

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

The Hesychastic Heart of Thomas Merton's Universal Embrace

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I AM SURE that I am not alone in feeling that the events of last September 11th in New York have had the effect of bringing Thomas Merton much nearer to us. I think already, long before that day, people were becoming aware of ways in which Merton seemed to be drawing nearer to us as we got further away from him in time. I began to think that a way to understand that apparent paradox was to recognise that Merton was so far ahead of his own time, it was only as we moved further away from him that we were gradually catching up with him.

September 11th changed things. Change became sudden not gradual, unpredictable not predictable, improbable rather than probable. I have been surprised, sometimes almost thrown, by the strength of my own reactions to these events, and in particular to the strength and disarray of my feelings towards the United States of America, a country which I have known for almost forty years, where I have frequently stayed and taught, where I have many friends and acquaintances, people to whom I am greatly indebted. I thought I knew the USA fairly well, for better and for worse, and that I knew my own reactions to that vast country, the favourable and the less favourable ones.

Forgive me if I speak personally. I have been remembering in the last months two lines from *King Lear*, which were very much with me at the end of the 1960s.

The weight of this sad time we must obey,
speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.

The events of September 11th have affected me in two ways. First in a strong sense of identification, not only with the country as a whole, but with the city and people of New York in particular, a place where I stayed quite a number of times in the sixties and seventies. I was in

Italy on the 11th of September, at Bose, in a predominantly Italian environment. Suddenly I was aware that I was not only a European. I was also an Anglo-Saxon, and I felt almost a New Yorker. I found the same thing when I got to New York some three weeks later, to stay with friends in a parish on 29th Street in Manhattan, not so far from the World Trade Center. I had an unexpectedly deep sense of satisfaction, of at-homeness, as the taxi drove into those familiar streets and I saw they were still there. But I must say that once I was there in Manhattan I became aware, in a way I could never have foreseen, of the weight, the burden, the sense of loss which people seemed to be carrying, particularly in that part of New York.

But if on the one hand I have found a sense of identification with America and with American friends, which was stronger than I had expected, I have also known within myself a revulsion from some of the attitudes and actions of the American government, which has astonished me by its violence; I hadn't expected myself to react so powerfully.

I think for instance of the treatment of the prisoners at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba. A treatment which seems to me to have been grotesque in its inhumanity, its stupidity and indeed its wickedness. In relation to those men, and to others whom the administration seems anxious to dispose of, I have felt that the difference that opens up between a country which retains the death penalty and one which has decided to reject it, is perhaps deeper and more decisive than I imagined it would be.

If you look in *The Merton Annual*, Volume 11, you will find the text of a keynote address given at the International Society's meeting in Mobile, Alabama, in 1997 by James Douglass, director of a House for Homeless People in Birmingham, Alabama.¹ In it he speaks of the American prison system with its huge population, he speaks of those on Death Row,

surrounded by the thickest walls on earth, guarded twenty-four hours a day, monitored constantly by electronic devices and video cameras...

He speaks of the particular way in which that system weighs on the black community,

at the judicial scape-goating of the poor and the massive expansion of our prison system into a new Harlem. On our Death Row we

have lost compassion. At the time of the unspeakable there is Death Row at the center of our history.

Perhaps it is not so surprising that the authorities at Guantanamo Bay are obviously perfectly at ease with the system they have devised. They evidently took it for granted that the rest of the world (even, apparently, the rest of the Muslim world) would have been as pleased as they were with the photographs they released of prisoners in process of being processed.

If my own reaction against a certain kind of aggressive and unreflecting American reaction to September 11th is stronger than I had expected, perhaps it has something to do with the two people who first welcomed me to the United States in the summer of 1963, when I was visiting that country for the first time, and who gave me, needless to say, a very different picture of what America is called to be.

The first was Dale Moody, New Testament Professor at the Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville, with whom I stayed first of all. He was in many ways a rather typical American; perhaps untypical in his deep sense of rootedness in Kentucky, the state in which he had not only been born and grown up, but in which he lived and worked and to which he was devoted. Dale Moody was a man felt by many of his colleagues to be dangerously liberal in matters of theology. He was a man loved by his students for his combination of scholarly accuracy with Baptist warmth and enthusiasm, a combination which got his lecture room the nickname 'Hallelujah Hall!' It was he who took me to visit Lincoln's birthplace, to visit Shakertown at Pleasant Hill, it was he who took me to Gethsemani and introduced me to Merton.

Merton was of course a man of a more complex kind than Dale Moody. Brought up in England and France, his father a New Zealander, his mother an American, it was in the end with his mother's country that he stayed and cast down his anchor. He became an American and identified himself with the country of his adoption, in many ways wholeheartedly if never uncritically. He too was a man who lived both with his heart and his head, and who joined clarity with devotion. I suppose, almost without being aware of it, I gained my deepest impressions of the United States not only through our conversations, but above all from the book of his which is still particularly dear to me, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, the book in which he lives through, thinks through and prays through those tumultuous years of the 1960s.

I have never ceased to be amazed at the strange fact that we should have been spending the day together in April 1968 at the moment when Martin Luther King was shot in Memphis. We finished the day in a little restaurant in Bardstown, Colonel Hawke's Diner, under the watchful eye of the restaurant's proprietor and manager Colonel Hawke, a remarkable and memorable African-American, a friend of Tom and a friend of the community at Gethsemani.

It would be tempting to try to imagine what Merton's reaction would be today to some of the stranger and more troubling aspects of our contemporary tumults. But I intend to try to look a little beneath the surface of things to the deeper motivations of his life. Recognising for instance how closely some of his deepest concerns in that last decade of his life correspond to some of the deepest needs of our own time.

There is for instance the need to work towards a non-violent way of resistance to war and violence, the need to develop a positive peace movement, a way of working towards both truth and reconciliation. There is also the urgent need to press forward on the way of inter-faith dialogue, towards a greater mutual understanding, respect and love between people of very different religious and cultural traditions. There is above all the urgent need to rediscover a wholeness and liberty in our way of living and thinking and praying the Christian tradition, a new awareness, a new sense of the all-embracing divine humanity of Christ, which leaves no-one outside the scope of divine love. It is the subtitle of our conference this year, *Thomas Merton's Universal Embrace*. How far is it our continuing fears, prejudices, divisions, within the family of Christ, which block us from this truly universal vision, this truly universal embrace?

I have long believed that something of the very heart of Merton's theological and spiritual vision is to be found in the unpublished lectures on *Ascetical and Mystical Theology*, which he gave to the community at Gethsemani in 1960, and in those lectures above all about the remarkable chapter on *Natural Contemplation*, on *physike theoria*, in the work of Maximus the Confessor. Of Maximus, Merton says

He has the broadest and most balanced view of the Christian cosmos of all the Greek fathers and therefore of all the fathers.

He indeed can tell us what it means to have the world in our bloodstream.

Last October, on my visit to the States, I went from New York to Louisville, to take part in a day symposium on *Merton and Hesychasm*, *Merton and the Prayer of the Heart*, and the morning after the meeting I had the chance to spend two or three precious hours at the Merton Study Center, and with Paul Pearson's expert and perceptive guidance I was able to discover many things in a brief space of time. Above all I had the chance to examine one of the volumes of Mignes' *Patrologia Graeca*, from the monastic library, which contains the works of Maximus the Confessor, and there I could trace in Merton's discreet careful notes and marks in the margin of that volume, how thoroughly he had read his way through that great and complex thinker. Of course he shouldn't have been making those notations, I think he perhaps reckoned that no-one else in the monastery would read the volume at all!

There I saw something of the work which lay behind the words he spoke to the community in those lectures on the spiritual tradition of the Church through the centuries, or, as he says in those lectures, 'the mystical tradition of the Church, a collective memory and experience of Christ living and present within her,' and of the vital place of natural contemplation within that memory and experience. *Theoria Physike*, 'the reception of God's revelation of himself in creatures, in history, in scripture,' learning to read God's presence in all things, finding the world despite all its apparent darkness as still God's good creation.

We must not believe that sin caused this unique masterpiece, which is the visible world in which God manifests himself by a silent revelation. (Maximus).

The vision of *theoria physike* is essentially *sophianic*, through the vision we are able to unite the hidden wisdom of God in things with the hidden light of wisdom in ourselves. The meeting and marriage of these two brings about a resplendent clarity within man himself, and this clarity is the presence of the divine wisdom fully recognised and active within us. (Merton).

It is that 'resplendent clarity' which we see shining out in the photograph of Merton and the Dalai Lama at the end of the third of their momentous meetings.

This contemplation of God in and through the things he has made, and in and through the vicissitudes of history, personal and public, works at many levels. It involves a discovery of God's presence in the spirit of scripture and not in the letter. It liberates us from a deadly

literalism of scriptural understanding, the root of fundamentalism, it involves discovering God's presence in the *logoi* of created things, not in their materiality, that is to say in the things in themselves, in their own true being, not simply as things to be manipulated and exploited by us; it means 'recognising God's presence in our own inmost spirit and true self, rather than in the ego'; the discovery of the true person within, the hidden person of the heart; 'recognising God's action in the inner meaning of history and not in its externals; in the inner sense of the divine judgement and mercy, not in the superstitious and pseudo-apocalyptic interpretation of events.' How that speaks to some of the dangerous nonsense of our time, which treats the vision of St John on Patmos, for instance, as if it contained the predictions of an astrologer!

The wisdom which comes from the encounter with God in history and in our own lives is liberating and integrating, enabling us through turmoil to find balance and clarity and equilibrium.

The will of God is no longer a blind force plunging through our lives like a cosmic steamroller and demanding to be accepted willy-nilly. On the contrary we are able to understand the hidden purposes of the creative wisdom and the divine mercy of God, and we can co-operate with him as sons and daughters with a loving father.

There is much more in Merton's monastic interpretation of the patristic ideal of natural contemplation, receiving and apprehending the revelation of God in and through the things that God makes and the things that he does. There is his whole consideration of what that means for the work of the artist, the poet, the musician in our times.

He must be in communication with things in their deepest centre, in their most real value, he must be attuned to their voice, he must sense something of their logic, their vocation.

There is also his brilliant use of the architecture and craftsmanship of the nineteenth century Shakers to illustrate the nature of the true sacred art and meaning of this seventh century theologian. 'Shaker handicrafts are a real epiphany of the *logoi*;' in them we see the inner logic, the calling, the vocation of stone and wood and bricks and mortar. The Shaker building always fits right into its location, manifests the *logos* of the place where it is built, grasps and expresses the hidden *logos* of the valley or hillside which forms its site.

But rather than dwell on such material, fascinating though it is, I want to come back again to the very heart of our topic, to Merton's

description of the inner, mystical tradition of the Church, its 'collective memory and experience of Christ living and present within her.'

The symposium in which I was taking part, in Louisville, was on the theme of *Merton and Hesychasm*, *Merton and the Prayer of the Heart* but it was unfortunate that none of the four speakers, of whom I was one, seem to have been aware of the tape of Merton speaking directly on the subject of prayer of the heart, i.e. the Jesus Prayer, to the brothers of the community at Gethsemani and showing how that extremely simple way of prayer is a true way of keeping alive, in one's own inmost being, as well as in the life of the whole Church, this memory and experience of Christ living and present within and amongst us.

Only on Tuesday last did I get from David Scott this tape of Merton speaking on this subject to the community of Gethsemani. It is a wonderful tape, a talk full of humour and joy, given with immense vigour and immense freedom. It begins with Merton telling us of a meeting he has had recently with a person who had struck him as someone truly holy, someone in whose presence he seemed to feel the touch of God's presence, and in her saw the truth of what Irenaeus means when he says that the vision of God is a human person truly alive. Merton then speaks about the Jesus Prayer and its use, its practice, its meaning and its power. Ultimately its power is in the name which stands at its centre, the name in which human and divine meet in their fullness and integrity.

Throughout the talk one is aware of Merton's enormous desire to communicate to his brethren in the community something of his own sense of discovery of this way of prayer, so simple that it can unite itself with all the times and circumstances of our life, can bring us at the end to discover that through the action of the Holy Spirit the memory and presence of Christ is indeed living within us.

If we ask how it was that Merton came to know that prayer, we can confidently say that he came to know it by praying it. If we want to see how carefully he had pondered on the depth of its meaning, how ready he was to learn from the Orthodox world in which it had its origin, we can turn to his journal entry for September 11th 1960 when he observes the anniversary of the death of Staretz Silouan, the monk of the Russian Monastery on Mount Athos who had died on September 11th 1938.² It was Staretz Silouan, unknown in his lifetime, and still very little known in 1960, who is now becoming well known as St

Silouan the Athonite, having been canonised by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople.

If you want an introduction to the prayer and vision of St Silouan you cannot do better than to turn to the little book of Brother Ramon and Bishop Simon Barrington-Ward, *Praying the Jesus Prayer Together*.³ There you will see something of the unifying power of that prayer, drawing together Evangelical, Catholic and Orthodox, and not only that, you will see the way in which that prayer speaks far beyond the boundaries of Christendom, especially to Muslims and Hindus. There too you will find, as you will in Merton's Journal for 1960, reflections on the words of the Lord spoken to the Staretz at the turning point of his life, 'Keep your mind in hell and do not despair.' I had long thought of those words as a message of hope from heaven addressed particularly to men and women of the twentieth century. Hearing them now I can see that they are no less urgently addressed to the people of our own century, our third millennium.

'Keep your mind in hell and do not despair.' What else could we possibly say to our brothers and sisters, Muslim, Jewish and Christian, in the Holy Land, to those who shelter at this moment in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, to those who go into the Church of the Resurrection in Jerusalem. 'Keep your mind in hell and do not despair.'

Notes and References

1. James W. Douglass, 'Compassion and the Unspeakable' in *The Merton Annual* Vol. 11, Sheffield Academic Press, 1998, pp. 67-87
2. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World—The Journals of Thomas Merton* Vol. 4 (ed. Victor A. Kramer), USA, HarperSanFrancisco, 1996, pp. 44-46
3. Brother Ramon and Simon Barrington-Ward, *Praying the Jesus Prayer Together*, Oxford, The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2001