

## The World in My Bloodstream: Merton on Relatedness and Community

THOMAS DEL PRETE

IN ONE OF THE WEEKLY TALKS THAT HE GAVE to the Gethsemani community after taking up full-time residence at his hermitage, Merton remarks that it is much better to become 'related' than virtuous. He insists that relatedness, not virtue, is what matters in spiritual and community life.<sup>1</sup>

Particularly in light of the fact that virtuous behavior, in some form, is held forth as the measure of tolerance and acceptable social policy by conservative religious voices in different places in the world today, Merton's distinction seems pressingly important.

The aims of this paper are to explain what relatedness means to Merton in contrast to virtue, to explore the roots of his thinking in his Christian humanism as well as his understanding of Eastern thought, and to show the importance of relatedness to his understanding of spiritual growth and community life from a Christian point of view.

### Virtue Versus Relatedness

Merton has a keen sense of how misleading the idea of virtue can be in the spiritual life, and how inimical to the development of real community. As those self-consciously involved in their own spiritual journey know, there is an inevitable desire to see signs of progress. The signs one looks for are often falsely clothed in the guise of virtue—some external evidence of one's own goodness or advancing character. There is a similar tendency to judge one's own development in relation to others. In the worst case, what results is self-absorption, self-importance, and a stance of righteous judgment over and against others.

Merton, of course, knew full well our capacity for self-deception, the snares laid by what he, and many whose ideas informed his understandings, called the ego-self. Like his Cistercian forebears, he was quick to point out to his brother monks how easy it is to substitute a self-willed, self-centered pseudo-spirituality for something deeper and real. He cautioned them in particular not to make of themselves a 'project' or object of study, not to confuse their idealization of the spiritual life with the deeper reality.<sup>2</sup> He explained that the spiritual life is not something that we construct ourselves and is not measured by visible signs that we may have in mind. As he put it,

When you start maturing in the spiritual life...gradually you find... that the purpose of everything is to make you drop your own plans and...place [your] hopes in God's Will.<sup>3</sup>

Clearly for Merton, a virtuous life and the spiritual life are hardly synonymous. It is not surprising, therefore, that in his teaching he steers a course away from virtuousness as an end in itself. In stressing the importance of relatedness, however, he is going beyond a concern for a false spirituality based on virtue, or an idealized or prescribed spirituality that is disconnected from inner openness to God's Will. A spirituality based on virtue is limited, if not hazardous, not only because of its focus on characteristic external behaviours, but because it is individualistic. In Merton's Christian humanism, spiritual growth is not only a matter of an intuitive awareness of and response to God's love at the inmost centre of our being, but involves at once a growing awareness of and response to our human relatedness in God. Self-discovery and other-discovery, so to speak, are intimately and mysteriously intertwined; Merton's spirituality is both personal and communal.<sup>4</sup> To be a person – to mature as a person – one has to become more and more related.

### The Spiritual Roots of Relatedness

The spiritual roots of relatedness in Merton's thinking are embedded in his essentially Pauline mystical theology and traceable in his understanding of the relationship between self-discovery and other-discovery, between person and community. In his various formulations of it, self-discovery for Merton is the realization of our whole, naked, inmost self. On the deepest level, self-discovery is the inner realization of Christ in

us, captured in the Pauline expression, 'I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me' (Galatians 2:20).<sup>5</sup>

Our full freedom and maturity as persons are realized in and through Christ, but this realization is unique for each of us. Thus Merton says, 'I have to become me in such a way that I am the Christ who can only be Christ in me.' Referring to his religious name, he adds, 'There is a "Louie-Christ" which has to be brought into existence and hasn't matured yet . . . Not just an abstract Christ but the Christ who can only be what he wants to be in us and he can't be in me what he is in anybody else.'<sup>6</sup>

Becoming is an important theme here. Paradoxically, to use Merton's words, 'I have to become me,' or, as he said in another context, we have to become what we already are.<sup>7</sup> The paradoxical mystery deepens when we realize, as Merton emphasizes, that 'I must look for my identity, somehow, not only in God, but in other[s];'<sup>8</sup> or when he writes, we cannot find ourselves in ourselves alone, but only in and through others.<sup>9</sup> The explanation for the paradox lies again in the deeper mystery of our identity in Christ.

Believing that self-discovery is ultimately Christ becoming what he wants to be in us, and thus in each of us becoming our 'Christ-self,' we are led to the spiritual corollary that we are related in and through Christ. We are all members one of another, as Merton reminds us. Therefore, relatedness is an aspect of our spiritual lives, part and parcel of 'other-discovery,' of discovering our mutuality in Christ and our common membership in the body of Christ. For Merton, this recognition is fundamentally important as a basis for the development of community life and for Christian social action.

Merton frequently expresses these ideas in non-theological as well as theological language from the middle of the 1960s onward. In talks that he gave to a group of clergy in Alaska, for instance, he writes, 'We are not individuals, we are persons, and a person is defined by a relationship with others' (TMA, pp.134-135).<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, in discussing prayer, he says,

'I am not just an individual when I pray..I am, in a certain sense, everybody...because this deep consciousness when I pray is a place of encounter between myself and God and between the common love of everybody...All prayer is communion' (TMA, pp.135-136).

One cannot be a person and fulfill one's unique personality in Christ without also and at the same time understanding one's relatedness.

Merton's introductions to Japanese editions of his work, in particular to *The Seven Storey Mountain* and *Thoughts in Solitude*, show him playing on the Zen concept of 'suchness,' his sense of 'withness.' Introducing *The Seven Storey Mountain* in 1963, he writes,

I must...not retain the semblance of a self which is an object or a "thing." I too must be no-thing. And when I am no-thing, I am in the All, and Christ lives in me. But He who lives in me is in all those around me...is hidden [in them]... My monastery...is...a place in which I disappear from the world as an object of interest in order to be everywhere in it by hiddenness and compassion.<sup>11</sup>

These words are echoed several years later in his introduction to *Thoughts in Solitude*:

[The] person...is one in the unity of love. He is undivided in himself because he is open to all. He is open to all because the one love that is the source of all, the form of all and the end of all, is one in him and in all... He who is truly alone truly finds in himself the heart of compassion with which to love not only this man or that, but all men. He sees them all in the One who is the Word of God, the perfect manifestation of God's love, Jesus Christ.<sup>12</sup>

It seems clear that the development of Merton's understanding of relatedness benefited from his in-depth study of Chuang Tzu, the ironic Taoist of the fourth and third centuries B.C.E., in the mid-1960s. Although he does not identify it as such, Merton in his introduction to *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (WCT) suggests that there is an awareness of relationship between self and other in Chuang Tzu's spiritual experience that has some parallel to the inner dynamic of self-discovery and other-discovery in the Christian spiritual life.

To draw this parallel it is important to see Chuang Tzu in context as Merton did. The Ju philosophy that prevailed during Chuang Tzu's time tended to set growth in virtuousness above a more direct, spontaneous and unselfconscious response to the Tao. This emphasis made it suspect as a spiritual philosophy in Chuang Tzu's eyes. Ends and means become confused. Concepts such as happiness and unhappiness, right and wrong, or good and evil, are sought self-consciously as ends in themselves. They frame and define the person in terms of a set of dichotomies that are either there or not there, gained or not gained, like objects.

Chuang Tzu refocused attention on the hidden Tao rather than the Tao as manifested in virtuous behavior. For Chuang Tzu, the one necessary end was to live in harmony with the Tao—albeit the Tao that is invisible, the 'nameless and unknowable source of all being' (WCT, p.20).<sup>13</sup> As Merton explains

For Chuang Tzu, the truly great man is therefore not the man who has, by a lifetime of study and practice, accumulated a great fund of virtue and merit, but the man in whom "Tao acts without impediment," the "man of Tao" (WCT, p.25).

Merton says that Chuang Tzu was not against virtue, but saw that 'mere virtuousness is without meaning and without deep effect either in the life of the individual or in society' (WCT, p.24).

For deep effect, it is much better to be non-virtuous, or, more to the point, to lose and find oneself in the Tao. Merton notes the Gospel analogy, 'For Chuang Tzu, as for the Gospel, to lose one's life is to save it, and to seek to save it for one's own sake is to lose it' (WCT, p.12). That deep effect includes and presupposes awareness of relatedness as well. One cannot be responsive to the Tao simply as an individual matter. In Merton's perception, Chuang Tzu, as a true man of Tao, 'does not set himself apart from others' and, in fact, recognizes 'his relatedness to others, his union with them' (WCT, p.30). Merton thus suggests a further implicit parallel between Chuang Tzu's experience and his own Christian humanism. In Chuang Tzu the way of the Tao was tied to identification with others in the same way that Merton says that we must find ourselves in and through others, and find others, therefore, in ourselves, that is, in the hidden ground of love in which we are one.<sup>14</sup>

We might cite other sources of influence in the formation of Merton's understanding of relatedness. Merton's study of Gandhi, for instance, reinforced a sense of connectedness across social and political boundaries, for at the centre of Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence, grounded in faith in God, is an ontological argument that a universal law of truth is inherent in our very being. Gandhi offers a basis for community in the common capacity to recognize and acknowledge the truth.<sup>15</sup>

The idea of *sobornost*, which appears in Merton's correspondence in the sixties, had a more direct and perhaps deeper influence. Central to the theology of the Russian Orthodox Church, with its emphasis on the Holy Spirit and personal encounter with God, *sobornost* had

theological roots in common with the Western Church in the Greek and Latin fathers. The term denotes community in the Spirit, an intimate form of collegiality and connectedness. For Merton *sobornost* pointed to the importance of a personalistic and spiritual basis for community as compared to the ideological or institutional basis that often substitutes for it.<sup>16</sup>

In elaborating the meaning of *sobornost*, Merton emphasizes that the deepest consciousness of who we are is a consciousness of closeness to other people, not of remoteness from them. As he explains,

...because I am a member of Christ... If I am going to pray validly and deeply it will be with a consciousness of myself as being more than just myself when I pray... I meet other people not only in outward contact with them, but in the depths of my own heart. I am in a certain sense more one with other people in that which is most secret in my heart than I am when I am in external relations with them. The two go together; you can't separate them (TMA, pp.134-135).

#### Relatedness and Community Life

Relatedness, in its full spiritual import, and community go hand in hand in Merton's perspective. Community in some sense is both the inner and outer realization of our relatedness, both within and across social, cultural and political boundaries. It is therefore an integral aspect of both our inner prayerful lives and daily relationships.

Merton states explicitly, 'The grace and the mystery and the sacrament of community work when there is relatedness between one another.' The grace that nourishes community life is tapped when we identify completely with and experience empathy for those with whom we live. As Merton explains in reference to the monastery, 'You not only identify with [your fellow monk], but you are able by your identification to value him. You see him as a good in himself because he is a person.' Identification in this sense is as much a matter of consciousness and spiritual insight as emotion, a felt intuitive awareness of the spiritual reality that we do not exist as isolated individuals. It means much more than virtue or even 'the moral conscience,' much more than judgment in terms of 'right' or 'wrong' (TMA, p.134). Merton elaborates,

Relatedness means this capacity to leave oneself behind...[to think] in terms of other...not "I" ... but "we". [You] are no longer there as a mere individual; you are functioning as two related people...<sup>17</sup>

Merton's characterization should not mislead. Becoming related no more means merging with another in a faceless relationship, or becoming invisible, than it means clothing oneself in virtue. In Merton's view of our spiritual maturation, the dynamic of self-emptying, or *kenosis*, means leaving behind all that stands in the way of our realization of what he calls our 'indestructible' self and the true 'ground' of our personality.<sup>18</sup> By leaving ourselves behind in this sense, we open up the inner space that is essential if we are to experience and express our relatedness to one another in community; for relatedness leads to an inner freedom that implies 'openness, availability, the capacity for gift.'<sup>19</sup>

These themes echo in talks, spurred in part by documents such as 'The Church in the Modern World' produced by Vatican II, that Merton gave to religious communities in the late 1960s, in particular those he gave to the Sisters of Loretto, neighbours to Gethsemani Abbey, and in Alaska on the eve of his trip to Asia. For them and for him 'community' was more than an abstraction. When he highlights for the Sisters of Loretto the importance of being present to others in community, he stresses in the same breath the importance of distance. It is distance that makes presence possible, and presence that ensures the capacity to give. Distance, as Merton means it, is both the inner and external space necessary for the recognition, valuing of and, finally, the response in love to each other as persons.<sup>20</sup>

In one of his Alaskan talks, Merton suggests further that leaving ourselves behind to be present to others, as an expression of relatedness, is ultimately letting God be present in and through us. In his words,

[The kerygmatic aspect of community] is making present the thing that the word is about... The real education of the Christian community is something that God himself gets into. God himself teaches us. And what the human teacher has to do is to get in there just enough to be a channel and to let God work through him' (TMA, p.120).

For Merton, community is built ultimately on God's love, not our own (TMA, p.104).

For those of us whose sense of social identity is shaped by Western culture, Merton's idea of relatedness is counterintuitive. It is the spiritual counterweight to the culture of individualism and self-assertion that sets one over and against another as objects, that perpetuates an illusion of separateness. What we lose in becoming

related is not ourselves in any deep sense, but the illusion of our individuality.

In Merton's spirituality, relatedness is one of the defining differences between an individual and a person, between the 'I' of our own preoccupation, and our real personality or 'Christ' self that is connected in love to others in the inmost depths of our being. In larger social terms, relatedness is the difference between an atomistic and a personalistic society, between a collectivity formed from the principle of self-interest or, worse, to borrow from Blake, from the 'mind-forged manacles' of collective control, and a community that seeks its ground in the mutuality of personhood and love. Neither an institution, be it a monastic tradition, the Church, or a government, that functions on the basis of rules and procedures, or a group or association, however well-intentioned and however just its cause, that seeks social leverage through power and control, have the basis for real community.<sup>21</sup>

Merton refers in this regard to Eberhard Arnold, the German Lutheran theologian who articulated the spiritual basis for community as a fellowship in the Spirit in love, even as he was confronted by, and saw as equally problematic, the political alternatives of Nazism and Communism in the 1930s (TMA, pp.108-109). The latter represent types of 'groupthink' that Merton saw as symptomatic of the unforgiving, collective will to power that co-opts our deep need to experience relatedness. More than once, Merton cautioned against the creation of these forms of pseudo-community, whether of the monolithic variety or in the guise of activist groups which zealously set cause and ideology above people.<sup>22</sup>

In reflecting on relatedness and community in light of Merton's insights, we must ask about the role of culture, class and ethnicity. Whether on a small or large scale, in what sense can relatedness transcend social, political and psychological boundaries? Commenting in one of his Alaskan talks on a Pauline passage that he uses to illustrate 'how community and contemplation and understanding the mystery of Christ are all linked together,' from Ephesians (Ephesians 2:11-22), Merton expresses clearly his view that historically divisive social distinctions are not inevitable. As he explains, 'In [the] creation of community . . . community is based not on ethnic background, not on whether you are a Jew or go to the synagogue, but on the love of

persons in Christ, personal relationships in Christ, and it isn't based on nationality or class' (TMA, p.100).

In other contexts, he makes equally clear that our development as whole persons and the development of a consciousness that transcends such divisions, go hand in hand.<sup>23</sup> This is not to say that relatedness is acultural for Merton, but that, insofar as the Christian community is concerned, it is transcultural. Put differently, Merton suggests that the more that we discover our inner integrity as persons, the more related we become within and across social and cultural groups.

If culture and ethnicity do not stand in the way of relatedness in a spiritual sense, neither does our capacity for relatedness make culture irrelevant or unimportant. One can readily make the case that Merton viewed the capacity for cultural understanding as important to the development of a sense of relatedness as relatedness might be for developing an understanding of different cultures.<sup>24</sup> The evidence is in his own effort to understand intercultural dynamics, both contemporary and historical, such as those related to the Cargo cults that he studied, and other religious traditions, and in his own capacity to establish communication with leaders in those traditions, such as the Dalai Lama. It is important to recognize, however, that his effort to understand was motivated in part by a realization that the prospect for peaceful and meaningful coexistence in the world depended on the ability to align cultural and transcultural perspectives, to inter-relate the local and the universal.

Merton strove to realize in himself what he called a universal consciousness, which, though universal, did not replace a more localized and communal consciousness, but rather helped to mold it. He felt sure that a universal consciousness could lead to the solution of communal problems in universal terms. In his words,

There has to be one world in which we all experience our problems as common and solve them as common without repudiating national differences.<sup>25</sup>

Merton's hopeful conviction stemmed from his belief that the 'deepest level of communication is communion,' a belief that only a deep experience of relatedness can sustain.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, it should be noted that Merton's idea of relatedness is part and parcel of an ontological perspective that embraces the world of

nature as well as the world of people. The intimation of God in all being, in everything that is, means that we are connected through God to nature as well as each other. Merton evokes this deep connectedness very simply in an entry in his journal in recording what might be described as a moment of being or of wholeness:

The meadowlark, feeding and singing. Then the quiet, totally silent, dry sun-drenched mid-morning of spring, under the climbing sun... How absolutely central is the truth that we are first of all part of nature, though we are a very special part, that which is conscious of God...it is man's own technocratic and self-centered "worldliness" which is in reality a falsification and a perversion of natural perspectives, which separates him from the reality of creation...<sup>27</sup>

This example of contemplative perception has a surprising counterpart in an encounter Merton had with quantum physics. He was delighted when he learned of the uncertainty principle, which maintains that we cannot know precisely what is happening to matter in the sub-atomic world precisely because we influence what is happening by our very act of observation, a conclusion that can only be reached with the startling realization that we are part of what we see. He exclaims in his journal, 'This leads to a fabulous new concept in nature with ourselves in the midst of it, destroying the simple illusion of ourselves as detached and infallible observers.'<sup>28</sup>

Merton's declaration that the world is in his bloodstream is a metaphorical way of saying that 'we are part of nature,' and, more generally, a statement of relatedness. He has left himself behind in the world as an object so as to experience it living in him even as he lives in it. As he explained to Japanese readers, 'He is open to all because the one love that is the source of all, the form of all and the end of all, is one in him and in all.'<sup>29</sup>

#### Notes and References

1. Thomas Merton, 'Christian Hope and Relatedness' (Cassette Recording #243B, 1966). Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky
2. Thomas Merton, 'Freedom and Spontaneity' (Cassette Recording #230B, 1965). Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky
3. Thomas Merton, 'Christian Hope and Relatedness' (Cassette Recording #243B, 1966). Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky
4. Thomas Merton, *No Man is An Island*. New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955, pp.xv-xxi

5. Quoted by Merton in *Love and Living* (ed. Naomi Burton and Patrick Hart). New York, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1979, p.22
6. Thomas Merton, 'The Bear' (Cassette Recording No.AA2079, 1967). Kansas City, MO, Credence Cassettes.
7. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal* (ed. Naomi Burton, Patrick Hart & John Laughlin). New York, New Directions, 1975, p.308
8. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*. New York, New Directions, 1961, p.51
9. Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island*, op. cit. p.xv
10. Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska: The Alaskan Conferences, Journals, and Letters*. New York, New Directions, 1988 (TMA)
11. Thomas Merton, 'Honorable Reader': Reflections on my work (ed. Robert E. Daggy). New York, The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1989, pp.64-65
12. *ibid.* pp.112, 118
13. Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*. New York, New Directions, 1965 (WCT)
14. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns* (ed. William H. Shannon). New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985, p.115 (HGL)
15. Thomas Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative*. New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980, pp.182-183; TMA, p.109; Thomas Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani*, New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1992, p.30
16. TMA, pp.84-85; HGL, pp.104, 360
17. Quotations of Merton in this paragraph are taken from the talk, 'Christian Hope and Relatedness,' see note 1 above.
18. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*. New York, New Directions, 1968, 117-119; see also, Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, op. cit. pp.5, 9
19. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, op. cit. p.8
20. Thomas Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation*, op. cit. p.70
21. See for example, TMA, pp.96, 109; Thomas Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation*, op. cit. p.35
22. See for example, HGL, pp.294-297; TMA, p.104
23. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, op. cit. p.9
24. Thomas Del Prete, 'Thomas Merton's Spirituality of Education,' *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice*, 5(2), 2001, pp.157-180 (see pp.165-167)
25. Thomas Merton, *Preview of the Asian Journey* (ed. Walter Capps). New York, The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1991, p.69
26. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, op. cit. p.315
27. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: The Journals of Thomas Merton*, Vol. 3 1952-1960 (ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham). San Francisco, HarperSanFrancisco, 1996, p.294
28. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Journals of Thomas Merton*, Vol. 4 1960-1963 (ed. Victor A. Kramer) San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996, p.323
29. Thomas Merton, 'Honorable Reader,' op. cit. p.112