

Explorers In The Dark Night
Thomas Merton & Dietrich Bonhoeffer
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1. Introduction

It is a privilege and a pleasure to be leading off this Day Conference devoted to the enduring vision and legacy of Thomas Merton and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Many of you will, no doubt, have come today with a particular (or even exclusive) interest in one or other of these twentieth century prophets. Some of you will, perhaps, be asking why we have chosen to link them together in our overall title and in our first three presentations. For Bonhoeffer the Lutheran Pastor and Merton the Catholic Monk would appear to have very little in common either temperamentally or theologically.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was brought up one of eight children of a close-knit upper middle class German family. As a child he is described by his twin sister Sabine as both 'sensitive' and 'chivalrous'.¹ Furthermore, we are told also that he did not make friends easily at school, a trait which was to follow him through life as he continued to find it difficult to form relationships with his peers (as opposed, for example, to his students). In adulthood, too, home and family continued to be of central importance to him. In his *Fiction From Prison* we see Bonhoeffer's attempt to recreate in his imagination the familial security of his childhood in order to strengthen himself in his current separation. We note also that to the end of his life, at age 39, he had never yet formally left home. Spiritually, Dietrich Bonhoeffer had shown an interest in religion from early childhood. The family (or, at least those of them who actively pursued the things of faith) were Lutheran, and it was through that tradition (intellectual, at times pietistic, always Christocentric) that Bonhoeffer's religious commitment grew and developed through his studies, teaching, ordination, right up to his work for the Finkenwalde Seminary and his subsequent involvement with the anti-Nazi activities of the Abwehr and the conspirators against Hitler.

By contrast, Thomas Merton was brought up one of two sons in a family which was anything but close-knit. His mother died when he was six years old. During the following formative years he spent time variously in Bermuda with his father, in New York with his brother and grandparents, in France with his father, and in England at boarding school. This time culminated in his first year at Cambridge where he fathered an illegitimate child. It was during his subsequent time studying and then teaching in New York that Merton became interested in, and committed to, Catholicism; eventually (in 1941) joining the Trappists at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, which was to be home for the rest of his life. Not long after he joined the Trappists his brother was killed in action, leaving him with no surviving close family.

Merton himself indicates that there was a sense in which he regarded his religious commitment as at least in some way an atonement for past misdemeanours; most probably too there was an unconscious longing and searching for family and community which characterised and motivated the perpetual restlessness yet rootedness of his Gethsemani years. Theologically, too, Merton was an increasingly intuitive thinker, essentially mystical and poetic in style, and Theocentric in content.

As people, therefore, I guess Bonhoeffer and Merton would have been very different. One shy, reserved, gentlemanly, perhaps even a little awkward (in the unintentional sense of the word). The other outward-going, down-to-earth, streetwise. Religiously, too, Bonhoeffer the Lutheran Pastor would have shied away from the introspective mysticism (wrongly) implied by Merton's Trappist Monasticism; just as (indeed) Merton himself went away severely shaken after his one and only encounter with psychiatry. They would both have agreed on that at least! Yet Bonhoeffer was awed by his visit to Rome in the 1920s, and the experience seems to have been formative; and the experiment at Finkenwalde is not so far removed from the model of a Monastic community.

It is, however, not despite but because of their differences that I believe that it is so valuable that we look at these two prophetic figures side by side. For if they were already obviously matched there would be no interest in making the connection, for it would be there already. It is precisely because we have here two very different individuals: in nationality (we can and should never forget that Bonhoeffer was German and Merton American), in family background (one spent a lifetime in juxtaposition to his family whilst the other spent a lifetime looking for love and stability he had never received from his own), in temperament (in some ways it would seem that Bonhoeffer by nature was better suited to the life of an enclosed community while Merton was better suited to the role of a pastor-conspirator), in religious tradition (Lutheranism and Catholicism are at one and the same time very close but very different. For we are making connections, and as we make connections we are affirming something about the nature of the universe, about truth, and about God. As Christopher Nugent has said:

everything that **deepens** tends to coverge²

And another sign of this is what this paper is about.

2. Dark Night Spirituality

The clues to the understanding of Merton and Bonhoeffer which I should like to share with you this morning are found in Merton's own work. In his essay entitled "Godless Christianity"?, Merton writes of Bonhoeffer in the light of

his use by the Radical Theologians of the time. 'We can surmise', he writes, 'that his "godless" kenoticism was quite probably the result of a deep personal evolution of his genius and his faith'. Indeed, he continues, 'one might compare it with St. John of the Cross ...'³

In that short essay, written towards the end of his life when the "Death of God" debate was at its height, Thomas Merton made the connection between the Lutheran Pastor and the Catholic Saint. And I would like to commend that connection to you again not despite the fact that Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran and "Lutherans are terminally suspicious of the mystical" and Bonhoeffer himself was uneasy and suspicious of mysticism too, but **precisely because** of that fact.

The reason we are reflecting on both these men is because each in his own way helps us in our own exploration of the current *impasse* in which we find ourselves as Christians and Churches, indeed as religiously and spiritually inclined people. For John of the Cross, the "Dark Night" was a personal experience (of seeming loss of faith) which yet led to a renewal and redefinition of faith. One set of ideas and concepts, one language and superstructure, had to break down in order to make room for another. And the period in between was the "Dark Night", the desert experience, in St. Teresa's words: the "Cocoon". In retrospect it was a much needed reminder that God is more than all that we can say or think of God, that God transcends all our efforts to describe, define or picture God. This is the theology and spirituality which would have been familiar to Merton, and which finds its place in the wider mystical *apophatic* tradition where God is constantly reaffirmed as over and above and beyond all that can be said of God. And so, for example, Pseudo-Dionysius can suggest that it is better to call God a "rock" or a "castle" than a "father" because with the first two words you know very well that God isn't literally being described, but with the title "father" you might be tempted to believe that God is. This for Merton is at the heart of his Spirituality of Dis-Illusionment, where the illusions are stripped away from person, society and God to come to the naked heart of the individual, the world and the divine. As Merton himself wrote in explanation of the medieval principle of *contemptus mundi* - it is

not the rejection of a reality but the unmasking of an illusion.⁴

Such thought is clearly relevant to our own time, especially in light of the renewed interest in the NT concept of "principalities and powers" (explored in the work of Walter Wink, and before him, by William Stringfellow). Is it individual human beings who are at the root of evil and injustice or is it (to use Stringfellow's words) the Images, Institutions and Ideologies to which they are in thrall? It is relevant too in light of the late Jacques Ellul's work on the nature and implications of modern technological society. Is technology a cause

of separation from one another and from God? Is technology a source of illusion - illusions of power, control, ability? Interestingly one of Ellul's last books was titled (in English translation) *The Technological Bluff*. It is relevant too even in light of the work of Matthew Fox and others in Creation Centred Spirituality - for they have uncovered and confronted the influential and persistent illusion of Christian fatalism (ie. that we live in a fallen world where ultimately evil and injustice are inevitable) with a sense of Original Blessing - that the naked reality of the human is blessed not cursed.

I believe that these are all signs of theology entering into a new paradigm - a new way of looking at and understanding the world within which we live before God. The experience of "Dark Night" is for John a sign of spiritual maturity. He likens it to an infant's learning to walk alone. And, of course, such an image is not dissimilar from Bonhoeffer's description of a "world come of age". We have moved on some years in human development, but the intention of the description is the same: in both cases we are being led to think in terms of maturity, of moving on, of a transition from redundant dependence to necessary independence. As Merton himself said in Bangkok on the last day of his life:

From now on, Brother, everyone stands on his own two feet.⁵

And it is this transition which we see around us in our own late twentieth century world - not just in individuals but in a whole culture, a whole society. As that so interesting Catholic writer Flannery O'Connor put it once

Right now the whole world seems to be going through a dark night of the soul.⁶

The *impasse* of which John wrote is a reality today not just as a personal experience but as a social and cultural reality too. This is how Bonhoeffer could speak of humanity's "coming of age" in such positive terms: it does not refer to a rejection of God but rather to the observed fact of the disintegration of one particular way of speaking about God; a way which has been so bound up with our western culture and world view that it looks as if Christianity is as obsolete as the redundant culture. But it isn't. As Bonhoeffer himself wrote in his "Thoughts On The Baptism Of Dietrich Wilhelm Rudiger Bethge":

In the traditional works and acts we suspect that there may be something quite new and revolutionary.

.....

Our earlier words are therefore bound to lose their force and cease, and our being Christian today will be limited to two things: prayer and [doing justice].⁷

In Teresa's language, we are still in the cocoon. What we have been is gone. What we will be is as yet still unclear. What we are is uncertain, afraid, silent. As Bonhoeffer asks in his 'Outline For A Book': 'What do we really believe? I mean, believe in such a way that we stake our lives on it?'⁸

It is ironic that though we may still be unclear about what precisely Bonhoeffer believed during those final years in prison, what we do know is that he staked his life on it! His belief in the God of Jesus, however much it distanced him from his fellow believers even in the Confessing Church, however much it led him into compromised positions *vis a vis* the Nazi regime, however much it causes endless scholarly debates about its meaning and implications for him and for us, nevertheless led inexorably to his own death at Buchenwald fifty years ago this month. (April 1995)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer leads us in our exploration of a Johannine "Dark Night Spirituality" for our own time, place and culture because he grapples with many of the same issues that face us too. Furthermore, his experience of "Dark Night" was in many ways more profound even than that of John because over and above the individual it characterised a whole culture, a whole nation.

What about those who would appear to be more faithful to the way and spirit of Christ than many of us who call ourselves Christians; those whose lives are marked by love and self-giving, who choose to put themselves on the line for the sake of others and for values which are proudly and authentically Christic? Three times in the final pages of the *Letters and Papers From Prison* Bonhoeffer speaks of what he calls "unconscious Christianity". Does this refer to his fellow conspirators in the plot against Hitler, in the main decidedly unreligious and humanistic, but in reality embodying Christic values more faithfully than many of their onlookers in the Church? As he wrote elsewhere

To be a Christian does not mean to be religious in a particular way [but to participate] in the sufferings of God in the secular life.⁹

What about the perceived absence of God in our time? How can we continue to believe in God in this age of Holocaust, of AIDS, of "ethnic cleansing"? What Bonhoeffer was grappling towards in his final months was an awareness that 'Before God and with God we live without God'. It must have been powerfully clear to him that in his own life the cultural reality of Enlightenment thought and the personal reality of separation from family, friends and Church, had converged in a situation which left him alone before a silent God. And from this situation came a description of his experience (and hence in many ways of ours today) which is strikingly similar to that of someone else before him. As Bonhoeffer wrote:

And we cannot be honest unless we recognise that we have to live in the world *etsi deus non daretur*.

And this is just what we do recognise - before God! God himself compels us to recognise it.

.....
God would have us know that we must live as men who manage our lives without him.

.....
Before God and with God we live without God.¹⁰

And as the medieval mystic Meister Eckhart wrote some 500 years before:

Man's last and highest parting occurs when, for God's sake, he takes leave of god ... and [gives] up all that he might get from god, as well as all that he might give - together with every idea of god. In parting with these, he [parts] with god for God's sake and yet God [remains] to him as God is in his own nature - not as he is conceived by anyone to be

.....¹¹

3. Postmodern Spirituality

I do not want to digress into a philosophical discussion about postmodernism. But I couldn't resist drawing your attention to a recent collection of essays entitled *Divine Representations: Postmodernism & Spirituality*, published in the States last year.¹² In the introductory essay to the book, the writer refers to what she describes as 'the saints of the World War 2 era', and four in particular, as 'prophets of a new, postmodern spirituality'. One of those four is Dietrich Bonhoeffer. [The others are Joseph Kentenich, Chiara Lubich, and Simone Weil]

In my own book on Merton, Bonhoeffer and (another wartime figure) Etty Hillesum, I speak of the three as "Contemplatives For Our Time".¹³ I then seek to relate them to what many are speaking of today as the "New Paradigm". This is simply a way of describing the fact that because culture is changing, so too must our talk about God. For example, when Anselm formulated his ingenious penal-substitutionary theory of the atonement, he sought to express the truth of the atonement in a metaphor relevant to his time and place. So he spoke of it in terms of law and honour, using a picture which would be readily understood by his readers. Whatever we make of his theory today, it is certainly not expressed in terms alive and meaningful to the culture outside the Church. To really understand and appreciate it you need to

imagine yourself in Anselm's time and place, namely 11th century north Europe. In other words, culture has moved on and has left (as it so often does) the Church in a cultural and theological timewarp.

Talk about the New Paradigm is a way of saying to the Church that we must not fall into the same trap again. Most of what we say about God is at least to some extent) culture-specific. Which means it makes sense to us, but we can't necessarily expect it to make sense to someone in Africa or Japan or even to our own future descendants. And so we need to be prepared to let go of forms of expression which have become obsolete, and to create new ones which speak to our own time and place.

What the philosophers call Postmodernism is an example of a paradigm shift. Both, I would suggest, can be experienced in theological and spiritual terms as a "Dark Night of the Soul". And the response to such a "Dark Night" is (as one writer has put it) 'a challenge and a concrete focus for contemplation':

in a genuine impasse one's accustomed way of acting
and living is brought to a standstill.
The left side of the brain, with its usual application
linear, analytical, conventional thinking
is ground to a halt.
It forces the right side of the brain into gear,
seeking intuitive, symbolic, unconventional answers,
so that action can be renewed eventually
with greater purpose.¹⁴

4. Right Brain Theology

One of the formative breakthroughs in Merton's journey toward faith in the God of Jesus was discovering in a work on medieval philosophy the claim that:

no idea or sensible image could contain God
and further that we must not be satisfied with such knowledge of God.¹⁵

This concern with the stripping away of illusions was to preoccupy Merton for the rest of his life. One such illusion is the Illusion of Certainty.

There would appear to be two ways of responding to the perceived theological and religious *impasse* of our time. One is to affirm ever more loudly and fervently the truth of what has always been said about God, about Jesus, about the Church, about the World. The other response is to let go of previous certainties, and to explore where God is here and now. I believe very strongly that we should take the latter option, and that if we do, both Merton and Bonhoeffer stand as our companions in the journey which awaits us.

Merton continued to push back the frontiers of spirituality until the end of his life, making connections between spirituality and social justice, east and west, church and world, monasticism and social criticism. In Merton's life we see both a deep appreciation of, and also a radical relativisation of, the orders, structures, liturgies of the institutional Church. He affirmed his oneness with members of other religious traditions. He offered perceptive critique on the social issues of the day. He even wrote one day of his sense of real friendship and connection with those working for social justice and peace outside the monastery - some of these were his real friends. Finally, in his very life (stable yet yearning to move on, celibate yet deeply in love, unequivocally Christian yet profoundly appreciative of other faiths) he posed the certainties of Catholicism and of Christianity with a formidable threat.

Bonhoeffer, too, was aware from early on that Jesus could not be contained by our ideas or expectations of him. As he wrote in *The Cost of Discipleship* during the 1930s:

To follow in Jesus' footsteps is something which is void of all content. It gives us no intelligible programme for a way of life, no goal or ideal to strive after. It is not a cause which human calculation might deem worthy of our devotion.¹⁶

Later, in one of the writings making up the unfinished work *Ethics*, he noted that there are times when the right course of action is self evident, when 'the moral course goes without saying'. The emphasis was practical responsibility not abstract duty, as logical deduction made way for Christic intuition. The journey was to continue as he came to pose an increasing threat to the political and theological certainties of the Lutheranism of his time: pacifist in a tradition where such an adoption was almost unheard of; leader of a seminary based on the unfamiliar model of community; conspirator against Hitler and the Nazis in a tradition that commended (and commanded) obedience to authority; questioner of a church financially dependent upon the state. Finally, in his prison writings he leaves us with questions which continue to challenge and perplex us; how to be authentically Christian yet utterly worldly; how to live without God yet before God; how to speak of the unspeakable God in a time of no religion; how to live out the transcendence of "being there for others".

I see in both Merton and the later Bonhoeffer what I have called "Right Brain Theology". The right side of the brain is that usually associated with creative, connecting, intuitive functions, and (I would suggest) those are what we see active in the life and work of our two subjects. This is why we find them both so fascinating, and why folk even outside the churches read them and enjoy them. It is because they offer us theology, spirituality, thoughts about God and about the world, mediated (self consciously and distinctively) through their own selves and experiences.

This, I believe, is what theology is all about. Faced with a culture of change, where traditional answers seem increasingly inadequate, there is need for those who will go the way of Merton and Bonhoeffer, entering in to the Dark Night of *impasse* and uncertainty, but doing so as a time of opportunity, of *kairos*. As Bonhoeffer wrote over 50 years ago faced with his own Dark Night:

Our earlier words are therefore bound to lose their force
and cease, and our being Christians today
will be limited to two things:
prayer and doing justice ...¹⁷

One day, though, he believed, a new language would be available. In Tegel he made his own first steps towards it. We, too, are invited to make our own contribution to a Christianity for our Time, as we join Bonhoeffer, Merton and many others in exploring the Dark Night which at the same time surrounds and beckons us.

Notes and References

1. Sabine Leibholz-Bonhoeffer. *The Bonhoeffers: Portrait Of A Family* (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 1994), pp. 32-33.
2. Christopher Nugent, 'The Ecumenical Orthodoxy Of St. John of the Cross' (*New Oxford Review*, December 1991), pp. 13 - 18.
3. Thomas Merton, *Faith & Violence* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), pp. 271, 266.
4. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation In A World Of Action* (New York: Doubleday Image, 1973), p. 169.
5. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (SPCK, 1984), p. 254.
6. These words of Plannery O'Connor were quoted in the article by Christopher Nugent referred to above. However they were not located. If anyone reading this knows where they come from I would be very interested to know.
7. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters & Papers From Prison* (SCM, 1971), p. 299.
8. See *LPP*, p. 380 ff.
9. *LPP*, p. 361.
10. *LPP*, p. 360.
11. Meister Eckhart, Latin Sermon 12, quoted from the Blakeney translation (Harper & Row, 1941).
12. Anne W. Astell, *Divine Representations: Postmodernism & Spirituality* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1994).
13. Peter King, *Dark Night Spirituality: Thomas Merton, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Etty Hillesum - Contemplation & The New Paradigm* (SPCK, 1995).

14. See Belden C. Lane, 'Spirituality & Political Commitment: Notes On A Liberation Theology Of Nonviolence' (*America*, March 14 1981)
15. Walter Conn's description of Merton's chance encounter with Etienne Gilson's book *The Spirit Of Medieval Philosophy*. See Walter Conn, *Christian Conversion: A Developmental Interpretation Of Autonomy & Surrender* (Paulist, 1986), p. 166.
16. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Cost Of Discipleship* (SCM, 1959), p. 49.
17. See note 7 above.

