

Thomas Merton and *Nouvelle Theologie*

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'If I can unite in myself the thought and the 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. From that secret and unspoken unity in myself can eventually come a visible and manifest unity of all Christians ... We must contain all divided worlds in ourselves and transcend them in Christ.'

Thomas Merton *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*

Historical context

Since the historic 1978 Thomas Merton Symposium in Vancouver, British Columbia, the centre of Merton studies in Canada has been on the west coast. The Thomas Merton Reading Room is at Vancouver School of Theology (where the symposium was held), and most of the national executive of the Thomas Merton Society of Canada (TMSC) live on the west coast. This area has

become the centre of a thriving interest in Merton.

There have also emerged in the last decade from the west coast two challenging books from the probing mind of Hans Boersma from Regent College: *Nouvelle Theologie and Sacramental Ontology: A Return to Mystery* (2009) and the more popular *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry*

(2011). These two books have brought into sharp focus the essential role the nineteenth and twentieth-century New Theologians of the Roman Catholic church played in calling the church back to her grounding, rooting and ancient sources of renewal. The Roman Catholic tradition had become stalled and frozen in many ways in the Tridentine paradigm and confessional commitment between the sixteenth century and Vatican II. There was a narrowing between Trent and Vatican II of the much fuller and deeper Roman Catholic way. The earlier sixteenth-century humanists such as John Colet, Thomas More, Erasmus and Juan Vives, for example, had a broader understanding of their faith than that of Tridentine Catholicism. Indicative of this was that Erasmus was put on the Index at Trent and remained there until Vatican II.

The New Theologians such as Mohler, Blondel, Marechal, Roussetot, De Lubac, Bouillard, Balthasar, Chenu, Danielou, Charlier and Conger attempted in many ways to call the Roman Catholics back to a more contemplative theology that was more creedal and grounded in mystery than the rationalist and confessional Tridentine agenda. The New Theologians' plough broke the hard ground of modernity and tossed seeds of an older way into the life of the church. These were that nature and super-nature need not be held at such a distance, that a more spiri-

tual and mystical exegesis be applied to the interpretation of the Bible, and that the Fathers of the Church (East and West) be held high as guides and sages of faith. Tradition was now seen in an organic and unfolding way and a more unified and communal ecclesiology was retrieved. Engaging leading Protestant theologians in an irenic manner was welcomed, and the use of terms such as *ad fontes* and *ressourcement* epitomised those committed to the ancient sources. A compact agenda of the New Theologians can be summed up in a threefold manifesto:

- 1) a return to classical (patristic-medieval) sources
- 2) a renewed interpretation of St Thomas, and
- 3) a dialogue with the major movements and thinkers of the twentieth century, with particular attention to problems associated with the Enlightenment, modernity and liberalism.

Both *Nouvelle Theologie* and *Sacramental Ontology* and *Heavenly Participation* walk the extra mile to highlight the significant role the New Theologians played in the ongoing reformation of the Roman Catholic Church both in the period leading up to Vatican II and later. However it is noticeable that the contribution of Thomas Merton is omitted by Hans Boersma in these fine books.

Needless to say, the theologians mentioned above were European and many of them were Jesuits or

Dominicans. It was the turn to the 'Great Tradition' that distinguished the New Theologians (who were only new in that they challenged the dominance of scholastic Thomism). There is no doubt that they read Aquinas in a much more dynamic way, and their mystical and sacramental theology left much more room for mystery rather than the previous theology which focused on rational certainty and confessional exactness.

There has not yet been a study of Thomas Merton and the New Theologians – this short paper will touch on the many affinities Merton had with them both in explicit communication and in the sharing of similar theological themes.

Thomas Merton and *Ressourcement*

Thomas Merton turned to the Cistercians for the simple reason that he thought he saw in them a contemplative theology and practice that reflected the simplicity and insights of both the early Cistercians and the Desert Fathers and Mothers. The fact that Merton had obvious literary gifts meant that he was soon asked to write about the Cistercian order, monastic life and the contemplative way. Most of the books and booklets that Merton published in the 1940s and 1950s reflected his turn to the 'Great Tradition' of contemplative theology, classical exegesis, and, practically speaking, a liturgical and communal life style. *What is Contempla-*

tion? (1948), *Seeds of Contemplation* (1949), *The Ascent to Truth* (1951), *Bread in the Wilderness* (1953), *The Last of the Fathers: Saint Bernard of Clairvaux and the Encyclical Letter* (1953), *The Living Bread* (1956), *Praying the Psalms* (1956), *Thoughts in Solitude* (1958), *What Ought I to Do? Sayings of the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century* (1959) and *The Wisdom of the Desert* (1960) are just a few of the books that emerged from Merton's prolific and creative mind. Each dealt, in one way or another, with a turn to an older, deeper and more contemplative way of doing theology and mystical exegesis.

Three recent publications, edited by Patrick O'Connell, *Thomas Merton: Cassian and the Fathers* (2005), *Thomas Merton: Pre-Benedictine Monasticism* (2006) and *Thomas Merton: An Introduction to Christian Mysticism* (2008) make it abundantly clear how wide and deep Merton had read in the Patristic tradition, and how he used all he absorbed and internalized as master of scholastics and novices at the monastery. Merton was very much at the forefront, with his close friend and monastic reformer Jean Leclercq, of mining the motherlode of the ancient ways and sources. *Survival or Prophecy: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Jean Leclercq* (2002) tell this tale in exquisite and poignant detail. There can be no doubt that Thomas Merton, as a creative interpreter of the Great Tradition, was on the same page as

most of the more academic theologians and scholars that formed the *Nouvelle Theologie* movement. The main difference between Merton and the *ad fontes* theologians of the *ressourcement* movement was that Merton, as a monk and spiritual director, had to both interpret the Great Tradition (sifting wheat from chaff in it) and apply it to the vocation of educating, shaping and forming lives in the wisdom tradition of the contemplative and monastic way.

Thomas Merton has been interpreted in many different ways, and the Merton of the 1960s is often seen as the mature and more attractive Merton. From such a perspective, the Merton of the 40s and 50s is viewed as more conservative and less at the *avant garde* cutting edge of theology, politics and interfaith dialogue. There are problems with this developmental way of reading him. He was a radical conservative which means he was committed to conserving the essence (*esse*) of the Great Tradition but quite willing to let go of that which was of secondary or tertiary value (*adiaphora*). This means that he remained committed to the essence of the ancient way (which makes him a radical conservative), but he weighed, in his judicious way, the gold from the dross within the way. Merton was no traditionalist who pitted past against present, the classical path against the modern.

Merton and Von Balthasar and others

Merton was alert to the fact that change was afoot in the Roman Catholic Church in the 1950s, and the fact that he was seen as a writer on the forefront of contemplative theology in the 40s and 50s meant that he corresponded with many within the church who were keen to hear his insights on reform. I have listed a few letters below that reflect Merton's engagement with the New Theologians and others. Where the letters were too long I have briefly reviewed their main points.

Letter to Father Mark Weidner:
15 April 1959

'Here are authors I recommend in a general way: Guardini always fine. Bouyer, Danielou, De Lubac (some books), Josef Pieper (Thomist), Von Balthasar (controversial but generally very good).'¹

Letter to Father Chrysogonus Waddell: 26 November 1963

'Of course I agree that as a theologian Chenu does not come up to Von Balthasar, but I like him above all as a historian of theology.'²

Letter to Father Hans Urs Von Balthasar: 3 July 1964

Father Von Balthasar's writings were read a great deal at the monastery, and Jean Leclercq had spent time with Von Balthasar in Basel where Merton's 'name was mentioned in the conversation'. The fact

that Von Balthasar had done serious work on Origen meant a great deal to Merton, and Origen's poetic and contemplative approach to theology drew Von Balthasar and Merton together. Merton was also engaged at the time in the reading and translating of Latin American poets who he mentions to Von Balthasar. Merton then writes that 'I am very fond of your neighbor Karl Barth and have written on his book on Anselm (which is wonderful I think)'. Merton asked Von Balthasar if he had done any writings on 'Oriental religion'. Merton was convinced that the Zen Buddhist scholar D.T. Suzuki, with whom he had met and exchanged letters, had 'a natural grasp of the Patristic approach to Paradise and the Fall which is most remarkable, he understands it much better than many technical theologians and indeed many monks'. The letter shows a definite affinity between Merton and Von Balthasar.³

Letter to Father Hans Urs Von Balthasar: 7 August 1964

This is a rather long letter in which Merton is responding to a letter from Balthasar. Merton was drawn to Balthasar's 'theology of 'Kabod'' and thanks Balthasar for his willingness to translate some of Merton's poems into German. Merton goes on to say 'I am very much in agreement with you on the importance of poetry as being, ever so often, the locus of Theophany!' Merton then again informs

Balthasar of the importance of many Latin American poets. Merton brings to an end the letter with these words. 'I failed to mention to you that the book of yours which says the most to me has always been the one on St Maximus'.⁴

Letter to Father Hans Urs Von Balthasar: 27 September 1964

Von Balthasar had sent Merton a package of his books, and Merton replied in these words: 'I am most grateful, as this is exactly what I have been looking for, a truly contemplative theology, for which we have been starved for so many centuries (though of course there have been little intervals of refreshment and light with people like Scheeben)'. Merton then mentions how in Buddhism there exists a form of wisdom (transformative *sapientia*) that is often sorely lacking in much 'scientific theology and Scripture study'. Merton turns to Origen again - 'And how right you are about Origen and how well you use his inexhaustible mine of riches. I am most grateful.' Merton had published in 1962 a small booklet, *Clement of Alexandria: Selections from The Proteptikos*, so he knew the Alexandrian tradition well. The final paragraph in the letter is worth quoting in full. 'Recently I have made the discovery of St Ephrem, who is magnificent. I hope soon that he will be accessible to those of us who do not know Syriac, etc. The documents of Celtic monasticism have absorbed me too, as

I have been preparing a course on this for the novices. It has become a real avocation for me. I can think of nowhere in the West where monastic culture was so drenched in brilliant color and form, with such dazzled love of God's beauty.' There is no doubt that in such a letter Merton is fully immersed in the depth and breadth of the Great Tradition.⁵

Letter to Father Columba Halsey: 29 October 1964

'On monastic theology: Dom Leclercq mentioned lately that he thought Von Balthasar was the one who came closest to a monastic theology in our day. I very much agree. I am reading Von Balthasar's new book, *Word and Revelation*, which is excellent.'⁶

Letter to Father Hans Urs Von Balthasar: July 17 1965

Merton thanks Von Balthasar for the bibliography he sent to Merton and a couple of books. Merton sent Von Balthasar his poem on Origen. Merton was concerned with some of the positions on militarism being taken at Vatican II, so he ended the letter by saying, 'Finally, I send you some notes I hope to publish on Schema 13. There is reason to fear that the American bishops, or some of them, are trying to slip some approval of nuclear weapons into the Schema. Do you know anything about this?' This letter brings together, in a dialogical fashion, Merton's interest in poetry, theology and politics. Von Balthasar could

not miss the connection and integration.⁷

Letter to Father Hans Urs Von Balthasar: 12 September 1966

There is much packed in this final letter by Merton to Von Balthasar. 'I am hoping that your book on Barth will be translated here. As for me, I have just published an article on St. Anselm where I speak much of Barth. It seems to me that, of all those who have been discussing Anselm these past years, Barth and the Orthodox P. Evdokimov have appreciated him the best.' Merton then thanked Von Balthasar for his willingness to write an introduction to a collection of Merton's poems. The letter is brought to a close with some illuminative comments. 'Yes, I feel it is very important for us other monks to show gratitude towards a theologian such as you, who are, after all, more contemplative and more monastic. These are the beacons that are the most helpful to us, and not arguments or novelties. As monks, we ought to live with eyes open to the deifying light'. Merton's interest in Buddhism concludes the letter. 'I am sending you in a separate envelope a small article on present day Buddhism. I have met a Vietnamese Buddhist monk (Thich Nhat Hanh) whom I love very much. To me he is a true brother.'⁸

Letter to Dom Jean Leclercq: 18 November 1966

Merton expresses his gratitude to Leclercq for his support and affir-

mation in a context in which many are turning on Merton. He then writes, 'I am also very grateful to P. Von Balthasar for his generous introduction, or rather postface, to the little selection of my poems. The selection was good, the translations seem to me to be very well done, and I am happy with the whole book. With you and him behind me I can feel a little more confidence – not that I have yet made myself notable for a lack of it. Perhaps I have always had too much.'⁹

Letter to Father Matthew Fox:
23 January 1967

The controversial American Dominican theologian Matthew Fox had not yet emerged on the intellectual scene in 1967. He was young and very much feeling his way. Merton was a distinguished contemplative theologian and had written much on the church and politics by 1967. Fox wrote to Merton inquiring about places to study. Merton offered many leads and Fox has suggested that it was Merton's pointers that made it possible for him to study with another well respected New Theologian, Marie-Dominique Chenu. Obviously Fox went in directions that Chenu and Merton would have questioned, but the connections are valuable to know. Merton mentioned in the letter. 'I am glad you are going to work on spiritual theology. The prejudice in some Catholic quarters against mysticism is a bit strange, when outside the Church there is

such an intense and ill regulated hunger for and curiosity about experience ... I do think we are lying down on the job when we leave others to investigate mysticism while we concentrate on more practical things. What people want of us, after all, is the way to God.'¹⁰

Merton and Danielou

Merton had joined the Cistercian monastery at Gethsemani in 1941 in the belief that the contemplative vision was embodied there. The fact that the austere setting, Spartan existence and the few monks there at the time, embodied such an ascetic way appealed to him. The order and discipline was very much a corrective to his rather wayward and ill-ordered early years. It did not take long, though, for his reputation to spread. The publication and immense popularity of *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948) ushered Merton onto front stage. Gethsemani became a spiritual Mecca for many. The monastery became, by the 1960s, a lighthouse that drew the spiritually hungry. 'With 150 monks, Our Lady of Gethsemani was the largest monastery of the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance in the world. It had prospered, and it had led others in monastic renewal at a time when there were questions of survival in many monasteries of the Order. There was much for Father Louis (Merton) to be proud of, yet it was not the Gethsemani he had come to in 1941.'¹¹ Merton had joined the

monastery in 1941 in a conscious quest for silence and solitude and a more contemplative vocation, but the sheer demands and busyness of the growing community meant that Merton was living a life that was increasingly the opposite of the contemplative way. This created immense tensions in Merton's life, and at various times in the 1950s he cast his longing eyes about for more contemplative orders. The ongoing tensions between Merton and the monastery meant that Merton was quite often eager to find monasteries and hermitages that were firmly committed to the contemplative vocation in a world that was moving ever faster and faster.

It was these sorts of tensions and contemplative questions that brought Merton into close contact with Father Jean Danielou in the late 1950s. Danielou understood Merton's plight, and Merton was convinced he had a listening ear in Danielou. The question for Danielou, though, was this: could the deeper transformation of Merton best occur in a hermitage in Mexico or Nicaragua, or, as much as Gethsemani was a hairshirt for Merton, was it there where he was meant to be, both for himself, and for the monastery and the world? There were moments in which Merton thought that Danielou was on the same wavelength with him, and other moments when he thought Danielou did not really understand his deeper plight. He often felt like a prisoner in a cell at Gethsemani,

and he was not always convinced that such a cell was to be his site for 'deification'.

'In mid-July 1961, when Father Danielou visited Gethsemani, Merton showed the man he considered his spiritual director three poems: *Hagia Sophia*, 'Elegy for Hemingway', and 'the Auschwitz poem' ... Father Danielou liked the poem for Hemingway and *Hagia Sophia*, not the poem on Auschwitz'.¹² Merton recorded in the *Restricted Journals* (1956–68) a variety of his responses and reactions to Danielou. There is a sense that the Patristic tradition is being played out in the relationship on a modern stage. Danielou was ten years older than Merton, much respected as a Patristic scholar and academic, but, deeper than both, played the part of a spiritual Abba to the younger Merton.

Merton tended to venture into territory where Danielou was more hesitant to go. Merton was committed to exploring the relationship between the Great Tradition and the world in which he lived. *Hagia Sophia* and 'Elegy for Hemingway' were safe reading for the type of intellectual that stood above the fray, but the Auschwitz poem was not so comfortable. This – *Chant to Be Used in Procession Around a Site with Furnaces* – probes the way the herd or collective man does what is expected of him, not daring to ask questions of power or implications of political decisions made. Arendt's 'banality of evil' had spoken

deeply to Merton. Merton made the connection between what went on in Germany in the 1940s and what was unfolding in the USA in the early 1960s. There were parallels to draw, and Merton made them. Danielou was not so sure of the connections. Both Danielou and Merton were committed to the Great Tradition and the *ad fontes* way, but Merton was also eager to understand what the Fathers and Mothers of the past, at an economic, social, political and military level, might speak to the present. Danielou was not as committed as Merton was to such a shuttling back and forth between past and present.

'Danielou encouraged him (Merton) in his Oriental studies, saying true balance and optimism could be found in detachment'.¹³ Merton might offer a *sic et non* to such advice. The balance of attachment/detachment to inner desires (and the false/true self 'agon'), and issues around activism are difficult and Merton walked the tightrope in a precarious way – one which Danielou did not.

Conclusion: Merton and *Nouvelle Theologie*

There has been a decided turn, by many significant theologians in the Roman Catholic and Evangelical traditions, to the ancient sources in the last century. Hans Boersma, who teaches at Regent College (with a pronounced reformed and evangelical leaning and ethos), has

done more than yeoman's duty in bringing together the reformed and evangelical clan to ponder how and why the New Theologians of the Roman Church in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries turned to the ancient sources for wisdom and insight. Boersma's books, *Nouvelle Theologie and Sacramental Ontology* (2009) and *Heavenly Participation* (2011) have made it abundantly clear that those from this clan can learn much by bending their ears to the New Theologians of the Roman Catholic church. Both groups are on a conscious search for something deeper, something older, something wiser and more contemplative – modernity and postmodernity will not do. This essay has made it clear that Merton had both obvious affinities with the agenda of the New Theologians, and that he was in explicit and personal contact with Von Balthasar and Danielou. Merton was also aware of most of the work of the other theologians within the New Theologians movement. Boersma has highlighted, from a reformed/evangelical seminary, the seminal role that Roman Catholic theologians can play in deepening and reforming yet further the reformed and evangelical must be noted. The fact that Merton was missed in this bringing together of some of the finer theological insights of the Roman Catholic tradition does need to be corrected. The task, now, is to further understand and clarify how and why Thomas Merton belongs to

the *Nouvelle Theologie* and *Ressourcement* movement that has turned to the Great Tradition as a means of renewing and reforming the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity*, selected and edited by Brother Patrick Hart (Florida: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1990) p.119.
2. Ibid.p.186.
3. Ibid. p.219.
4. Ibid p.226.
5. Ibid. p.251.
6. Ibid.p.248.
7. Ibid. p.287.
8. Ibid. p.312.

9. Ibid. p. 321.

10. Ibid. p.327.

11. Michael Mott (ed), *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Houghton Mifflin 1984) p. 434.

12. Ibid. p. 364.

13. Ibid. p. 364.

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Advance Notice

Advent Quiet Day 2012

Saturday 1 December
in Winchester

with the Reverend Gary Hall

Methodist minister, tutor in practical theology
at The Queens Foundation, Birmingham
and former editor of the Merton Journal

Booking details will be available in the autumn

www.thomasmertonsociety.org.uk