

Thomas Merton and Romano Guardini

Preliminaries

Thomas Merton and Romano Guardini have much more in common than just a shared year of death, 1968. Both of them were born in the southern part of Europe, living in contrasting cultures, multilingual, deeply rooted in European traditions, highly interested in literature, arts, and politics. They were seeking the truth, expressed in human existence.

Of course, Guardini, thirty years older, was sometimes looking in other directions than Merton. He was an acclaimed university professor, a shy introvert, lecturing for big audiences. Merton lived as a monk and hermit, reaching out to a large number only through writing. Diaries – and the books evolving from them – constitute a large portion of Merton's oeuvre, whereas Guardini was not really interested in writing a diary. Open to new developments, even in liturgy, deeply united in a great love for the traditions of the Church and well versed in their writings (in original formats), though welcoming the reforms of Vatican II, both were clear-sighted about potential dangers which could arise. Seeing the increased mechanization of the world as a critical concern (especially the military and civil use of nuclear power), both made numerous strong comments on the subject. They were horrified about militarism of any kind. As masters of language – Merton's English, Guardini's German – they continue to impress by their remarkable writing styles.

Whereas a church process of beatification for Guardini was introduced at the Third Advent 2017, and Pope Benedict as well as Pope Francis are

quoting his writings occasionally, this has not happened for Merton. Nevertheless, on September 24th, 2015, Pope Francis mentioned Merton in his Address to the House of Congress:

I would like to mention four [...] Americans: Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton. [...] Three sons and a daughter of this land, four individuals and four dreams: Lincoln, liberty; Martin Luther King, liberty in plurality and non-exclusion; Dorothy Day, social justice and the rights of persons; and Thomas Merton, the capacity for dialogue and openness to God.¹

A century before Pope Francis' address, at the beginning of the Great War, which Pope Benedict XV termed a "pointless slaughter", Merton was born. He remains a source of spiritual inspiration and a guide for many people. In his autobiography he wrote:

I came into the world. Free by nature, in the image of God, I was nevertheless the prisoner of my own violence and my own selfishness, in the image of the world into which I was born. That world was the picture of Hell, full of men like myself, loving God, and yet hating him; born to love him, living instead in fear of hopeless self-contradictory hungers.²

Merton was above all a man of prayer, a thinker who challenged the certitudes of his time and opened new horizons for souls and for the Church. He was also a man of dialogue, a promoter of peace between peoples and religions.

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1 Zitiert nach (abgerufen am 12.01.2019), http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/de/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150924_usa-us-congress.html

2 Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1948), 3.

Reciprocal readings

Thomas Merton read Romano Guardini, and Guardini read Merton. In his diary, Guardini noted:

*Munich, 7.11.54: [...] Deeply touched by Th. Merton: The sign of Jonas. Earlier on I had the impression the impact of the American spirit on religious matters is simply negative. This was false. He can also offer a peculiar directness to the things discussed, simple and fresh.*³

Merton remarks five times in his diaries about reading Guardini. The first reference is on January 11, 1959:

*A very fine interview with Guardini was read in the refectory – a wonderful relief from the complacent windiness of Chesterton (St. Thomas Aquinas). Guardini spoke of power poisoning man today. We have such fabulous techniques that their greatness has outstripped our ability to manage them. This is the great problem. Difference between Guardini and Chesterton – Guardini sees an enormous, tragic, crisis and offers no solution. Chesterton evokes problems that stand to become, for him, a matter of words. And he always has a glib solution.*⁴

Six days later, on January 17, 1959, he wrote about a Guardini interview read in the refectory, with a paragraph about himself being left out:

It said my books were good but if I went a few years without writing they would get better.

He agreed, commenting that he ought to be able to write even less than he had the previous year. He concludes with the comment:

3 Romano Guardini, *Wahrheit des Denkens und Wahrheit des Tuns*. Paderborn: Schöningh, 1980, 98.

4 Thomas Merton, *A search for solitude: pursuing the monk's true life*. Ed. by Lawrence Cunningham. (The journals of Thomas Merton; vol. 3: 1952-1960). New York: HarperCollins, 1996, 246.

*Moved by Guardini's wonderful book on Dostojewski.*⁵

Merton was referring to an interview of Romano Guardini, conducted by Joseph Benjamin Gremillion (1919–1994) in Munich and published in the Jesuit journal "America", an interview in which Guardini referred to a growing interest in the United States in quiet and meditation and in lay retreats, and to the nine new Cistercian monasteries established since 1945:

*Yes, I know something about this grand development through reading Thomas Merton. Some of his books are very good indeed. But sometimes I think if he would find a way to withdraw from this activity for a few years, maybe he would then produce a truly great book for our age.*⁶

More than four years after his previous entry,⁷ Merton wrote again about Guardini, this time referring to his essay on Jean Pierre de Caussade. In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* Merton made use of these notes⁸, then on February 21, 1966, he wrote in his journal:

Rilke again. Re-reading the II Elegy and [Romano] Guardini about it. It seems to me that Guardini, while right in many judgments about R., takes too seriously R's own 'passionate' rejections of Christianity in letters etc. For passionately one should understand emotionally. [...] I do not minimize this – objectively a failure of faith. Yet G. does not see that R. was also struggling with a false religious problem imposed on him by 19th-century Christianity. [...] In a sense he does come up with a cos-

5 Thomas Merton, *A search for solitude: pursuing the monk's true life*. Ed. by Lawrence Cunningham. (The journals of Thomas Merton; vol. 3: 1952-1960). New York: HarperCollins, 1996, 248.

6 *America*, 1958, vol. C., No. 7 vom 15. November 1958, pp. 194-195, here 195.

7 Eintrag vom 17. August 1963, in: Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the water of life: seeking peace in the hermitage*. Ed. by Robert E. Daggy. (The journals of Thomas Merton; vol. 5: 1963-1965). New York: HarperCollins, 1998, 10.

8 Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a guilty bystander*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 311.

mology that seems a parody of Christianity - but is it really as G. thinks, a "secularization" in the sense of a degradation? [...] I cannot agree with all Rilke says - but I do not think he himself would have expected, still less demanded, an act of theological faith in the content of the *Duino Elegies*?⁹

Merton's final reference is to reading Guardini's "Pascal for Our Time" (New York, 1966), which on January 10, 1967, he described as:

one of G.'s best, at least for me. Whole thing so full of ideas they rush in from all sides and I have to stop and walk around.¹⁰

Shared interests

Clearly Merton's notes show an interest in certain authors shared with Guardini, but not typically, in the focus of theologians: Dostojewski, Pascal, Rilke, de Caussade. Merton appreciated Guardini's "wonderful book" on Dostojewski and Guardini's "Pascal for Our Time" inspired him so much that he has to interrupt reading to walk around. In Merton's judgement this book is one of the best ever written by Guardini. Why? We can only speculate. Maybe, because Guardini, as always, was trying to face his subject objectively, to find his way into Pascal's thinking. His study of Pascal was devoid of the prejudices typically put forward against Pascal (which Merton named as "Fatal pessimism and that. Jansenism.")¹¹ Guardini and Merton shared an unprejudiced view as they sought to look at things as they truly are; only then to evaluate and to judge.

9 Thomas Merton, *Learning to love: exploring solitude and freedom*. Ed. by Christine M. Bochen. (The journals of Thomas Merton; vol. 6: 1966-1967). New York: HarperCollins, 1997, 20.

10 Thomas Merton, *Learning to love: exploring solitude and freedom*, 184.

11 Thomas Merton, *Learning to love: exploring solitude and freedom*, 184.

Of course both of them hold their own point of view, as they look at the world; and we can see some notable differences between Merton and Guardini, irrespective of their shared interests. The different judgement on Rainer Maria Rilke makes that clear.

Different views on Rilke

Merton and Guardini are divided on Rilke. Whilst agreeing with Guardini in some aspects, Merton argued that Guardini was taking Rilke too seriously in his religious statements; something of which even Guardini himself was aware: Gerl-Falkovitz points out that: "in 1953 Guardini is finishing the interpretation of Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, with a sense of having taken them too serious, investing too much in them."¹²

On Rilke, then, Guardini remained ambivalent. Increasingly he sensed Rilke's peculiar mannerisms, but was unable to deal with Rilke without prejudice, to understand him in his own right. Indeed, Guardini was thinking from an ecclesiastical perspective, taking Rilke's use of language for granted, which brought about misunderstandings about the Christian faith as expressed in Rilke's poetry. That's why Merton is correct in his critique of Guardini's interpretation of Rilke.

Analysis of the contemporary


Merton appreciated the interview of Guardini in *America* magazine. He had found a kindred spirit, who like himself opposed the restorative tendencies in society after the war, the increase of mechanization and the depersonalization of humanity. In his diary, Guardini noted:

12 Hanna-Barbara Gerl-Falkovitz, *Romano Guardini*. 4. erg. Auflage. Mainz: Grünewald, 1995, 370.

Munich, 27.1.60 – *The apocalyptic riders: The big number / The perfect technique / The absolute truth / The closeness of the world.*¹³

These were issues Merton was dealing with, feeling forced into an active participation in various movements of his time: the Vietnam war, civil rights, challenging nuclear weapons, interreligious dialogue. Romano Guardini, thirty years older than Merton, was unable to undertake the kind of prolific political engagement performed by Thomas Merton. But he very clearly explained (for instance in “Das Ende der Neuzeit”) the approaching questions, and the necessity of answering them. He also underlined the relevance of a Christian encounter with Buddha and Buddhist thoughts, still outstanding. In this, Merton became a pioneer.

Thomas Merton and Romano Guardini were offering outlooks for the future, confronting as faithful catholic priests the questions and problems of their time, offering even today unusually and eloquently profound encouragements to address questions and problems of our time. In no way are the potentials of either of them exhausted.



Translation from the German by the author.

13 Romano Guardini, *Wahrheit des Denkens und Wahrheit des Tuns*. Paderborn: Schöningh, 1980, 126.