

“Can We Do Wales Then?”

A.M. Allchin

Merton was a very many-sided, many-faceted man. On many questions he would say one thing at one time and another at another. I want in this article to look at three strands in his total make-up—small but not altogether inconsiderable—which I think have a certain importance for our understanding of him as a whole, and perhaps particularly for those of us who live in Great Britain and Ireland.

The first point concerns how he understood his family background and the part that the land of Wales played in it. The second, how he understood the hidden but in some ways deep rooted influence of Anglican ideas and practices in the tradition of the New Zealand branch of the Merton family of which he was a part. Thirdly, how this was one of the channels through which he came into close contact with Eastern Orthodox Christianity and in particular with the theology of Vladimir Lossky.

I start from a postcard which he wrote to me from New Delhi in November 1968. After speaking of his meetings with the Dalai Lama, he said he hoped to get permission to return to the States by way of England in the following May. He ended, “Can we do Wales then?”

My first question therefore is, why was Wales important to Merton? His father was a New Zealander, his mother was altogether American and he himself grew up in England, France and the USA. He

was bilingual English/French. To begin to answer the question about Wales we need to turn to the description of a visitor who came to the monastery in November 1961, namely his Aunt Kit (Agnes Gertrude Merton). In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (p.181) Merton writes:

My Aunt Kit from New Zealand is here, and this is the first time in forty years that I have seen her. She is on her way home to Christchurch after spending the summer at Horsley, in England. She is delighted to have hopped over New York in a helicopter and she says she saw all she wanted to see of it that way. It rained yesterday so we sat in the gatehouse drinking tea and talking about the family. The Mertons went out to New Zealand from Suffolk in 1856. My great-great-grandfather, James Merton, was bailiff of a family called Torless. His family and theirs went out together to New Zealand. His son Charles, my great-grandfather, was born in New Zealand and taught music at Christ College, Christchurch where my father, Owen, went to school.

My grandmother, Gertrude Griereson, (1855-1956) was the best of the lot (she died at 102). She is one of the people of whom I retain the strongest impression of my childhood, she taught me the Lord's Prayer.

In his diary Merton recalls that she also told him the names of the stars at night and that when he looked at them in New York she would be looking at them in New Zealand and thinking of him:

She was born in Wales of a Scotch father. But the best that is in us seems to come from her Welsh mother, whose family name was Bird. This is where our faces come from, the face father had, that I have, that Aunt Kit has: the look, the grin, the brow. It is the Welsh in me that counts: that is what does the strange things, and writes the books, and drives me into the woods. Thank God for the Welsh in me, and for all those Birds, those Celts, including the one who was a lieutenant in the navy, and whose face, in a miniature which Aunt Maud had, is said to prove all this. Aunt Maud, too, had the Bird face and the humour, and the silences.

As for Granny, that Bird of all Birds, when she wanted to meet anyone in London she would always arrange to meet them by the Elgin Marbles in the British Museum.

There we go again with that old Hellenic-European-Christendom! (*Conjectures*, p.182)

In his diary he records: “I was sad to see Aunt Kit go. It was forty two years since I last saw her and very probably I would never see her again. The only blood relation I had seen for twenty years. Lots of lines in her face but much animation; thin and energetic she reminds me of Aunt Maud” (*Turning Towards the World*, The Journals of Thomas Merton, Vol. IV, p.178).

Amongst other things, Merton had learned from Aunt Kit something more of the family who were wholehearted members of the small Anglican world of Christchurch, Canterbury, New Zealand—part of the only specifically Anglican colony in the whole history of the British Empire. They had evidently been musical. His father had been an organist in the local Episcopal Church in Flushing. Merton's grandfather and great-grandfather had both been involved in the musical life of the cathedral in Christchurch. His grandmother had founded Christchurch Girls High School. Both his unmarried aunts had been teachers.

There is more to be said of Merton's father, Owen. Perhaps it is enough to

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quote Merton's own tribute to him: “His vision of the world was sane. Full of balance, full of veneration for structure... and for all the circumstances that impress an individual entity on each created thing. His vision was religious and clean... since a religious man respects the power of God's creation to bear witness for itself.” Consciously or unconsciously, Merton the artist and painter had inherited the sacramental vision of nature to be found in Wordsworth and Coleridge, something

which lay behind the sacramental vision of the Oxford Movement itself.

From the time of Aunt Kit's visit, Merton kept up a fairly regular correspondence with her. His letters to her are full of affection and insight. In May 1964 he writes, "Lately I've been reading about hermits and recluses in early Celtic Christianity and in England. Wales was a very monastic and eremitical sort of place. I think we all have some of this in our blood". It is clear that he wanted to encourage the old lady in her faith. "Did you ever read Thomas Traherne?" he writes,

He is one of the very best and most delightful of Anglican writers. I think that part of the problem is that Anglicanism assumes a great deal and takes a lot for granted; first of all that you are able to do most of it on your own (so to speak). The Roman Church goes to the other extreme and tries to push you into everything and do it all for you, including all your thinking. (And some of us don't take too kindly to this as you may imagine.)
(*Road to Joy*, p.62)

In a distinctly more jokey letter from the summer of 1966 he explains that though he is not now receiving ecumenical groups he is still involved in ecumenical affairs: "I have lots of Anglican contacts... All High Churchy as you may well imagine. But I am a pretty liberal bloke myself, if not radical. Actually I feel very much at home with the C of E, except when people are awfully stuffy and insular about it. I have never been and will never be aggressively Roman by any means. It wouldn't be possible for a Merton to go too far with a really 'popish'

outlook. We are all too hard-headed and independent." (*Road to Joy*, p.75).

Two years later, in Holy Week 1968, Aunt Kit was drowned in a hideous marine accident when the ferry between the North and South Islands was sunk in a storm. The depth of Merton's grief at this incident, as recorded in his diary, bears witness to his deep affection for his Aunt: "A frightful mess. And in the middle of it all, poor sweet Aunt Kit, old and without strength to fight a cold, wild sea! I look at the sweater she knitted me to 'protect me against the cold' and the whole thing is unbearable.... May God grant her peace, light and rest in Christ. My poor dear. And now winter comes to her little garden in Repton Street and that is the end of it. It does not have another spring." A correspondent in New Zealand wrote to him. "Your Aunt will ever be remembered by those who found her a tower of courage—she walked up and down through the terrified people encouraging and comforting them—a lady who is a friend of a neighbour here was one of those saved and it is she who told me of Miss Merton's outstanding fortitude." (*The Road to Joy*, pp.85-6).

We have seen a little of the depth of feeling Merton had for his family, especially for the Merton side of the family with which he felt such a close connection. It was this which seemed to him to speak most clearly of some aspects of his own many-sided character. But for a moment I want to look a little more at what the Merton family's Anglican rootedness meant for him. Clearly he wanted to encourage Aunt Kit to feel more confident in her Anglican identity. Naturally enough, this question of his own relationship to Anglicanism was one which also

occurred in one or two of his letters to me. Writing in April 1964 he says:

It seems to me that the best of Anglicanism is unexcelled, but that there are few who have the refinement of spirit to see and embrace the best and so many fall off into the dreariest rationalism. For my part I will try to cling to the best and be as English a Catholic as one in my position can be. I do think it is terribly important for Roman Catholics, now plunging into the vernacular, to have some sense of Anglican tradition. This, however, is only a faint hope in my mind....
(*The Hidden Ground of Love*, p.26)

The cultural conditions of our time did not seem to him to favour it.

He was clearly interested in the seventeenth century writers. As we have already seen he was much impressed by Traherne, whom he compares with Julian of Norwich. He had a particular interest in Henry Vaughan and had once thought of making an edition of Vaughan's translation of Eucherius' *De Contemptu Mundi*. He was evidently intrigued by the seventeenth century Anglican attitude towards monasticism. Here perhaps the Welsh attraction was also at work.

Like John Henry Newman, to the end of his life, Merton kept Andrewes' *Preces Privatae* on his prayer desk. In the hermitage he finds some of Andrewes' meditations a genuine support in times of inner and outer darkness. He also finds himself making use of these devotions in the informal eucharist which he celebrated at the hermitage for a group of Contempla-

tive Sisters who came for a time of retreat in April 1968.

So we see two areas here, connected with his own family background, which seemed to Merton of some importance in his understanding of his own make-up. There was the mixed Anglo-Welsh, or Anglo-Saxon/Celtic inheritance which he believed to be present in the family; a matter of which he writes in the opening pages of *The Geography of Lograire*.

Two seas in myself Irish and
German...
Wales, all my Wales a ship of green
fires...

There is certainly more material in that perplexing poem which relates to this theme of the Welshness in Thomas Merton. But there were also the deep roots of the Christchurch part of his father's family in the Anglican ethos of the city and province of New Zealand where they had settled. Related to this Anglican sensitivity there was another distinct but not unconnected influence to be taken into account: the Anglican tendency to look towards Eastern Orthodoxy for inspiration and direction. It so happens that his two Anglican correspondents in Oxford, Etta Gullick and myself, were both closely connected with the Orthodox and Ecumenical centre, The House of St Gregory and St Macrina, itself linked with the joint Greek and Russian parish of the Holy Trinity. This connection with Orthodoxy was certainly of importance in my own first meeting with Merton.

When I first came to Gethsemani in August 1963, I wondered whatever I could bring him—apart from one or two

contacts with friends in Great Britain. I had not realized before I came how much he was attracted by the theologians of the Russian emigration in Paris, how he had been reading some of the older writers like Bulgakov, and Berdyaev and more recent writers such as Paul Evdokimov and Olivier Clement. This was a world with which I had personal contact, in particular through the family of Vladimir Lossky, which had become a kind of second family for me in the 1950s and '60s. Clearly, in that first visit of 1963 we must have talked a good bit about Russian Paris and in particular about the work of Vladimir Lossky whose first major work, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, had been published in French in 1944 and in English in 1957. Merton, needless to say, had read it in French in about 1950. I think that during the two later visits of 1967 and 1968 we must have talked more about some of the Welsh writers who were attracting him. In June 1967 he wrote, "R.S.Thomas is for me a marvellous discovery". In September he made a larger Welsh find: "I am entirely swept away by my discovery of David Jones. He is a real revelation, I like his work immensely". He goes on to say that he hopes to learn from "his kind and convenient notes how to pronounce a few Welsh words". At about the same time I sent him the hymns of Ann Griffiths in Herbert Hodges' prose translation. In March 1968 he writes, "Thanks for Ann Griffith's poems, wonderful material, very Greek sounding. I think before publication in *The Pond* I'd have to make them more poetic, or you or Hodges. But I really do hope to do something with at least some of them".

(*Hidden Ground of Love*, p.30)

It was at the beginning of April that year (1968) that I came on my third visit to Gethsemani. This visit was to have a very special quality. On April 4th we went together to Shakertown at Pleasant Hill. It poured with rain, but that could not altogether dampen our shared enthusiasm for Shaker furniture and artefacts. We had lunch together in Lexington and later that afternoon we heard on the car radio of the assassination of Martin Luther King in Memphis. Merton suggested at once that we should return to Gethsemani by way of Bardstown, stopping at

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a small restaurant kept by an African American who was a friend both of Merton and of the monastery. We had a meal there and Colonel Hawk, the proprietor, came and sat with us and insisted on bringing a large photograph of John F. Kennedy and putting it on the table between us. He was in many ways an impressive and memorable man. In his grief at the death of MLK he was clearly deeply moved by Merton's presence that evening. Merton records in his diary, "Hawk, with his arm around me saying, 'This is my boy, this is my friend'." It was a memorable occasion too for myself and for my companion, a student from General Theological Seminary who had been driving us that day.

Merton and I had evidently spoken

earlier during this visit about the possibility of our visiting Wales together if it became possible for him to come back from Asia to the USA by way of Europe. But I do not recall exactly what plans we discussed. I myself had only recently begun, in the previous three or four years, to discover the existence of Wales as a place with its own character, its own history, its own culture, its own language. I should have been an inexperienced guide for Merton for the holy and historic places of that land. We could at least have made a beginning: St David's; Bardsey Island seen from the end of the Llyn Peninsula; some of the major Cistercian sites, above all Caldey Island; and without question, Dolwar Fach. This is the little farmhouse where Ann Griffiths lived for the twenty-nine years of her life, where her hymns were composed and her letters written. There the farmer and his wife, whose family had taken over the tenancy in 1806 - the year after Ann's death - kept her memory alive. As the members of their family had always said, and still say today, "This is Ann's house and anyone who wants to visit it because of her is welcome to come in as long as we are at home."

The one encounter for Tom in Wales, which I think I had begun to figure in my imagination, was this encounter with David Jones, the farmer of Dolwar Fach. He would certainly have been surprised and delighted to have a visitor from Kentucky coming to put his signature in the big old visitor's book which is kept in the front parlour, and he would have shown his pleasure. I imagine the meeting at the farmhouse might have had at least something of the same warmth of feeling as our meeting with Colonel Hawk at Bards-

town. But I suppose the most significant meeting with Wales would have taken place in Harrow, if we had had the courage to go and visit the other David Jones whose work both as a painter and as a poet had so overwhelmed Merton. We should have gone to visit him in his unforgettable bed-sitting room on the ground floor of the little private hotel in Northwick Park Road. To meet that David Jones was indeed, in a very special way, to meet Wales.

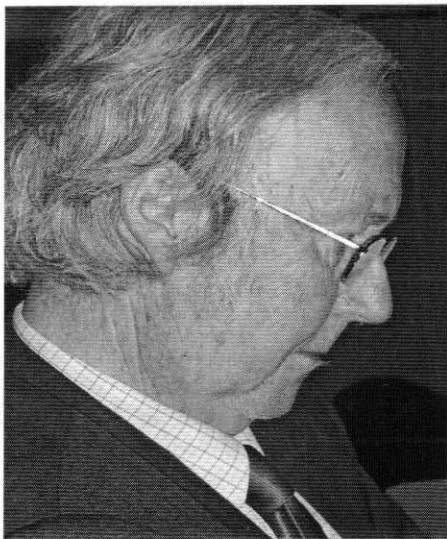
But if Merton had already, at the time of his unexpected death in 1968, become aware of his Welsh ancestry and his family connection with the Anglican tradition, it is certainly important to notice how great had been the influence on him of Vladimir Lossky in the last ten years of his life. Merton was born in 1915 and died in 1968 at the age of nearly 54. Vladimir Lossky had been born in 1903, and died suddenly of a heart attack early in 1958, at the age of 54. At the time of his death, Lossky was known primarily for his first book, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*. In the decade after Lossky's death three further works of his were published in France, and to each of them Merton responded in a markedly personal way. First there was the massive doctoral thesis on Meister Eckhart, which Lossky had been working on for at least the last ten years of his life. Almost complete at the time of his death, it was granted a posthumous doctorate by the university authorities in Paris as a recognition of its scholarly excellence. In 1961, Etta Gullick sent a copy of the newly published work to Merton. It arrived in July:

Today came the Lossky book on Eck-

hart. It is fabulously good and not only that, for me personally a book of enormous and providential importance because I can see right away in the first chapter that I am right in the middle of the most fundamental intuition of unknowing which was the first source of my faith and has ever since been my whole life.... I cannot thank you enough.

(*Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 344).

It is a remarkably personal tribute to an eminently academic piece of writing, at times almost technical in its accuracy and detail. Perhaps even more striking is Merton's reaction to the second of Lossky's posthumously published works, a slighter volume, *La Vision de Dieu*, which appeared in 1962. This is a study of the history of this subject in Byzantine theology. Merton writes in his diary for December 22 1964, "Am finally reading



Donald Allchin waiting to give his address at the Oakham conference

Vladimir Lossky's fine book *La Vision de Dieu*, which reminds me that the best thing that has come out of the Council is the Declaration on Ecumenism, particularly the part on oriental theology". Once again this is a work which evokes from Merton a deeply personal response. As he prepares to celebrate Christmas in the hermitage for the first time, he is drawn to make a kind of confession of faith, a recommitment to his hermit vocation in a remarkable and very moving passage. It is too long to be quoted here, but will be added as an appendix at the end of this article.

The third of Lossky's posthumous works to be published at this time is a collection of articles and essays which he had put together and revised in the months before 1958, but which in the end was only published nine years later in 1967: *A L'Image et a la Ressemblance de Dieu*. Again, it is a fine piece of work which re-states the theology of the image and likeness of God in the human person, showing us the human person as seen in the light of the Triune mystery of God in whose likeness we are created. In Lossky's own view, this particular collection was the most important of his works at this date. If the previous book accompanied Merton into his initial commitment to stability in the hermitage, this work accompanied him across the Pacific on his journey to the Far East. It is striking that at a moment when he must have needed all the spare space in his luggage for new books on various aspects of the traditions which he would soon be meeting—Tibetan, Zen, Taoist, Hindu—he could also find space for Vladimir Lossky. We find him on a sunny autumn day in Alaska, while conducting a retreat for

some nuns, reflecting on the clarity and depth of Lossky's Trinitarian theology, some of which he was incorporating into the retreat (Thomas Merton *The Other Side of the Mountain*, The Journals of Thomas Merton, Vol. VII, 1967-8, pp.187-8, Vladimir Lossky, *A L'Image*, pp. 183-4).

Is there perhaps something which we need to reflect on further here? Was it precisely *because* Merton was so firmly rooted in the heart of the Christian tradition, that he could freely explore the traditions of those he was meeting for the first time and could reveal to them, as the Dalai Lama himself declares he did, something of the true nature of the Christian way, which previously they had only seen from outside? The immense and constantly expanding nature of the non-disintegrating explosion which, it seems, was going on in Merton's heart and mind during these years, was indeed not a source of disintegration. Things did not fall apart, the centre held; and in that centre there were a number of strands: aspects of his family inheritance on his father's side, rooted in a traditional, if not very articulate Anglicanism; a deep attraction to some of the Celtic and Welsh aspects of the British Isles from which that family had come; and through all that, the discovery in Eastern Orthodoxy of a reinforcement and confirmation of that total Christian inheritance which he had made his own at the time of his baptism in New York and of entry into the monastery at Gethsemani.

Appendix

Merton Diary, December 22 1964

"I'm finally reading Vladimir Lossky's fine book *La Vision de Dieu*, which re-

minds me that the best thing that has come out of the Council is the Declaration on Ecumenism, particularly the part on oriental theology. If it were a matter of choosing between 'contemplation' and 'eschatology', there is no question that I am and would always be committed entirely to the latter. Here in the hermitage, returning necessarily to beginnings, I know where my beginning was: hearing the Name and Godhead of Christ preached in Corpus Christi Church. I heard and believed. I believe that He has called me freely, out of pure mercy, to His love and salvation and that at the end (to which all is directed by Him) I shall see Him after I have put off my body in death and have risen together with Him. That at the last day 'all flesh shall truly see the salvation of God'. What this means is that my faith is an eschatological faith, not merely a means of penetrating the mystery of the divine presence and resting in Him now. Yet because my faith is eschatological it is also contemplative, for I am even now in the Kingdom and I can even now 'see' something of the glory of the Kingdom and praise Him who is King. I would be foolish then if I lived blindly, putting all 'seeing' off until some imagined fulfilment (for my present seeing is the beginning of a real and unimaginable fulfilment!). Thus contemplation and eschatology are one, in faith and in surrender to Christ. They complete each other and intensify each other. It is by contemplation and love that I can best prepare myself for the eschatological vision—and best help the Church and all men to journey towards it.

"The union of contemplation and eschatology is clear in the gift of the Holy Spirit. In Him we are awakened to know

the Father, because in Him we are refashioned in the likeness of the Son. It is in this likeness that the Spirit will bring us at last to the clear vision of the invisible Father in the Son's glory, which will also be our glory. Meanwhile, it is the Spirit who awakens in our heart the faith and hope in which we cry for the eschatological fulfilment and vision. In this hope there is already a beginning, a 'promise' of fulfilment. This is our contemplation: the realization and 'experiences' of the life-giving Spirit in Whom the Father is present to us through the Son, our way, truth and life. The realization that we are on

our way, that because we are our way we are in that Truth, which is the end and by which we are already fully and eternally alive. Contemplation is the loving sense of this life and this presence and this eternity."

(Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, The Journals of Thomas Merton, Vol. V, New York, HarperSanFrancisco, 1997, pp.181-2)

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