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Thomas Merton on the Gifts of a Guilty Bystander

A note on Merton's language: Merton was a man of his time and wrote before inclusive language was the norm in public discourse. He used masculine pronouns both for God and for human beings. As a scholar, I cannot alter primary sources with which I work. So if Merton's "exclusive language" grates in your ear (as it does mine), please do a little "work of translation" in your heart. Thank you.

Introduction

We begin with confession: We are all guilty bystanders; all implicated in systemic evil; all beneficiaries of unjust economic systems. Many of us live far from the epicenters of human suffering. We aspire to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ, but none of us is guiltless.

Merton spoke eloquently in an earlier era when the conscience of my country was waking up to our complicity in racism, poverty in Appalachia (where I am from) and the rural south, the horrors of Vietnam, when we were "going for the gold" in the nuclear arms race, barely aware of the threat of ecological disaster Rachael Carson (with whom Merton corresponded) signaled in her book *The Silent Spring*¹, and on the cusp of a new wave of feminism. In the 1960's America was, as Merton scholar Lawrence Cunningham once remarked, "having a collective nervous breakdown".

1 See Monica Weis, SSJ, *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2011).

Merton lived in rural Kentucky far from places of power and protest. He was cosseted in a monastery, a place of physical safety where he was fed and clothed (however basically), had access to good medical care, and knew he would be looked after in old age. Merton had all the things many in the USA today only dream of. Yet Merton was a bystander whose correspondence and writing indicate he understood his guilt, his complicity in the troubles of his times. This is particularly evident in his correspondence with the social activist and feminist theologian, Rosemary Radford Ruether, a correspondence worth reading as she harshly confronts him personally, politically, and in no uncertain terms with his comfort and complicity. He responds with remarkable gentleness and comprehension.²

In fact, Merton was literally “a voice in the wilderness”, not unlike John the Baptist with whom one could draw many parallels. It was precisely his remote geographical location and his vocation as monk from which his authority derived. His marginal position in the “monastic wilderness” gave him authenticity. It was why public figures like the Berrigan brothers, Jim Forest, and other voices for peace and justice sought his counsel. In the midst of his prophetic writings on social justice, war, and weapons, Merton also longed for greater solitude, for a hermitage, to withdraw farther from the mainstream than he already was.

Was, as Professor Ruether implied, being a Christian monastic, a hermit escapist? In his desire for greater solitude, was Merton turning his back on the needs of the world he had *already* left in 1941? Is there a contribution a hermit (a term I am using metaphorically and allusively for one who chooses marginality, not just for a vowed solitary) can make to alleviate the evil and suffering in God’s world? Merton thought (and

2 *At Home in the World: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Rosemary Radford Ruether* (Mary Tardiff, OP, ed) (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1995).

I think) that the hermit, the “fringe person”, has a crucial role to play among (not apart from, but *among*) the guilty bystanders. After introducing Merton’s positive view of monastic solitude, I suggest that Merton taught and exemplified two gifts of the guilty bystander: marginality and hospitality.

Before we turn to those ideas it is important to note briefly two basic premises. First, Merton believed in the reality of an unseen world, a spiritual realm that it has effects on the known, material world. This is perhaps not scientific or contemporary thinking, but it reflects the basic stance of Christian theology since its inception and certainly the historical trajectory of Christian monasticism and, more generally, spirituality. It means, for example, that prayer has its own kind of power.

Second, in an informal talk given in Calcutta, India in October, 1968, Merton explicitly equated “monk” and “marginal person” as I do in this talk. He termed the monk a marginal person, “no longer an established person with an established place in society”. “The monk is essentially outside of all establishments. He does not belong to an establishment. He is a marginal person who withdraws deliberately to the margin of society with a view to deepening the fundamental human experience.” Merton says he speaks as and for “all marginal persons who have done this kind of thing deliberately”.³

Merton goes on to equate “The marginal person, the monk, the displaced person, the prisoner” all of whom “have absolutely no established status whatever” (AJ 306). In notes for a second Calcutta talk, “Monastic Experience and East-West Dialogue”, Merton writes that “the term ‘monastic’ is applied ‘in a broad way’ to ‘a certain distance or detachment from the ‘ordinary’ and ‘secular’ concerns of a worldly life’”. (AJ 309)

3 *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (N. Burton, P. Hart & J. Laughlin, eds) (NY: New Directions, 1973/75) 305. Hereafter in the text AJ-

In the reflections that follow “monk” does not imply a male, vowed religious, but, more broadly, any person, male or female, monastic or lay, who has *chosen* marginality, who is a “guilty bystander” and who, thereby, can offer special gifts.

The Positive Role of the Bystander

I suggest we understand “bystander” as shorthand for Merton’s position as a monk, and especially for his desire for the life of an anchorite or hermit, a life he undertook fully in 1965. In one of Merton’s best essays, one with enormous implications for Christians in the world, the introduction to *The Wisdom of the Desert* (a collection of the sayings of the 4th C. desert Christians), Merton explains that the desert Christians “believed that to let oneself drift along, passively accepting the tenets and values of what they knew as society, was purely and simply a disaster”.⁴

They went to the desert, not because they hated the world, but, paradoxically, because they loved it.

The Coptic hermits who left the world as though escaping from a wreck, did not merely intend to save themselves. They knew that they were helpless to do any good for others as long as they floundered about in the wreckage. But once they got a foothold on solid ground [...] they had not only the power but [...] the obligation to pull the whole world to safety after them. (WD 23)

Merton wrote in *New Seeds of Contemplation* “the only justification for a life of deliberate solitude is the conviction that it will help you to love not only God but also other men”.⁵

4 Thomas Merton, *Wisdom of the Desert* (NY: New Directions, 1960) 3. Hereafter in the text WD.

5 Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (NY: New Directions, 1961) 52. Hereafter in the text NSC.

This is what Archbishop Desmond Tutu said in his extraordinary dialogue with H.H. the Dalai Lama: “You show your humanity [...] by how you see yourself not as apart from others but from your connection to others.”⁶

For Merton, a desert hermit is a particular kind of “bystander”. As we know, in classical and *koine* Greek, “desert” (*eremou*) is not a geographic term, but a sociological one. A desert is an uninhabited place, and therefore a dangerous one, a lonely place to which one withdraws to be nearer to God and thereby closer to other human beings. Merton wrote in NSC: “The more I become identified with God, the more will I be identified with all the others who are identified with [God].” (NSC 65) The desert is the place from which the “guilty bystander”, one implicated by conditions in the world, but one who has voluntarily drawn apart from it for its sake, offers two important gifts: marginality and hospitality.

The Gift of Marginality

The monastic, the recluse, the solitary, the “bystander”, voluntarily chooses his or her marginality. She “opts” out of the “rat race”. To be marginal is to be on the border, on the edges, not at the center of things. The person who chooses marginality is not excluded from, but lives outside the mainstream. This gives him or her perspective on that mainstream. The marginal person is like the referee in a football match. He sees what the players can’t because they are so involved in the game. The marginal person is like someone on the sidelines or in the stands of a match. She can see what the players can’t. Persons on the margins of a society can serve as its conscience because, from that perspective, they can see society more clearly. A gift of the “bystander” is the ability to see the

6 H.H. the Dalai Lama & Archbishop Desmond Tutu (with Douglas Abrams), *The Book of Joy* (NY: Avery/Penguin-Random House, 2016) 115.

mainstream clearly, and, if (an important condition) he understands his complicity and guilt in what he sees, can serve as its conscience.

In his essay *The Solitary Life* Merton says the hermit or marginal person puts “us on our guard against our natural obsession with the visible, social and communal forms of Christian life which tend at times to be inordinately active, and become deeply involved in the life of the secular non-Christian society”.⁷ The bystander or marginal person has a certain detachment or freedom from the “givens” of a society or culture. He or she understands that the way things are isn’t necessarily the way things have to be. Such people “out of pity for the universe, out of loyalty to mankind, and without a spirit of bitterness or of resentment, withdraw into the healing silence of the wilderness, or of poverty, or of obscurity, not in order to preach to others but to heal *in themselves* the wounds of the entire world” (MJ 153; italics mine). The bystander heals herself for the sake of the sickness of the world and can thereby become its physician.

This position of “marginality for others” is implicit in what Merton says in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*: “Christian social action must liberate [...] from all forms of servitude whether economic, political, or psychological.”⁸ One does this by naming the servitudes, and one *can* do it because she has seen and rejected them in herself. Merton admonishes, “instead of hating the people you think are warmakers, hate the appetites and the disorder in your own soul, which are the causes of war. If you love peace, then hate injustice, hate tyranny, hate greed – but hate these things *in yourself*, not in another” (NSC 122).

7 Appears in Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey*, (Patrick Hart OCSO ed.) (Kansas City: Sheed Andrews and McMeel, Inc., 1977) 151. Hereafter in the text MJ.

8 Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (NY: Doubleday/Image, 1965/68) 83. Hereafter in the text CGB.

The gift of a chosen marginality, whether that is actual and geographical or psycho-spiritual, is the gift of perspective. It gives one the ability to see and to say “the emperor has no clothes on”, or “the way we have always done it isn’t the just and merciful way”. What in *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* Merton calls “the monk’s chief service to the world” is precisely the marginal bystanders’ gift: “this silence, this listening, this questioning, this humble and courageous exposure to what the world ignores about itself – both good and evil.”⁹ The hermit, the marginal person, the bystander “has all the more of a part to play in our world, because he has no proper place in it” (MJ 157).

The Gift of Hospitality

When a monastery is mentioned, many think of monastic hospitality (like that shown at this conference). Historically, Christian monasteries are places where travelers, strangers, and pilgrims have been taken in, protected, and treated as Christ.¹⁰

In a world of suspicion and fear this is a powerful witness. But the monastery is not only a place of physical refuge, because the monastic heart is the reception room for the troubles of the world, and especially for those who are “lost”. The true monks (a gender inclusive term) are among the most loving and least judgmental of people. The monk opens her heart to the wanderer because she sees in him, although perhaps in disguise, her brother Jesus. I remind you that Merton’s marginality was rooted in his life as a monk, and that in his October, 1968 Calcutta talk he used the terms “monk” and “marginal person” synonymously.

9 Thomas Merton, *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1969/2018) 11. Hereafter in text CMP.

10 See *The Rule of St. Benedict*, Chapter 53 “On the Reception of Guests”.

Perhaps ironically, the marginal person is one who invites the whole world in. He or she *becomes* the hostel and hospice for others, the place of refuge and of healing, perhaps healing for the terminally ill. (In English, a "hospice" is a hospital or place of care for the dying.) Marginality chosen for the love of the other is always manifested in hospitality, and, at root, hospitality is about healing. The Latin root of hospitality, *hospitalis*, means "of a guest", and *hospes*, means "host". As you know, in German "hospitable" is *gastfrei*, and "hospitality" is *Gastfreundschaft* or *Gastlichkeit*. The etymology of the words suggests the relatedness of host and guest.

The marginal person understands hospitality in two senses. First, it is understood in terms of place in the world. We are all the world's guests. As Benedictine Br. David Steindl-Rast teaches, our very lives are gifts. We are God's guests in the world, and, as good guests, should be grateful to the host and care for the house and the household. Second, the marginal person is to host others, is charged with their safety, care, and nurture. We, the guilty bystanders and marginal people, are to treat others as graciously as we have been treated. As Merton wrote in *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*, our action must "spontaneously manifest itself in a habitual spirit of sacrifice and concern for others that is unfailingly generous" (CMP 87–88). The true host is that rare soul who puts the good of the other (the guest), or the good of the whole (the community) before his or her own.

In his discussion of the desert Christians Merton described the attitude of the monk: "Love means an interior and spiritual identification with one's brother so that he is not regarded as an "object" to "which" one "does good". "Love takes one's neighbor as one's other self, and loves him with [...] immense humility and discretion and reserve and reverence". (WD 18) Hospitality of the heart is an important way of love. Indeed, Merton suggests it is an important way *God's* love enters the world. In

the August, 1967 "Letter on the Contemplative Life" he writes "we exist solely [...] to be the place He [God] has chosen for His presence, His manifestation in the world, His epiphany". "It is my love for my lover, my child, my brother, that enables me to show God to him or her in himself or herself. Love is the epiphany of God in our poverty." (MJ 172)

The marginal person is the host who invites the stranger in and whose very self offers sustenance and healing *because the hospitable person is a conduit of God's love to the world*. Writing in *Thoughts in Solitude* about "the mystery of our vocation", Merton said exactly this. It is "not that we cease to be men in order to become angels [...] but that the love of my man's heart can become God's love for God and men, and my human tears can fall from my eyes as the tears of God [...] We can go out to them [...] loving them with something of the purity and gentleness and hiddenness [sic] of God's love for us."¹¹ In closing this section of *Thoughts in Solitude* Merton explicitly links this hospitality of heart with marginality: "This is the true fruit and the true purpose of Christian solitude." (TS 124)

Merton's language of hospitality and household remind one of St. Paul's frequent use of household and domestic metaphors to describe both the Christian community and Christians' relationships to each other. Merton's idea is similar. Knowing we are "guests of God", we respond to God as good guests, enter, and then, paradoxically, invite God into our hearts. (Jesus *did* say, "Behold I stand at the door and knock." Rev. 3:20) Then, as Merton so amazingly puts it "we all become doors and windows through which God shines back into His own house." (NSC 67) We become "lights of the world." (Matt. 5:14, and see 5:16) And this can happen because, as Merton wrote in *New Seeds*, God has already come down from heaven and found us (NSC 39).

11 Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux/Noonday, 1977) 123–124. Hereafter in the text TS.

A chosen marginal stance or attitude puts one "at the fringe" not only of society, but of domestic and familial life. It is not only the "family" towards which one must manifest the radical hospitality of the open heart, but toward everybody. As God's guests, we become the world's hosts, inviting them all in. Marginality leads to hospitality which makes of us doors and windows through which God's light can illuminate this darkening time.

Conclusion

Merton profoundly understood that in our complex world, we are all guilty bystanders. But this positions us to be agents of healing in an ailing age. Having recognized and confessed our guilt, having taken it on and then put it down if you will, the "scales have fallen from our eyes".¹² We see reality much more clearly. We become bystanders who have two gifts to offer: our marginality and our hospitality.

No longer embroiled in the processes and procedures of "the world" (which, of course, includes ecclesial institutions), we see that world more clearly. What we see is basically a world operating on models of scarcity, and therefore acting with anxiety and fear which lead to inhospitality. But, the bystander has come to realize, as Merton wrote in his letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra, that "God speaks, and God is to be heard, not only on Sinai, not only in my own heart, but in the *voice of the stranger*" (italics in the original). "God must be allowed the right to speak unpredictably." "We must find him in our enemy, or we may lose him even in our friend."¹³

12 Guilt is a burden Christ's Cross lifts from the Christian.

13 *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (NY: New Directions, 1977) 384. Hereafter in the text CP.

Thus the gift of marginality leads inexorably to the gift of hospitality. The marginal person sees what Merton called the "desperate need for reconciliation with God in and through reconciliation with his brother" (CMP 143, italics in the original). Reconciliation can occur when someone chooses hospitality and openness over suspicion and fear, when someone chooses to "invite the other in". Just as the inward way of prayer inevitably leads outward, the *raison d'être* of Christian marginality is opening to the other, radical hospitality, especially hospitality of heart.

I do not know what Merton might suggest hinders such hospitality, but I suspect it might involve two attitudes. The first he called "an activist spirit" which "seeks to evade the deep inner demands and challenges of the Christian life in personal confrontation with God" (CMP 143). Marginality is a fruit of the contemplation and prayer which must be priorities for bystanders. Action must proceed from contemplation and prayer if it is to be healing. The second hindrance is related. It is the sense that all this is *our* work rather than God's work in and through us. "We must", Merton wrote in *New Seeds*, "live by the strength of an apparent emptiness that is always truly empty and yet never fails to support us at every moment" (NSC 62). "None of this can be achieved by any effort of my own" (NSC 63), Merton continued, but God Who "utters me like a word containing a partial thought of Himself" (NSC 37) can transform our guilt into gifted bystanding when we realize that our "life is a listening. His is a speaking" (TS 74).

Lines from Merton's poem "The Quickening of St. John the Baptist" describe with great precision and beauty the role of the guilty bystanders in the cosmos and in God's plan:

*We are exiles in the far end of solitude, living as listeners
With ears attending to the skies we cannot understand:
Waiting upon the first far drums of Christ the Conqueror,
Planted like sentinels upon the world's frontier. (CP 201)*

A "far frontier" is a marginal place, "a place between" that bridges others. We guilty bystanders have been planted precisely there. Passive voice. It was something done to us. We choose marginality, to be guilty bystanders, and then are planted to watch, to perceive, to be vigilant, to be hospitable to those who find themselves with us, and to invite others to join our marginality for the sake of healing the whole.