

'Creative Consent': Thomas Merton on Saying 'Yes'

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The Easter number of The Merton Journal is a good place to consider what Merton says about 'creative consent',¹ about saying 'yes', because the resurrection of Jesus is God's on-going 'YES' to the creation which longs for it.² What follows is a modest attempt to introduce Merton's thought on the 'Yes' at the root of the True Self and the 'Yes' at the root of resurrection. While hardly exhaustive, I hope it may enliven our Easter meditations.

I begin with a brief and dramatic true story. I was once sitting quietly against the back wall of St. Oran's Chapel, the oldest continuously used place of worship on the Isle of Iona. An elderly woman shuffled in, creaked down in the last pew, put her white head in her hands, and began to pray. Hard. After a long time, she suddenly sat bolt upright and said 'yes', then standing said 'yes, Yes, YES' and walked determinedly out of the little chapel. She was resurrected. The following es-

say explains why I knew this to be the case.

Background: Some Biblical Theology

According to biblical theology, God made the whole creation including humans and endowed it all with a radical freedom which was subsequently misused. 'In the fullness of time' (Galatians 4:4) Mary's 'Yes', her *fiat* recorded in Luke 1:38, allowed God to set in motion a re-creation, signaled at the beginning of St. Mark's and St. John's gospels by the carefully chosen Greek word *arche*, 'beginning'. By saying 'Yes' to God's original intention in a world wandered far from it, Mary inaugurated, and her Son Jesus gave, that world another chance, a new beginning. The cross is Jesus' 'Yes' to God. Resurrection is God's 'YES' to Jesus Whom God raised from the dead.³ St. Paul glimpsed the mystical power of this chain of spiritual affirmatives. He writes of Jesus in 2 Corinthians 1:19-20: 'For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you ... was not "Yes and No"; but in him it is always "Yes". For in him every one of God's promises is a "Yes"'. The risen Christ is God's cosmic 'YES'.

Merton understood that at the heart of every person is a corresponding 'Yes'. For Merton the Christian is called to uncover this 'Yes' which is substance and core of his or her own true identity, and not only to uncover it, but to *choose* it as one's own basic life stance and

response to the Creator. This 'creative consent' is a personal resurrective *fiat*. To choose the 'Yes' which has been given at the 'deep heart's core' (to borrow W.B. Yeats' happy phrase) is to re-enact the resurrection, to participate in its new beginning.

The 'Yes' of Identity

One of Merton's most fully articulated ideas is that of the true self. It is a concept appearing frequently in his writing and perhaps most fully worked out in chapters 5 to 7 of *New Seeds of Contemplation* and in *The Inner Experience*.⁴ Merton has no illusions about human beings. He knows that all of us exhibit both false and true selves. He points out how thoroughly we are acculturated. From childhood we are taught to take on board the impermanent and flawed 'givens' of our particular culture's stereotypes (particularly those of what it means to be men or women). We become false selves. But we have within ourselves an alternative, a divinely given identity, our true self. The understanding that we have a central core of identity which is 'given' rather than 'developed' was for Merton a point of contact with Orthodox Christianity, Sufism and Buddhism. It was also an idea to which he alluded in several talks. Two examples are conferences he gave in Kentucky in 1967-68 and to Precious Blood Sisters in Alaska in 1968.

Speaking at Nazareth College in Rochester, NY in November, 1990, Sr. Mary Luke Tobin (Merton's friend, former superior of the Loretto community and an official observer at Vatican II) recalled how Merton described the self from a Sufi perspective. She summarized his remarks as follows: 'Sufism looks at a human person as a heart and a spirit and as a secret. The secret is the deepest part. The secret of the human being is God's secret. Therefore, it is in God. My secret is God's innermost knowledge of me which God alone possesses'.⁵ She continued by revealing 'what the secret really is':

It is the word 'yes'. And the act of 'yes'. It is a secret affirmation which God places in my heart, a 'yes' to God. That's God's secret. God knows my name even when I'm not saying it. My destiny in life ... is to uncover this 'yes' so that my life is totally and completely an assent to God ... God gives us the potential for saying this yes ... This is the most profound meaning of our personalities which is that we say 'yes' to God, and the spot is always there. All we need to do is turn toward it and let it become a flame.⁶

We find the same complex of ideas almost verbatim in a talk Merton gave to sisters in Alaska shortly before he left on his momentous

and final pilgrimage to Asia. He explains that Sufism understands the human person 'as a heart and a spirit and as a secret, and the secret is the deepest part...My secret is God's innermost knowledge of me, which He alone possesses. It is God's secret knowledge of myself in Him...' ⁷ It is, in fact, this 'inmost secret' by which humans are able to contemplate God. And the 'secret' is the word "yes" or the act of "yes". It is the secret affirmation which God places in my heart, a "yes" to Him ... My destiny in life – my final integration – is to uncover this "yes" so that my life is totally and completely a "yes" to God, a complete assent to God'.⁸ Within each of us is a 'holy spark', 'the "yes" which ... cannot be extinguished. And this is also the Christian view. Deep in our hearts is the most profound meaning of our personality, which is that we say "yes" to God, and the spark is always there. All we need to do is to turn towards it and let it become a flame'.⁹

The point is that the true self is a 'given', the gift of the 'Yes' which God offers to each person and longs to have returned. Authentic identity returns to its Creator this 'Yes' and is to some degree inauthentic until this 'turn' (the *metanoia* which the whole monastic project of *conversatio morum* hopes to foster)¹⁰ occurs. In a section of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* entitled "The Fork in the Road", Merton suggests that to 'make that turn' is to model

Christ's own gift of 'Yes' to God. 'One must live as a Christian, act as a Christian, with a life and an activity which spring from the unconditional "yes" of Christ to the Father's will, incarnated in our own unconditional "yes" to the reality, truth, and love which are made fully accessible to us in the Person and in the Cross of Christ'. 'My life and action seek their meaning in a world which has been reconciled with its own truth and its origin by Christ's love for it and for His Father'.¹¹ This brings us directly to resurrection's 'creative consent'.

The 'Yes' of Resurrection

The point of intersection between a person's radical 'Yes' to what God has already given, and God's resurrective 'YES', is, not surprisingly, Jesus Christ. Discussing 'trying to adjust' and ego-identity in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* Merton suggests that, 'We must go back to the beginning...The beginning is now'.¹² He introduces from the Christian perspective the Sufi idea previously presented:

In our being there is a primordial yes that is not our own ... my being is not an affirmation of a limited self, but the 'yes' of Being itself, irrespective of my own choices. Where do 'I' come in: simply in uniting the 'yes' of my own freedom with the 'yes' of Being that already is before I have a chance to choose....There is reality, and

there is free consent. There is the actuality of one 'yes'.¹³

'Pure affirmation' Merton believes 'can be arrived at only, in Christian terms, "in Christ"' because 'the "yes" of being and the "no" of man's refusal and evasion of being have been completely reconciled in Christ. The Christian's 'Yes' 'is simply a complete, trusting, and abandoned consent to the "yes" of God in Christ'.¹⁴

Christian theology asserts that Jesus' offered his own 'Yes' by total abandonment (in every sense of the word) to God, an 'unconditional "yes" ... to the Father's will'. Our own 'unconditional "yes" is "made fully accessible to us in the Person and in the Cross of Christ'.¹⁵ God longs for our 'Yes'. Indeed, Merton asserted earlier in *Conjectures* that 'God demands of us a creative consent, in our deepest and most hidden self ... This creative consent is the obedience of my whole being to the will of God, here and now. The inner "word" of consent is the coincidence, in the Spirit, the identity of my own obedience with the will and obedience and will of Christ'.¹⁶

By 'coincidence' Merton does not mean 'by chance'. I think he has in mind something very close to the word's Latin root, *coincidere*: 'corresponding exactly in nature or character'. 'Coincidence' here means not only two events occurring at the same time, but in exact correspondence or agreement in nature. The Christian's deepest

identity is God's 'Yes' within, a 'Yes' that is 'in coincidence' with Christ's. The transaction to which Merton points is profoundly Eucharistic: something is freely given in order that it may be freely returned. To return God's 'primal Yes' to God is not only to be 'in Christ' (*coinherence* in this case), but is resurrective, a source of new life. New life, resurrection, comes from conforming our deepest, truest selves to the Source of Life.

Discussing 'the hippie movement' with contemplative prioresses whom he had called together at Gethsemani in May 1968 Merton quipped, 'They've got an empty box. It's full of death, there's no life in it'. And then he delivered the punch line: 'the only real answer ... is the Resurrection. The only affirmation that makes sense to commit yourself to is the affirmation of the risen Christ. There is no other'. Merton continued, 'This awareness is central to us because we are witnesses to life in the Resurrection'.¹⁷ Taken in the context of his understanding of 'Yes', of an ultimate 'creative consent', perhaps Merton would agree that we not only witness to 'life in the Resurrection', but that in some mysterious way we incarnate it by joining our 'Yes' to the 'Yes' of Christ crucified Whom God vindicated with a cosmically resurrective 'YES'. In any case, Merton's talk to the contemplative prioresses continued as follows:

This is what it boils down to.

Either Christ is risen or he isn't. If he isn't, as St. Paul says, we're just a bunch of fools, the most to be pitied. ... we know that we're not that crazy because we know from experience that when we commit ourselves to this faith, our life changes. Something happens to us which cannot be accounted for otherwise ... Contemplative life for us is a life centered on the Resurrection. Our contemplative life, as life for any other Christian, is Christ risen and living in us... Our life is the sharing of Christ's Spirit. Nothing else...¹⁸

Conclusion

So where, practically, does this leave us? With a very practical choice: to offer our 'creative consent', our 'Yes' – or not. As we noted previously, Merton believed 'God demands of us a creative consent, in our deepest and most hidden self'. Making a full oblation of this 'Yes' 'is the coincidence, in the Spirit, the identity of my own obedience and will with the obedience and will of Christ'.¹⁹ Merton makes clear that Easter invites us to participate in resurrection by being another 'place' in which every one of God's promises is a 'Yes'.

The decision to make the 'creative consent' is also the heart of prayer. In an essay on contemplative life in *Contemplation in a World of Action*, Merton pens one of his most striking definitions of

prayer. 'Prayer is freedom and affirmation growing out of nothingness into love'. Prayer is 'the elevation of our limited freedom into the infinite freedom of the divine spirit, and of the divine love'.²⁰ And divine love always launches itself and those who, by grace, become its channels, into a 'world of action'.

The crucial choice to say 'Yes' is not just for the sake of the solitary person who makes it. It's not a choice with 'private consequences' alone (although they are manifold). When our 'Yes' is said, our *fiat* made, we become implicated in, indeed, in part responsible for, the ongoing resurrection that began with Jesus Christ's, God's 'big YES'. 'Creative consent' is linked directly with commitment to God's intended justice and peace for the whole creation. This fact, Merton's own writing and life everywhere demonstrate. 'Creative consent', 'Yes' enacts the Gospel. As Merton explained:

The Gospel is the news that, if I will, I can respond now in perfect freedom to the redemptive love of God ... in Christ, that I can now rise above the forces of necessity and evil in order to say 'yes' to the mysterious action of Spirit that is transforming the world even in the midst of the violence and confusion and destruction that seem to proclaim His absence and His 'death'.²¹

Like that astonishing woman in St. Oran's Chapel we can rise up saying 'yes, Yes, YES'.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday/Image, 1968) p.184 (hereafter CGB).
2. Romans 8: 20-23.
3. The verb form of 'resurrect' when used in the New Testament in relation to Jesus is normally in passive voice. Something was 'done to' Jesus. God raised Him from the dead, thereby affirming the claims of His life and ministry.
4. Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003) and *New Seeds of Contemplation* (NY: New Directions, 1962). See also William H. Shannon, 'Thomas Merton and the Discovery of the Real Self' in *The Message of Thomas Merton* ed. Br. Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O. (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1981) pp.192-203. And William H. Shannon, *Thomas Merton's Dark Path* (NY: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1981).
5. Mary Luke Tobin, 'Prayer and Commitment in Thomas Merton' talk given at Nazareth College, Rochester, NY, November 3, 1990 and printed in *Hidden in the Same Mystery*, ed. Bonnie Thurston (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae Press, 2010) p.72.
6. Ibid.
7. Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska* ed. Robert Daggy (New York: New Directions, 1988) p.153.

8. Ibid p.154.
9. Ibid. p. 154 Also one is immediately reminded of the discussions of the inner light or spark which appear in Eastern Christian teaching about the Jesus Prayer.
10. For an extended discussion see Merton's chapter 'Conversion of Life' in *The Monastic Journey*, ed. by Br. Patrick Hart (Kansas City: Sheed Andrews and McMeel, Inc, 1977).
11. CGB p.268.
12. CGB p.266, italics Merton's.
13. Ibid.
14. CGB p.267.
15. CGB pp.267-8.
16. CGB pp.184-5.
17. Jane Marie Richardson ed. *The Springs of Contemplation* (NY: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1992) p.268.
18. CP pp.269-270.
19. CGB pp.184-185.
20. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (NY: Doubleday/Image, 1973) p.345.
21. CGB p.128, italics Merton's.

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