 1964, in: *Witness to Freedom*, p. 311.

<sup>41</sup> Th. Merton, *To Abdul Aziz*, May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1963, in: *Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 54.

one with everything in that hidden ground of Love for which there can be no explanations.<sup>42</sup>

If we are all called to experience this dynamic awakening of ourselves in the Spirit, an awakening through which we become "fully real," then why do so few people actually achieve it? Merton's answer here mirrors that of Kierkegaard and other existential thinkers.<sup>43</sup> This achievement is so rare, says Merton, because most of us tend to be alienated from ourselves. We look for fulfillment in all the wrong places. We end up "living like a machine, pushed around by impulsions and suggestions from others."<sup>44</sup> When we live this way, "involved only in our surface existence, in externals, and in the trivial concerns of our ego, we are untrue to [God] and to ourselves."<sup>45</sup>

Merton does not propose that we abandon the ordinary world of work and functions. Far from it. For Merton, action is the natural fruit of contemplation. Action is the sign that our contemplation is absorption in God – and not merely self-absorption (navel gazing). When action and contemplation operate in tandem, says Merton, "they become two aspects of the same thing. Action is charity looking outward to other men, and contemplation is charity drawn inward to its own divine source. Action is the stream, and contemplation is the spring."<sup>46</sup> "When action and contemplation dwell together, filling our whole life because we are moved in all things by the Spirit of God, then we are spiritually mature."<sup>47</sup> And this is precisely the rare sort of greatness to which we are all called.

<sup>42</sup> Th. Merton, *To Amiya Chakravarty*, April 13<sup>th</sup>, 1967, in: *Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 115.

<sup>43</sup> Merton frequently referred to himself as a Christian existentialist. See, for example, *Learning to Live*, p. 4.

<sup>44</sup> Th. Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, in: *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master*, ed. by Lawrence S. Cunningham, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1992, p. 372.

<sup>45</sup> Ibidem, p. 372.

<sup>46</sup> Th. Merton, *No Man Is an Island*, New York: Harcourt, 1955, p. 70.

<sup>47</sup> Ibidem, p. 70.

### *Finding communion in solitude*

*Love does not consist in gazing at each other but  
in looking outward together in the same direction.*

Antoine de Saint Exupéry

Contemplation requires solitude. When we hear the word "solitude," we usually think of being alone, being apart from others. Indeed, contemplation does require such external solitude from time to time, but this is not the deepest sense in which contemplation needs solitude. For Merton, the solitude that is at the heart of contemplation and that, in a sense, may even be said to *be* contemplation is inner solitude.

Such solitude, far from isolating us from the world, puts us most intimately in touch with the world. "The first place in which to go looking for the world," says Merton, "is not outside us but in ourselves. We *are* the world. In the deepest ground of our being we remain in metaphysical contact with the whole of that creation in which we are only small parts."<sup>48</sup> Approaching this same theme from another angle, Merton writes: "The self is not its own center and does not orbit around itself; it is centered on God, the one center of all, which is 'everywhere and nowhere,' in whom all are encountered, from whom all proceed. Thus from the very start this consciousness is disposed to encounter 'the other' with whom it is already united anyway 'in God.'"<sup>49</sup>

In his preface to the Japanese edition of *Thoughts in Solitude*, Merton calls solitude the "proper climate" for doing our own listening, our own hearing. "Or perhaps better," he says, "this Hearing which is No-Hearing is itself solitude."<sup>50</sup> Thus, solitude is not so much a state as it is an activity, but a very mysterious kind of activity, for it is a Hearing that is No-Hearing. By means of this enigmatic expression, Merton is trying to express the sense of unity with the whole of Being that occurs in authentic solitude. This is a solitude that unites rather than separates, a solitude that transcends all divisions.

<sup>48</sup> Th. Merton, *Seven Words*, in: *Love and Living*, p. 120.

<sup>49</sup> Th. Merton, *The New Consciousness*, in: *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, New York: New Directions, 1968, p. 24.

<sup>50</sup> Th. Merton, *Preface to the Japanese Edition of "Thoughts in Solitude"*, in: *The Honorable Reader*, p. 111.

Here we encounter one of Merton's most mature and profound reflections on solitude. "Why do I speak of a Hearing which is No-Hearing?" asks Merton. He responds:

Because if you imagine the solitary as "one" who has numerically isolated himself from "many others," who has simply gone out of the crowd to hang up his individual number on a rock in the desert, and there to receive messages denied to the many, you have a false and demonic solitude. This is solipsism, not solitude. It is the false unity of separateness, in which the individual marks himself off as his own number, affirms himself by saying "count me out."

The true unity of the solitary life is the one in which there is no possible division. The true solitary does not seek himself, but loses himself. He forgets that there is number, in order to become all. Therefore he is No (individual) Hearer.

He is attuned to all the Hearing in the world, since he lives in silence. He does not listen to the ground of being, but he identifies himself with that ground in which all being hears and knows itself.<sup>51</sup>

What we discover in such solitude is that we are *already one* with others and the world. "Communion," says Merton, "is the awareness of participation in an ontological or religious reality: in the mystery of being, of human love, of redemptive mystery, of contemplative truth."<sup>52</sup>

According to Merton, symbols play a central role in evoking such awareness in us. The function of a symbol, writes Merton "is to manifest a union that *already exists but is not fully realized*. The symbol awakens awareness, or restores it."<sup>53</sup> Merton's treatment of symbols here is very similar to Heidegger's view of the revelatory power of language: "Language alone," says Heidegger, "brings what is, as something that is, into the Open for the first time."<sup>54</sup> Communication is possible only because we are already in communion.

<sup>51</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>52</sup> Th. Merton, *Symbolism: Communication or Communion?*, in: *Love and Living*, p. 68.

<sup>53</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>54</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 1971, p. 73, qtd. in: Boelen, p. 181.

A very simple way of illustrating this truth is to return for a moment to the lines from Merton's beautiful prose-poem "Hagia Sophia," with which we began this presentation.

There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness. This mysterious Unity and Integrity is Wisdom, the Mother of all, *Natura naturans*. There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence that is a fount of action and joy. It rises up in wordless gentleness and flows out to me from the unseen roots of all created being, welcoming me tenderly, saluting me with indescribable humility. This is at once my own being, my own nature, and the Gift of my Creator's Thought and Art within me, speaking as Hagia Sophia, speaking as my sister, Wisdom.<sup>55</sup>

Why, we may ask, do these words resonate so strongly in us? Why do they strike us – and so many others – as capturing some sublime truth? Or, to put it another way, since what Merton is talking about here is "invisible," "nameless," "hidden," "mysterious," "silent," etc., how are we even able to understand him – unless we ourselves are participants in that same reality he is striving to articulate? Merton's words ring true to us precisely because they bring to light something we already know, however vaguely, in the pre-reflective immediacy of our lived experience.

The grounding of communication in communion is one of the themes Merton was exploring in the months just before his death. In his notes for a paper he presented in Calcutta in 1968, he wrote: "True communication on the deepest level is more than a simple sharing of ideas, conceptual knowledge, or formulated truth. The kind of communication that is necessary at this level must also be 'communion': beyond the level of words, a communion in authentic experience which is shared not only on a 'preverbal' level but also on a 'postverbal' level."<sup>56</sup>

In the paper itself, Merton expressed this insight in the following way:

The deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words, and

<sup>55</sup> Th. Merton, *Hagia Sophia*, in: *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, New York: New Directions, 1977, p. 363.

<sup>56</sup> Th. Merton, *Notes for Oct. 23th, 1968 Talk in Calcutta*, qtd. in William H. Shannon, *Introduction*, in: *Hidden Ground of Love*.



it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity. My dear brothers, we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are.<sup>57</sup>

Merton's biographer Michael Mott, in a perceptive comment on this passage, writes: "Here contemplation (the sense of God) and communication as communion (the sense of others) come together."<sup>58</sup>

Finally, for Merton, the most apt characterization of "this ground, this unity" in which all being hears and knows itself, is Love. "The paradox of solitude," writes Merton, "is the undivided unity of love for which there is no number."<sup>59</sup> It will come as no surprise to those familiar with Merton that his contemplative vision resolves itself ultimately in Love. For Merton, Being has a personal face.<sup>60</sup> Merton's enduring Christian faith and his personal contemplative experience both contributed to his conviction that "in the depths of our own being there is an inexhaustible spring of mercy and of love."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Th. Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, New York: New Directions, 1975, p. 308, qtd. in M. Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, New York: Harvest-Harcourt, 1993, p. 545.

<sup>58</sup> Mott, p. 545.

<sup>59</sup> Merton, *Preface to the Japanese Edition of "Thoughts in Solitude"*, p. 112.

<sup>60</sup> "My 'eschatology'," wrote Merton, "says that underlying all of [life and history], in the deepest depths that we cannot possibly see, lies an ultimate ground in which all contradictories are united and all come out 'right.' For a Christian this ultimate ground is personal – that is to say, it is a ground of freedom and love, not a simple mechanism or process. But since we are all in potentially conscious contact with this deep ground (which of course exceeds all conscious grasp) we must try to 'listen' to what comes out of it and respond to the imperatives of its freedom. In doing so...we will be in harmony with the dynamics of life and history even though we may not fully realize that we are so. The important thing then is to restore this dimension of existence" (*To Walter A. Weisskopf, Roosevelt University*, April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1968, in: *Witness to Freedom*, p. 336).

<sup>61</sup> Th. Merton, *The Good Samaritan*, in: *Thomas Merton Reader*, pp. 348-56.