

# Thomas Merton: Postmodernist *Avant La Lettre*?

Melvyn Matthews

A short time ago I found myself listening to a lecture about Buddhism given by someone who not only was a Buddhist but also taught Buddhism in one of our universities and edited one of the foremost academic journals about Buddhism. It was an excellent lecture, full of food for thought, especially, since it was given to a largely Christian audience, food for thought about the relationship between Buddhism and Christianity. Now this was only coincidence, but the uncanny thing was that the lecturer looked just like Thomas Merton. He wasn't as tall as Merton, but there was an uncanny resemblance to those photographs which were taken early on in Merton's time at Gethsemani where he looks so youthful and 'clear', full of awareness and wakefulness. Another member of the Thomas Merton Society was present at the lecture and had been asked to give the vote of thanks at the end and during his short speech he too remarked on the resemblance saying it was a sort of *Merton Redivivus* experience – here we were in a Christian cathedral listening to a talk on the relationship between Christianity and Buddhism by Thomas Merton – only it wasn't him.

On the drive home I thought, 'But say it had been him, say he had been asked to speak, what would he have said? Would he have said the same things? Would he have said, as this lecturer had, that there

was no real awareness of what Christians call 'grace' in Buddhism? What would have been his take on the place a religion like Buddhism has in the modern world? Would he have agreed with the speaker that the 'unselfing' inherent in Buddhism is the only real antidote to the chaos of modern conflictual politics? Yes to the second question but no to the first was my suspicion. Then my mind ran on. I remembered talking at a Thomas Merton Society conference in Southampton years ago when I had cast doubt on whether Merton would have been able to relate to the developments in the modern world since his death, particularly those in science. Did I still think the same? What about other things; what about, for example, the development of postmodernism and the philosophical thinking of people like Jean Luc Marion and Emmanuel Levinas? And what about Girard? Would Merton have recognised his ideas about mimetic desire and the origins of violence? All these are the people who have shaped so much of the theological and philosophical landscape of our times. Surely he would have recognised their importance?

But perhaps I was running ahead of myself. Why should there be a link between Merton and these people? Had he known of them would he have dismissed them as irrelevant to his search? What

was the postmodern anyway? What was it that Levinas and the others had said that might have interested Merton? I began to think more carefully. My Buddhist speaker had already given me a clue. The central thing about postmodernism that would have fascinated Merton is the way in which it dethrones the self. Postmodernism seriously questions one of modernism's pivotal affirmations, the centrality of the self. This self had emerged at the renaissance – it is plainly visible in Shakespeare – and continued to develop until the confident self took us into the Victorian expansion, the development of the New World and all that has stemmed from that. I suppose that the work of Freud and Jung is really the beginning of the questioning of the self which has become so much a characteristic of the last hundred years.

But is there really a self, an 'I' around which existence can be ordered? It seems to many postmodern thinkers that the insistence upon the centrality of the ego-self has resulted in so many difficulties that its existence is best questioned or ignored. Alongside this questioning of the centrality of the self there has arisen a questioning of the central place of reason in human affairs. For the postmodern thinker reason is associated with power and control and it is clearly the exercise of power and control which has done so much harm in contemporary human affairs. But the demotion of the ego-self and reason is not simply a negative move, for such a demotion then allows the return of the imagination and metaphor as primary means of communication. Truth can now occur in different forms. The truth of metaphor and symbol becomes at least as important as the truth revealed by

logic or reason. Emmanuel Levinas, for example, speaks of how images work on the human consciousness, saying that they possess a mode of being in which '*the I is stripped of its prerogative to assume*'. He says, '*An image does not engender a conception, as do scientific cognition and truth ... An image marks a hold over us rather than our initiative*'. For Levinas, '*art turns the sovereign ego out of its house*'<sup>1</sup> and enables human beings to concentrate on what he calls the ethical.

A further aspect of the postmodern way of seeing is that if there is now a serious question mark over understanding the world solely according to reason and what the individual human ego can know, then the unknown nature of the other person, his or her difference or separateness, becomes important. Levinas calls this otherness 'alterity'. This can be illustrated from Shakespeare's treatment of Othello, the Moor of Venice. Most people would say that Othello murdered Desdemona because he believed that he knew she had been unfaithful. He is prompted to this by his own capacity for jealousy which is fired by the intrigues of sly Iago; but above all he believed he knew what she had done. The moral of this type of tragedy consists in the fact that we cannot ultimately know everything about the other person, even, and perhaps especially, if the other person is someone that we love. This means that in our relationships with other people we have to learn to acknowledge what we cannot know. Failure to acknowledge this was Othello's tragic flaw. Of course that flaw was fuelled by a number of further factors – his maleness – alpha males must *know* – and by his race, for he had to prove to white people, especially the aristocracy of Ven-

ice who employed him, that he knew. But basically he thought he knew. He was trapped in his need for certainty. The end of certainty is the beginning of trust, and so the beginning of wholesome ethical relationships, but Othello was unable to trust.

Postmodernity insists that we have to respect the separateness or the transcendence of the other person. Each of us has to acknowledge that there are bounds or limits to our knowledge of the other. There is a secretness about the other which human beings find difficult to acknowledge. At the primary level this secrecy is to do with ethics and how we behave. The source of a truly ethical relationship with another does not so much lie in our ability to know and choose what we have to do, but more in our capacity to face the other and allow the other in all their difference to face me. At that point I – and hopefully the other person – will acknowledge that the other holds within them a difference and this difference is not totally known. This will enable respect and prevent dangerous and, in Othello's case, murderous assumptions being made. Human prejudice does not do this. Anti-semitism is a willing disregard of what we do not know about Jews. The Nazis believed that they *knew* that Jews were not really human and *knew* that they could prove this scientifically. Prejudice against women is a refusal to take the otherness and transcendence of women seriously.

As I mused on these themes I realised that it would all have fascinated Merton who was engaged in a serious questioning of the role of the self and the way in which it obstructed our view of God. I was reminded of Merton's meditations on

the self in *New Seeds of Contemplation*. There he says,

'As long as there is an "I" that is the definite subject of a contemplative experience, an "I" that is aware of itself and of its contemplation, an "I" that can possess a certain "degree of spirituality", then we have not yet passed over the Red Sea, we have not yet "gone out of Egypt".'<sup>2</sup>

And he goes on to say how we must accept the 'empty self', the self that is nothing and that the next step, the step into this 'nothing' is not 'an experience' because here 'words become stupid'. As I remembered this and read it again I wondered anew why Merton did not link this with Meister Eckhart. Perhaps he was still aware of the risks that Eckhart took, for Merton makes it very clear at one point, in a way which Eckhart refused to do, that this emptiness of the self is not an ontological unity with God.<sup>3</sup> He was still hung up on ontological language and concepts. Perhaps, I thought, that's why he did not make the link with Levinas and Jean Luc Marion, who specifically refuse to be captured by the ontological thing. Levinas refused the traditional definitions of the self. We are not an instance of some general concept or genus of the human being, an ego or self-consciousness or thinking being. For Levinas the abstract choosing willing ego is replaced by 'me', by the one who responds to the call and question of the other. The human being's first word is not '*cogito ergo sum*', I think therefore I am, but, in French '*me voici*', 'here I am', or 'see me here'. This is in fact the term which the prophets use in

responding to the call of God in the Hebrew Scriptures, 'Here I am'. In other words identity is only constituted in response to the call of the mysterious other, both the other person and the God who hides within the call of the other. We are only real when we say 'Here I am'.

Levinas said all this because he was attempting to re-instate the ethical. He had come to believe that the ontological tradition had led to a diminution of the ethical and that truly human relationships could only be restored, post Holocaust, by losing the "I" which had, to some extent, brought about the disasters of the twentieth century. Merton, I thought, could have taken this loss of ego in a more Christian direction and used it to explore our relationship with the Trinity, or indeed our understanding of any of the major Christian doctrines. Because if it is true that we are only real when we say 'Here I am' then what human beings are is a set of relationships. We exist because we are constantly open to the other. Once that is established then the faithful person can be released into belief in the traditional Christian doctrines with a new energy and a new joy. The reason for that is that the traditional doctrines are themselves to do with participation. While they appear to be paradoxical or even irrational they are only so when viewed from a purely rational perspective and questions are asked such as 'How can three be one?' or 'How can two natures exist within one person?' These are questions to which there is no answer unless we change our perspective. What does enable us to change our perspective is first of all a realisation that such questions assume that the human identity of Jesus is that of a separate conscious self, that he

has an ego-self which cannot be easily shared. Once we realise that human identity is not like that then the problem begins to unravel itself. If we could see human identity in terms of relationships then that might give us a better window into the doctrines we profess to hold. But another part of the jigsaw about believing in the Trinity, for example, falls into place when we understand how recent research understands the terms which are used. Most contemporary theologians of the Trinity are now agreed that in the classical formulations of the doctrine by

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Augustine or by Thomas Aquinas, there is no warrant for saying that there are three 'persons' in God, especially when you mean by 'person' three individual subjects or centres of consciousness. The three *personae* are simply the three ways in which God's single self-conscious is aware and the three ways in which humans respond to his call. So we are not isolated subjects but persons who are only persons when we are visited or, in Levinas' terms 'called', by the other. When we understand ourselves in this way we will

not only have a happier view of ourselves but will also be able to return to faith in a Trinitarian God and know that we can respond to and participate in his life. The same process occurs when we attempt to re-understand the doctrines of the incarnation and the atonement. The postmodern climate allows these doctrines to live again and releases us from puzzling over their meaning and vainly trying to impart that meaning to others because we are locked into redundant ways of thinking. A different perspective is needed.

But then I thought more about the ethical and the rational and Thomas Merton. Perhaps there was something there because he was sure that the rational man – and it is men – were the cause of the nuclear crisis that he and America was facing at the time. I remembered his amazing essay about Eichmann and looked it up. I was right. This does make him sound much more like a postmodernist. Indeed some of it even begins to sound like Levinas.

'The sanity of Eichmann is disturbing...It is the sane ones, the well adapted ones, who can do without qualms and without nausea aim the missiles and press the buttons that will initiate the great festival of destruction that they, the sane ones, have prepared. We can no longer assume that because a man is "sane" he is therefore in his "right mind". The whole concept of sanity in a society where spiritual values have lost their meaning is in itself meaningless. A man can be sane in the limited sense that he is not impeded by his disordered emotions from

acting in a cool, orderly manner, according to the needs and dictates of the social situation in which he finds himself. He can be perfectly "adjusted". God knows, perhaps such people can be perfectly adjusted even in hell itself. I am beginning to realise that "sanity" is no longer a value or an end in itself. The "sanity" of modern man is about as useful to him as the huge bulk and muscles of the dinosaur. If he were a little less sane, a little more doubtful, a little more aware of his absurdities and contradictions, perhaps there might be a possibility of his survival...."<sup>4</sup>

This was a long way, I thought, from my little Buddhist who looked like Merton. But my reflections and my reading had answered one or two questions. Yes, Merton would have been interested in the postmodernists, he would have agreed with them about the need to dethrone the ego and the centrality of reason. But, I thought, they would have had a thing or two to teach him as well. He never went far enough. Because he was so hung up on ontological thinking he could still not dissolve the ego sufficiently. Devotionally he was there, but philosophically speaking he was not. Perhaps he should have read Eckhart more carefully as a number of his contemporaries were doing. Postmodernism is a sort of mysticism, or at least it opens us all to the possibilities of the mystical way that have been denied to the church by its insistence on ontological thinking. Merton was on the brink of all that has been said about this since his death. Had he lived longer, I thought,

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perhaps he would have been a better post-modernist. He would have read Levinas and Jean-Luc Marion and even Girard. Perhaps, after all, it *would* have been him speaking in that cathedral and, moreover, he would have made a better job of it.

### Notes

1. Emmanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, cited by Gerald L. Bruns in "The concepts of art and poetry in Emmanuel Levinas's writings", *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, Ed. Critchley and Bernasconi, (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

2. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, (Burns Oates, 1962), p.217

3. Ibid, p. 219

4. Thomas Merton, *A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann*. This can be found in a

number of Merton collections, notably *Raids on the Unspeakable*, (Abbey of Gethsemani, 1966) or *Thomas Merton on Peace*, (Mowbray, London. 1976).

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