

Thomas Merton and Don Cupitt: Artist-Monk and Poetic-Theologian

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DISCOVERING THAT "fullness of life" lies at the very heart of the religious and human quest is an important breakthrough for us all. It would appear from recent health findings that the earlier individuals are able to recognise this, the better. Through the lives and in the writings of Don Cupitt and Thomas Merton, two twentieth-century religious figures with very different theological experiences and convictions, we are reminded that authentic faith can create a unity of life and love in the human personality.

At the age of seventy this year, Cupitt's latest book is entitled "Life, Life"; the same two words reveal just as much about Thomas Merton.

It may well be a cliché to say that no two lives are exactly the same. Yet it is my belief that despite some obvious differences, the enduring message to be read in the lives of both Cupitt and Merton, is strikingly similar. Even at a cursory glance there are some noteworthy autobiographical parallels. For example: both were essentially converts to Christian faith, Merton to conservative Catholicism and Cupitt to middle-of-the-road Anglicanism; both attended English boarding schools and went on to Cambridge - Merton survived only three terms at Clare College compared with Cupitt's thirty years as a lecturer and Fellow at Emmanuel. Teaching and writing were their life-vocations and the social revolution of the 1960's had a profound

impact on their development as prophetic voices of ecclesiastical freedom and renewal. These were the days of Vatican II, the "death of God theologians" and the early ventures into ecumenical and inter-faith dialogue really were breaking new ground. In their own distinctive ways, Cupitt as philosopher/theologian and Merton as engaged contemplative, both have taken on the worlds of ideas and social action in a manner so contemporary, that still manages to captivate a diverse readership nearly forty years later.

Conventional beginnings

Radical is a term that can be rightly applied to Don Cupitt and Thomas Merton. However, like many genuinely free-thinkers, radical is not how they started out. Merton's best-selling spiritual autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, is still interpreted essentially as a work of reactionary Catholic piety. It is a classic tale of bad-boy-made-good, a twentieth century Prodigal Son played out against the Pauline framework of sin, grace and redemption. And herein lay the book's unprecedented appeal amongst a largely non-monastic audience. Dom Jean Leclercq, Benedictine scholar and one of Merton's closest confidants, put it aptly when he wrote that "this story was my story: I followed Thomas Merton's path and I reached the end of it, just as he did."¹ Despite the narrowness of his early religious vision, there was

nevertheless a spiritual integrity and transparency in Merton's story. He seemed capable of addressing, both warmly and pertinently, a post-war generation (not just of Catholics) in search of answers to the tough questions.

Pastoral responsibility, gathered first in a Salford parish and then as Vice Principal of Westcott House theological college, characterised Cupitt's early life as an Anglican priest. His publications and interests seem fairly typical of an academic theologian with works on Christology and ethics, but life is all still fairly low key. It wasn't until 1980 when *Taking Leave of God* came out, that Don Cupitt's appetite for fresh and challenging thinking reached a larger audience than the seminar room. Then in 1984 the *Sea of Faith* book was launched alongside the TV series of the same name. This was the Cupitt equivalent of *Seven Storey Mountain* and it meant hitting the big-time. The programmes set out with the explicit intention of popularising the "non-realist vision" of God and belief; implicitly, they also managed to turn Cupitt into a spokesman for a generation that was beginning to feel spiritually and culturally lost.

I remember watching every episode as a rather bemused but conventional "O-Level" pupil. I remember also making contact with Cupitt by letter when I thought my faith was finished in my twenties. And the very first Merton biography I ever read a few years later - guess who wrote one of the reviews? Cupitt again. The figures of Merton and Cupitt have quite simply, stalked the better part of my adult life.

Conversion as a way of life

When monks take the vow of "conversion of manners," they consecrate themselves to the experience of being born again every day for the rest of their lives. This represented a very different kind of theology of new birth to the one I had received within the context of Ulster-evangelicalism. Reading Merton is certainly an exercise in coming to terms with the more realistic (and biblical, I think) understanding of conversion as a way of life. The journey through the Merton corpus presents us with clarity, a life lived in a state of perpetual progress. Ironically, it was this very commitment to human transformation that made him both irritating and loveable at the same time. A gadfly spirit he would remain throughout his life. This is evident in the ongoing struggle to comprehend the nature of his restless inner life and unique vocation over a period of nearly thirty years. Was he really a novelist, poet, solitary Carthusian, peacemaker, potential husband, or some new kind of Trappist semi-hermit, the like of which the Strict Observers had never known before? Truly, there was something of all these things in the enigma called Merton. He was impossible to contain and to classify. His interests were so varied, his passions so deep, his reading so broad for one whose real business as a good Cistercian, was simply to "listen" to and follow the Rule of St. Benedict.

In the beginning all Merton wanted to be was a good monk. Later, he wanted to be a worthy priest and Novice Master. But perhaps what resonates most about his pilgrim progress is that his greatest desire of all was to become more fully human. The pursuit of real

living and a living faith became inseparable. In his own words, he "really did want to write about everything"² and that ambition was largely fulfilled. But in the end, all that mattered was the hidden journey into the True Self and the Ground of All Being.

Don Cupitt too, still regards himself as a pilgrim of conversion. "Pilgrim" was the exact word he used in an unforgettable telephone-tutorial I had with him about a year ago. His journey through the darkness of metaphysical dogma and religiosity into the clean air of "Solar Living" and "Kingdom Religion," represents his own existential rebirth - painted in the glowing colours of his very own "poetical theology." For Cupitt, the language of growth and transformation applies not only to human beings, but to language itself. This progress into self-knowledge he re-names as the "Eye of God." And, just as Merton relied on the legacy of Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain, so too Cupitt has paid his own philosophical dues to the influences of Wittgenstein, Kierkegaard and Blake. Both Cupitt and Merton committed themselves to a "here and now" understanding of religious life. "To live in the Spirit," for Merton, still required the ascetical pursuit of the Great Unknown. In a similar vein, some words of Wittgenstein encapsulate the Cupittian vision of religion cutting loose into "the Blissful Void":

*If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present.*³

Crossing boundaries

"Why shouldn't there be anarchy?"⁴ is a question that seems to epitomise Cupitt's uneasy relations with authority over the years. Proclaiming a faith without hierarchy, religion without anchors and encouraging sheep to become their own shepherd, was always going to get up certain theological noses. And it's this kind of "free-floating," make-it-up-as-you-go-along version of the faith that leads some to suffer symptoms (if I can invent my own Cupittism here) of "vertigo-spirituality." So whilst Merton could legitimately be described today by Cupitt as being "very kingdom" in outlook, Merton might have made sharp distinctions between the primacy of personal autonomy over church edict on the one hand, and the potential hazards of a total rootlessness in the spiritual life on the other. This is where our two prophets-of-sorts do, I believe, part company. The university and the cloister are two very different worlds; and whilst the philosopher and the monk do well in crossing boundaries, they will inevitably end up feeling either at home or at sea.

Prophets have traditionally been heard from the vantage-point of distance where frontiers are uncertain and the air seems more pure. As far as monastic renewal is concerned, Merton certainly did exercise a lasting and prophetic ministry, not just to fellow monastics, but to the wider church and world. Sadly, a bit like Moses, it would be left to others to go in and claim the Promised Land. In the areas of dialogue and reconciliation with eastern religions in particular, Merton passed the baton on to other pioneering Benedictines like Bede Griffiths, John Main and

Laurence Freeman. They would refine and enlarge the Mertonian vision by incorporating both traditional and radical forms of witness and communion.

Mystics, on the other hand, have always had a love-hate relationship with the ecclesiastical powers that be. This might well have something as much to do with so-called "artistic temperament" as any message that the spiritual-seers have to offer. There can be little doubt that Merton belongs to this tradition within the church. Some have even argued that Cupitt deserves his own rightful place in such a hall of fame as well. I'm just not so sure that Cupitt himself would agree.

For Cupitt, even more than Merton, is virtually impossible to pigeon-hole. This can be viewed as his charm and his strength, but it might also be a weakness. There is, of course, a connection between the "negative" tradition of Christian theology and the work of Don Cupitt. But it may well be more tenuous than some would have us believe. Cupitt is well aware of the big-hitters in this area such as Meister Eckhart and St. John of the Cross. He has assimilated much of their terminology like "emptiness" and "nothingness" in the pursuit of an entirely new theological project more akin to Art than Religion. Clearly, the eastern influences on both writers were profound at different times and such language has an obvious Buddhist feel to it as well. But for all that, his natural home is not among the apophatic mystics or within the biblical, prophetic movement. Cupitt is as post-mystical as he is postmodern. And he may well be much closer to the spirit of Romantic Idealism - the figures of Wordsworth

and D.H. Lawrence he admires greatly - than some would consider possible.

Unlike a lot of the misery-guts religion that some of us were forced to swallow since childhood, Merton and Cupitt can still put a smile on your face. Despite growing up in the days of black and white, they have done all their living in colour. And even though I'm closer to a Merton-take on faith and living, I will be forever grateful to "the Don" for putting me on to the Christian mystics.

When aged twenty-five and you write off to somebody famous seeking a wisdom of sorts, there's no guarantee of a reply. But somehow just the writing of it seems to help. But Cupitt's letter arrived just two days later. It meant a lot.

And that's the sort of attitude towards correspondence that only someone like Thomas Merton would understand.

References

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3. Don Cupitt, *Reforming Christianity*, (Polebridge Press, Santa Rosa CA, 2001) p.137
4. Don Cupitt, *After God: The Future of Religion*, (Phoenix, London, 1998) p.124

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