

Thomas Merton's Vision of the Unity of East and West in Christendom.

by
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I ought to say at the beginning that this lecture is about east and west in the Christian world. Obviously, Merton is, I think, best known at the present day, and perhaps rightly so, as somebody who makes bridges between east and west, in the sense of between Christendom as part of the whole western world and the east in the sense of the east which is Buddhist or Hindu or the different religions of Asia. But I am in a way concerned with a more domestic matter from the Christian point of view, though, as I hope I shall show, it is not at all unrelated to the larger question of the relation of Christianity as a whole to the other religious traditions of humankind.

One of the things which Merton does for us is to establish friendships. He does this by sharing himself wholly with us, by giving us that amazing sense that he is speaking directly to us, which I suppose we have all known at one time or another in our initial meeting with his writings. I remember a particular room in a particular little monastery in Worcestershire in the 1950s where that happened to me. Merton seemed to be there, actually, as it were, confronting me.

Elizabeth Jennings speaks of the art of Thomas Traherne, who was perhaps Merton's favourite among the 17th century Anglicans, as the accessible art. And I quote from Elizabeth Jennings,

The poetic prose of Traherne's *Centuries of Meditations* is an example of the art of sharing, of participation. It is an art wholly accessible. Traherne is, in the deepest sense, a man possessed. What possesses him is a sense of God and this he wishes to share, to distribute. He gives himself to us in such a way that his work becomes our property, part of our life.

And I think what Elizabeth Jennings says about Traherne is remarkably true of Merton. He gives himself to us in such a way that his work becomes our property, part of our life.

Now I want to reflect a little upon the relationship of east and west in Christendom in Merton's thought and writing. And it is a topic with immense implications which, as far as I know, have not been very much explored. There is a very fine article by Father Basil Pennington but, apart from that, I don't know very much about Merton's use of eastern Christian sources. But as you will see, it is a topic which is, I think, central to him. What I shall seek to do is to show how Merton's basic understanding of the nature of mysticism and theology and their relationship to one another was decisively influenced by Eastern Orthodox models. Secondly, how two outstanding theologians of the Byzantine period, Maximus the Confessor and Gregory Palamas, were very important influences in Merton's thought. Third, his particular attraction for some of the more recent Russian writers of the 19th and 20th centuries, and finally his continuing commitment to the study of the monastic tradition as a whole from its earliest period until today.

This necessarily brief treatment of a very large subject will bring us to a conclusion which will centre on Merton's importance as a theologian and as a prophet of the renewal of Christian unity. Merton was that rare thing, a theologian who is also a poet, and a poet who is also a theologian. If I wanted a motto for this lecture I would take the lines "so all theology is a kind of birthday, a coming home to where we are, epiphany and Eden".

Now I am referring throughout to the last years of Merton's life. In the first part of the lecture, I am basing myself on the lectures on ascetical and mystical theology which Merton gave at the monastery in 1961 and which have never been published. Extracts from them have been published but they have never been published as a whole. They weren't intended for publication. And in the second part of the lecture I shall be basing myself on some of the working notebooks which are kept in the Merton archive at Bellarmine College in Louisville. In a rather well-known passage in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Merton wrote:

If I can unite in myself the thought and devotion of eastern and western Christendom, the Greek and the Latin Fathers, the Russian with the Spanish mystics, I can prepare in myself the reunion of divided Christians. If we want to bring together what is divided, we cannot do so by imposing one division upon another or absorbing one division into another, we must contain all the divided worlds in ourselves and transcend them in Christ.

And that, I believe, is precisely what Merton did. It's an amazing thing to do, containing the divisions within himself and transcending them in the unity which is in Christ. And this is a unity which is cosmo-theandric, or if you are very strong on the sexist implications of language, cosmo-theanthropic. I don't on the whole like technical terms, I think they are rather a nuisance, but I think that is quite a useful one - *cosmos*, *theos*, and *anthropos*. It's a portmanteau word which brings together the universe, God and humanity into a single focus. And that's how Merton sees things and how he tries to theologise. Merton's whole effort of mastering the tradition of Christian east and west which was a large part of his work, his intellectual work in the monastery, or rather his effort of letting himself be mastered by the tradition, was anything but antiquarian. It was to do with historical material but it was motivated by an urgent desire to enter more deeply into the life, death and rising of Christ for the sake of the world today. In the introduction to the lectures on ascetical and mystical theology, given in the monastery in 1960 or 1961, he writes:

The mystical tradition of the Church, a collective memory and experience of Christ living and present within her. This tradition forms and affects the whole person, intellect, memory, will, emotions, body, skills, arts, all must be under the sway of the Holy Spirit.

Important human dimension given by tradition, its incarnate character, note especially the memory. And he goes on to say that if we do not have a healthy and conscious grasp of tradition we shall be a prey to unhealthy and unconscious traditions, a kind of collective disposition to neurosis. I must say it seems to me a highly perceptive comment on some movements that call themselves traditionalist which are perhaps more powerful at the moment than they were 30 years ago when Merton wrote that.

If we do not have a healthy and conscious grasp of tradition we shall be a prey to unhealthy and unconscious traditions, a kind of collective disposition to neurosis.

I have spoken of the mystical tradition of the Church but I must go on at once to make the point from which Merton begins. There is nothing esoteric or exclusive about this tradition. It is simply the handing on of the Gospel of Christ, the faith by which the people of God have lived for 2000 years, but its handing on in its deepest and most authentic form. One of the basic purposes of his lectures is to show that the mystical tradition cannot be separated from the dogmatic and moral tradition but forms one whole with it. Without mysticism there is no real theology and without theology there is no real mysticism. Merton makes that point at the beginning and he repeats it later on spelling it out in words which he has consciously adapted from one of the most creative writers of the Russian diaspora, Vladimir Lossky, from Lossky's seminal book, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*. Merton writes,

By mysticism we can mean the personal experience of what is revealed to all and realised in all in the mystery of Christ. And by theology we can mean the common revelation of the mystery which is to be lived by all.

The two belong together, there is no theology without mysticism for it would have no relation to the real life of God in us, and there is no mysticism without theology because it would be at the mercy of individual and subjective fantasy. Unless our mysticism is truly theological, growing from God's revelation of himself in Christ and his gift of himself in the Spirit, then it becomes turned in on itself, and I quote Merton: "The experience of experience, the death of contemplation".

For Merton then, the heart of the matter lies in an appropriation of the tradition which is at once mystical and theological, subjective and objective, experiential and yet more than experiential. He is aligning himself here quite consciously with a school of thought which was particularly active in European Catholicism in the middle of this century, and whose outstanding representatives were men like de Lubac, von Balthasar, Congard - still alive, just become

a Cardinal, Louis Bourrier, and amongst monastic writers, Jean Leclerc. It was a movement which aimed to recover the theological vision of the first ten centuries, the centuries before the division between Christian east and west, and before the rise of scholasticism. While it involved a great deal of historical study and investigation, its aims also were anything but antiquarian. As Merton remarks, that movement had been stimulated by the bitter experience of Nazism and Fascism in the thirties and the Second World War in the forties – an experience which showed Christians in Europe something of the force of the powers of destruction at work in our age and had made them realise the need to go back to first principles in Christian theology and in the whole life of the Church.

It was also a movement which was greatly stimulated by the presence in western Europe, for the first time for about ten centuries, of a school of theologians who represented the eastern half of the earlier common Christian tradition and that centred, of course, on the Russian theologians who worked in Paris in the 1930s and the 1940s at the Institut St Serge. Merton was very well aware of their writings and he quotes them in many places. In this place, he quotes another outstanding representative of that group, Father George Vlerovski. Vlerovski is, for him, not only witness to the eastern tradition of Christianity but also a spokesman for a Church which in 1917 had felt the full impact of 20th century secularisation. In other words, a church which was aware in its bones, so to speak, that we live in apocalyptic times and that it is only in the power of Christ himself, only in the gift of the Holy Spirit, that the Christian faith can be maintained today.

So Merton invokes these Russian theologians at the very beginning of expounding the Christian mystical tradition to his brother monks at Gethsemani. How did he set out to present the tradition to his brethren? The lectures open with a masterly resumé of the dogmatic and mystical teaching of the Church centred around the two doctrines of incarnation, God's coming to be incarnate in us and deification, our coming to share in the nature of God, which are, in fact, as he says, two sides of the same mystery: God's coming out of himself to us and our going out from ourselves to him. This doctrine Merton sees firmly rooted in the New Testament, in St John's Gospel which he looks at in some detail, and in St Paul's Epistles which he treats more briefly.

It is expressed afresh in the writings of the Martyrs, Ignatius of Antioch, and of the Christian teachers of the 2nd and 3rd centuries, most notably Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria. It is worked out in greater detail in the writings of the Cappadocians, above all in Gregory of Nyssa, and of the spiritual writers of that time, Evagrius, the Macarian Homilies, Denys the Areopagite.

It is of course of great significance that in these early two or three lectures Merton makes absolutely no break between the New Testament writers, the post-Apostolic writers, and the writers of the Christian tradition. Scripture and tradition for him form one whole. The movement of Merton's exposition in the first two or three lectures is at first very rapid and confident, but it seems now to falter as he comes to what may seem, at first sight, a very secondary question, the question of the spiritual senses. How do we sense, perceive, spiritual realities? He allows himself a long digression into a controversy between two French scholars of the earlier part of this century, Poulin and Ofgaillard. I would guess that Ofgaillard is almost entirely forgotten and even Poulin isn't very much remembered. This discussion is cut short with the help of the Fathers of the Church and with an appeal to Gregory Palamas, the theologian of the Transfiguration and our vision of the Divine Light. Merton comments:

The lesson of this is that the doctrine of the spiritual senses when it is expressed in scholastic or phenomenological terms is confusing and inconclusive. It is especially unfortunate that the doctrine gets lost in psychology.

Now I want to pause just for a moment to comment on the significance of this appeal. In 1961 the Vatican hadn't actually begun (we are in the Roman Catholic world before Vatican II) this appeal to St Gregory Palamas, the outstanding and in some ways fairly polemical representative of the eastern half of Christendom in the 14th Century when already Christian east and Christian west had fallen apart. Because of the collapse of the Byzantine Empire in 1453 and because of the schism between east and west, Palamas' work was never properly known in the west and was largely forgotten in the east itself. Much of his writing was published for the first time only in the 50's

and 60's of this century and the recovery of the knowledge of his theology in Rumania, in Greece, on Mount Athos, in the Russian emigration and now, of course, in Russia itself, that recovery of the theology of Palamas in the last half century has been of the greatest importance for the renewal and inner development of orthodoxy through these difficult decades in the second half of this century.

Merton knew the thought of Palamas through the very fine book by John Mayendorf. Mayendorf, at that stage, was still teaching in Paris though he spent the whole of the rest of his life, and died just a year or two ago, teaching in New York. Merton knew Palamas' work through Mayendorf and at once sensed his importance. Here was a theologian who gave himself to defend and expound the reality of the Christian experience of God and to see that experience as rooted in the body and in the bodily senses. Merton sums up the matter thus:

The spiritual senses are thus the senses themselves, but spiritualised and under the sway of the Spirit rather than new spiritual faculties.

He refers to a vital number of passages from Gregory Palamas on this subject and quotes one very notable passage:

The spiritual joy which comes from the spirit into the body is not at all corrupted by communion with the body but transforms the body and makes it spiritual.

Now, I think one only has to think of the way in which Merton formulates his own deepest vision and experience of things to see the importance of that theology for him. I think of the wonderful passage in *Conjectures*, Prayer to God the Father on the Vigil of Pentecost, where Merton speaks: I am here ...

... to speak your name of "Father" just by being here as "son" in the Spirit and the Light which you have given, and which are no unearthly light but simply this plain June day with its shining fields, its tulip trees, the pines, the woods, the clouds, and the flowers everywhere.

Through the body and the senses, we experience our solidarity with all creation. Through the body and the senses we are also able to perceive the light of God shining out in that creation and thus we are able through the body and the senses to offer the praise of all creation to almighty God.

The climax of the first section of Merton's lectures (there are about 20 altogether), comes in Chapter 8 and it's a chapter called Contemplation and the Cosmos and it's a chapter wholly given to the thought of Maximus the Confessor. Here Merton puts together in his exposition of Maximus, the theology of a 7th century Byzantine master and the skill of the Shakers in 19th century America. He draws together different elements from his own experience in ways which are both creative and healing. Now it's interesting to notice in his introduction to the lectures where he describes the subjects he intends to cover, he's telling his brothers what he is going to go through, he makes no mention of this chapter on Contemplation and the Cosmos. It seems as though it was a chapter which grew under his hands as he was writing, so to speak. And it has got a kind of freshness, a kind of vividness to it.

Merton begins by giving his estimate of Maximus, who died in 662, as one of the greatest and most authoritative of all the Greek Fathers, and I quote Merton:

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

That's a rather striking affirmation; it implies that the greatest Christian thinkers are not Latin but Greek. Well, one would have to look carefully at Merton to see that, but it's a very strong affirmation of an acceptance of a certain priority in the eastern Christian tradition. He has the broadest and most balanced view of the Christian cosmos of all the Greek Fathers and therefore of all the Fathers. Maximus is a great and complex thinker and one of his most striking characteristics is his capacity to unite the mystic's concern with the One, the ultimate unity of all things, with the artist's sense of the value of each specific thing. That is to say, of the infinite diversity of the creation. A passage from Maximus which Merton quotes:

The love of Christ hides itself mysteriously in the *Logoi*, the words, the *Logoi* of created things. In all that is varied lies he who is one and eternally identical. In all composite things he who is simple and without parts. In those which have a beginning he who has no beginning. In all the visible he who is invisible.

Maximus teaches that if we are to come to look into the mysteries of God in himself and in his love for humankind, that is to say, if we are to come to *theologia*, which is a vision of God, we need first to look into the things which God has made, to exercise ourselves in what the Greek Fathers called *Theoria Physiki*, that is to say natural contemplation. Contemplation which discerns the inner *logoi*, reasons, meanings, in events and things, their God-given meaning, inscape, specificity and nature. The world is created by the Logos and it is full of *logoi*, words, expressions of God's creative will and purpose. These *logoi* in creation meet together in the One who is the Logos, the Word, in and for whom all things were made. The *logos* within human persons, and that's not just our reason but our whole capacity to see and to know, to discern and to understand and to love, because we are talking here of a world in which knowledge and love are ultimately identical. *Amor ipse intellectus est*. Love itself is understanding. The *logos* within human persons is created in order to respond to the *logoi* in the world around us, to praise and celebrate their goodness. In a paragraph where Merton tells us not only what he thought but also what he lived (he is unconsciously telling us that), he writes:

The vision of *Theoria Physiki* is essentially sophianic. It's a vision of the Sophia, the Wisdom of God. Man by *theoria*, by seeing, by perceiving, is able to unite the hidden wisdom of God in things with the hidden light of wisdom in himself. The meeting and marriage of these two brings about a resplendent clarity within man himself and this clarity is the presence of divine wisdom fully recognised and active in him. Thus man becomes a mirror of the divine glory and is resplendent with divine truth, not only in his mind but in his life. He is filled with the light of wisdom which shines forth in him and thus God is glorified in him. At the same time he exercises a spiritualising influence in the world by the work of his hands, an influence which is in accord with the creative wisdom of God in things and in history.

Something of the resplendence which Merton speaks about there, you can see in that wonderful photograph of Merton and the Dalai Lama taken after their long and truly sophianic conversation in which I believe something deeply healing and creative had been given to both of them. A conversation which is still in its way now flowering in such wonderful ways as in the Dalai Lama's visit to London in September [1994].

We have also the words of a stranger who met Merton on the last stages of his Asian journey in 1968, who tells us of that cleaner than clean, serenely open, quite halo-like face, as he perceived it, while they were sitting together waiting in the airport lounge for a delayed flight to Calcutta. It's a commentary on our times that the observer who saw that in Merton could only interpret the phenomenon in terms of psychedelic experience. Was he spaced out on drugs?

It would be tempting to expound at length on Merton's understanding of *Theoria Physiki* as he develops it under the guidance of Maximus the Confessor. He sees it as an expression of Christian faith in the inherent goodness of things, that goodness which remains in spite of all the ravages of sin and in the power of the divine grace which is always at work to make up what is lacking and to heal what is wounded in the creation of God. He sees the relevance of all this not only to our contemplation of things but to our use and transformation of them and he comments on the dangers of our advanced technology when it is controlled by the desire to exploit and to manipulate.

He speaks about the role of the artist and of the way in which he of all people must be in touch with the *logoi*. He is talking to fellow monks and it's before Vatican II. The artist doesn't necessarily have to be fully respectable in a conventional sense. A kind of unconventionality may be in him a form of humility, a folly for Christ. We mustn't forbid the artist a necessary element of paradox in his life but he must at all costs attain to an inner purity and honesty, and sincerity and integrity of spirit. He must be *holokleiros*, whole, understands the *logoi*, the inner meaning of things and is attuned to the *tropoi*, to the ways in which they develop.

But it is to the Shakers that I wish to come and to the way in which Merton speaks about them here. It is important just to remember that these lectures were given 30 years ago when I first was in the States. In these years,

in the sixties, there were comparatively very few books available about the Shakers. Four or five, really. Now there are whole shelves full of books about the Shakers, about their art, about their community life, about their theology and their vision and their music. It's a wonderful kind of flowering of interest in the Shakers which has come in the last 30 years in North America and to some extent here. Merton was speaking of it at a time when it was still very little known. I quote from the lectures, and these are his notes, you see, fairly full notes but not fully worked out.

Shaker handicrafts and furniture, deeply impregnated by the communal mystique of the Shaker community, the simplicity and austerity demanded by their way of life, enabled an unconscious spiritual purity to manifest itself in full clarity. Shaker handicrafts are then a real epiphany of the *logoi*, the words, the meanings of things, characterised by spiritual light. See also their buildings, barns especially, high, this highly mystical quality, capaciousness and dignity, solidity, permanence - *logos* of a barn, '... but my wheat gather ye into my barn'. Notice never a question of a barn in the abstract where it had no definite place. The Shaker farm 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. *Logos* of the site, important in Cistercian monasteries of the 12th Century.

That last point is of great significance. The *logos* of a place is always specific. It may be in some mysterious way universal but it is never abstract. And it is in and through the particular qualities of a place, a person, a time, an event, that the divine light shines out, transfiguring the limitations of what is given by nature, and that can be seen even in the names of the places, whether 12th century Cistercian places or 19th century Shaker places: Clara Vallis, Clairvaux, Pleasant Valley, Pleasant Hill in Kentucky, the Shaker community which had died in the 1920s but which Merton loved to visit. Sabbath Day Lake in Maine, the one remaining, living community of the Shakers. Fountains Abbey, very well known to us in the north. Lorgunkloster in Denmark. *Locus Dei*, the place of God.

That's from Merton's lectures in 1961. Now let's turn for a moment to the subsequent years, the last six or seven years of his life, and see something

of how his mind grew and developed during that time. Here I am reliant on these working notebooks. Merton kept very full notes on books that he was reading, and he kept them in large, bound or loose-leafed notebooks and many, many of them are there. There is wonderful material in the archive at Bellarmine College, some going back to the early fifties, more from the sixties, and the last notebooks show his reading in the months and weeks just before he set off on the Asian journey. I've only scratched the surface. There's much work to be done there. The notebooks give one a new impression of the width of Merton's interests and of the seriousness with which he pursued them. They reveal an almost frightening intensity of purpose. In these last years, and I am speaking about six or seven years, Merton was exploring all the major religious traditions of humankind. Hinduism, Buddhism, in its Japanese and Tibetan versions, Hasidism, and the world of Judaism. In the last two years, he was making a determined raid onto the treasures of Sufism. At the same time, he was expanding his knowledge and contacts with the world of 20th century literature, poets in Latin America, novelists in France and in the United States. At the same time, he was breaking out into new areas, examining developments in the Third World, particularly at the meeting point between primitive and developed cultures, his whole interest in cargo cults. Not to mention his deep involvement with questions of justice, peace and non-violence.

It seems to me that during these years there was an explosion of activity going on in Merton's heart and mind. But it was a very special kind of explosion, one which has no exact equivalent in the physical world. It was a non-disintegrating explosion and hence its effects were constructive and not destructive. The centre did hold. He did not fall apart. Anyone less well integrated than he was might well have done so, especially when you read that in the middle of it all he was having a love affair with Margie. I'm not surprised that the *Vow of Conversation* contains quite a number of references to physical ailments. Someone living at such an intensity of spiritual and intellectual activity, might well find curious side effects welling up in the physical part of their make-up and might well be so absorbed into those things as to neglect their physical condition and health.

When I say that the centre held, I mean, quite specifically, that the notebooks show how through these years Merton was continuing to maintain

his interest in the central, theological and spiritual tradition of Christendom, both in its patristic and in its modern versions. He was continuing to deepen and develop his already considerable knowledge of the monastic tradition of Christian east and west, and more than a hundred pages of notes on Celtic Christianity and Celtic monasticism in Notebook 48, dating from 1963-65 show him still pursuing insights into the origins of the Christianity of our offshore islands. The centre held too in the sense that Merton's discipline of prayer, silence and meditation so movingly described in the letters to Abdul Aziz provided the background to all this mental activity, the necessary foundation on which he could stand. An entry in his Californian diary, *Woods, Shore, Desert*, is extraordinarily illuminating in this regard:

"Not to run from one thought to the next", says Theophane the Recluse, "but to give each one time to settle in the heart. Attention, concentration of the spirit in the heart. Vigilance, concentration of the will in the heart. Sobriety, concentration of the feeling in the heart."

It was this characteristically monastic centring of feeling, will, mind and spirit in the heart, this constant search for the place of the heart and the disciplined use of the Jesus Prayer which kept Merton centred in himself and made the immense expansion of his interests during these years both possible and fruitful. The quotation about attention, vigilance and sobriety comes from a 19th Century Russian writer who greatly attracted Merton. Theophane the Recluse, George Govorov in the world, 1815-1894, was a bishop who after seven years of pastoral activity resigned his see and lived the latter part of his life as a hermit. During these years he made a new Russian translation of the *Philokalia* and exerted a great influence as a spiritual director through his extensive correspondence. And he was one of those who were canonised by the Russian Church at the Council in Moscow in 1988. Merton knew him basically through the extracts contained in the anthology called the Art of Prayer which was published in 1966 and which has a fine introduction by Father Bishop Kallistos Ware. You can see from Merton's underlinings in that book that he used it for his own meditation and you can see that he was specially attracted by the passages from Theophane.

Just at the same time, in 1965, Merton was reading and writing a long review of the two first books of Father Alexander Schmemmann, the other outstanding Russian Orthodox theologian to teach in America, who died a few years ago, his two outstanding books, the *World of Sacrament* and the collection of 19th Century Russian writings called *Ultimate Questions*. Schmemmann was a man who had something of Merton's own gift of making theological topics accessible to the general reader and one feels in Merton a kind of special resonance to him. Throughout his writings, Schmemmann saw two dangers for the church in the 20th Century. On the one side, that of retreating into a little, tight, artificial world of religious concerns, perhaps especially a danger for churches living in exile, so to speak, in another culture. On the other hand, that of going out to meet the world wholly on the world's terms. Merton applies this discernment to the position of the monk - the true way of the monk is in fact not to be sought in devising some explicit or implicit answer to any special problems which the world may have formulated for itself. I wonder there whether he is being a little bit self-critical of the way in which in 1960 and 1961 he did allow himself to be so caught into the detail of the Peace Movement and then he seems to draw back. It is not, I think, a drawing back of unconcern, it is a drawing back of awareness that that's not his way of doing it. I quote from his review of Schmemmann:

The monk is not a man of answers, he need not be concerned with either an optimistic or a pessimistic attitude toward these questions, however crucial they may seem. His life is an expression of eschatological hope and joy, of the presence of the Lord in his creation which is redeemed and which by the power of the spirit He will transform.

He says that the monk and the church and the Christian, like Christ himself, is to witness to the presence of the Lord of All in the creation which he has redeemed, to bear witness to the presence of the Kingdom in our midst, the power and wisdom of God hidden in the *logoi*, the meanings of all creation.

If the notebooks give evidence of Merton's interest in the more recent manifestations of eastern orthodoxy, they also show his continuing concern for

the earliest expressions of that same tradition. One text in particular is very striking, dated Pentecost, 1967. There you see how Merton, for Whitsun 1967, took out of the monastery library the appropriate volume of Meán's *Patrologia Latina* and read the story as told by St Jerome of the meeting of St Anthony of Egypt and St Paul of Thebes. It's a wonderful story but there isn't time to go into it now! But I think that Merton chose that text for a rather remarkable reason. Just a few days before (you can see this in the notebooks), he had been reading and making notes on the Dream of the Rood, the greatest Anglo-Saxon theological poem. And of course lines from the Dream of the Rood are inscribed on the Ruthwell Cross, the greatest stone monument from the Anglo-Saxon centuries in Britain and on the cross also there are a number of very fine carved, sculptured scenes, all of which are from the Bible except for one which is of the meeting of St Anthony and St Paul. Their meeting was a very important theme in Celtic monasticism and Merton was seeing all these things together.

To conclude, I would want to affirm that Merton is a great theologian, one of the great theologians of 20th century America. He is a theologian primarily in the sense that Evagrius uses that word, one whose prayer is true, one who sees deeply into the mysteries of God. But he is also a theologian in the sense that he is a great and gifted servant of the Word with a gift of communicating that Word to others, one who allows the mystery of faith to be named and heard in a great many places where it is not usually named and heard. He was, to use the term which Albert Outler, great American Methodist scholar and theologian, a patristic scholar who spent very much of the latter part of his life working on an edition of John Wesley and bringing John Wesley again into the forefront of people's minds as himself a great theologian. Albert Outler describes John Wesley as a folk theologian, not a theologians' theologian, in other words, a theologian who wrote to be read by human beings and not just by other scholars. He saw theology as a real service to human life and not an academic game. I should prefer to say a people's theologian, a theologian of the people of God, and what Outler says of Wesley is surprisingly true of Merton, and I quote now Outler on Wesley:

He had no academic base, no political base and no intention of founding a new denomination, yet we don't have many mass evangelists [I suppose we would have to say popular writers on religion] with anything like Wesley's [Merton's] immersion in classical culture, his eager openness to modern science and social change, his awareness of the entire Christian tradition as a living resource and even fewer, with his ecclesial vision of a sacramental community as the nurturing environment of Christian experience.

That was Albert Outler on Wesley and you could apply to all, with very small modifications, to Merton. Merton was a great mystical and experiential theologian, a great historical theologian with a firm grasp of the main outlines of the development of Christian doctrine and a remarkably full knowledge of the development of monastic life from the 4th century to today. Perhaps above all he was a great poetic theologian, who in his writing gives voice to the praise and worship of the whole creation. That rare thing, a great poet, more I would think in his prose than in his verse (and I begin to re-read his verse with the help of Selima Hill) who was also a great theologian.

Now in saying all this, I am not in any way wishing to minimise the importance or the creativity of his work in promoting the dialogue of religions or of his work at the point of meeting of theology and culture. Or of his work in the field of justice, non-violence and peace. He is important to a great variety of people for a great variety of reasons and he excelled in a great variety of fields. But at the heart of it all there is this concern for the tradition of the Church, the collective memory and experience of Christ living within her and there is his awareness of the entire Christian tradition as a living resource. By his gift of making accessible to us wisdom from distant periods and distant parts of that tradition, he challenges us to grow into a deeper awareness of the resources which are latent there. In particular he challenges us to rediscover the riches of the Christian east, maybe actually to learn Russian or Rumanian, Greek or Syriac, and actually go the countries of eastern Europe and the Middle East, the countries of eastern Europe which have been cut off from us for most of this century, to learn at first hand from our brothers and sisters there, what they have learned of Christ in this difficult time. It may well be that in the future it will be Merton's intuitive and prophetic actions in the field of

the relations between Christians and people of other faiths which will prove to be his most original contribution to the life of the 21st century.

But there is an immense amount still to be done by way of that inner recovery of Christian unity of which he spoke in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. This is in some ways for Christians at any rate a more prosaic task, nearer to us and less glamorous but nonetheless necessary if we are to recover both depth and balance and life in our understanding and expression of the Christian faith. Perhaps in the end of course it isn't an 'either/or' but a 'both/and'. The Merton who so impressed the Tibetan abbots and teachers on his visit to India did so in part because he had troubled to learn enough about Tibetan Buddhism to be able to enter into a real and intelligent conversation with them. But he impressed them still more because they at once recognised in him an authoritative and discerning representative of the Christian tradition as a whole, Catholic and Protestant, eastern and western.

So let the last word be with the Dalai Lama from his memoirs, his autobiography called *Freedom in Exile*,

This was the first time that I had been struck by such a feeling of spirituality in anyone who professed Christianity.

He says, a little bit later in that paragraph,

Since then, I have come across others with similar qualities, but it was Merton who introduced me to the real meaning of the word 'Christian'.

[Ed: This paper is a transcription of a lecture given by Donald Allchin at the Society's Oxford Conference in December 1994.]