

# Towards an Understanding of Thomas Merton's Ideas on Sanity and Spiritual Sanity

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In 1913, Albert Schweitzer, as part of his doctoral thesis, undertook a psychiatric study of Jesus and, against the opinion of a number of eminent psychiatrists, concluded that there was insufficient evidence to pronounce Jesus insane. However he could give him the benefit of the doubt only by discounting much of what he seemed to mean, and by culturally relativizing his world view.

In *A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann*<sup>1</sup> Thomas Merton reflects on the most disturbing fact

that during Eichmann's trial he was judged to be sane, suffering apparently from no guilt and no anxiety about the actions he had committed during the Holocaust, and in *Conjectures* Merton notes the universality of Eichmann's state of mind.<sup>2</sup> As J. S. Porter writes, 'For Merton, Eichmann embodies the technological mind-set whereby life's complexities are problems to be solved and mechanical efficiency is the highest form of morality'.<sup>3</sup> Merton also turns his irony and ire on Eichmann in the poem 'Epitaph for

a Public Servant'. He characterises this satire as 'a sort of mosaic of Eichmann's own double-talk about himself'—'I purified and I remained decent/How I commanded'.<sup>4</sup>

Eichmann's bureaucratic industriousness and icy determination in implementing the 'Final Solution' of the extermination of the Jewish people in Europe was not preordained by any evident pathology or inbuilt racism. As Hannah Arendt wrote, 'Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he [Eichmann] had no motives at all... He merely, to put the matter colloquially, never realised what he was doing'.<sup>5</sup> Eichmann acted in accordance with the rule. A later biographer, David Cesarani, refutes the idea of Eichmann the totalitarian man or robotic receiver of orders, and also Eichmann the perverted or insane man whose criminal actions can be explained away by an abnormal childhood or an authoritarian father complex. He argues that Eichmann was 'a knowing and willing accomplice to genocide'. He writes, '[Eichmann] was educated to genocide and chose to put what he learnt into operation... he learnt so well that he was never able to understand that he acted wrongly'.<sup>6</sup> Eichmann's religious belief was of a God-in-nature where everything was foreordained and therefore the individual was without free will or responsibility—paradoxically, then, this omnipotent divinity relieved man of his moral restraints.<sup>7</sup>

One aspect that Merton conveys in his writings on social action is the power of the society in which such hate-filled ideas flow freely, the political systems that purvey them and all the circumstances that make them acceptable. So when Merton raises the question of what constitutes sanity he is not speaking just of individual emotional health but also of the influence of society and what is judged to be sane/insane in that context. Merton's observations lead him to the thought that it is those deemed sane who are the most dangerous, and who, without any qualms or second thoughts, can initiate warfare and press the nuclear button. The sane will justify their actions with perfectly reasonable logic, and so there will be no mistakes. As Merton puts it, 'They will be obeying sane orders that have come sanely down the chain of command'.<sup>8</sup> Such sanity does not mean that such people are in their 'right mind', and it is here that Merton introduces the idea that sanity can have no meaning where spiritual values have lost their relevance. If we are 'adjusted' to a social environment without belief in actions of love, empathy and compassion towards each other then we may still be seen as sane by society, and this certainly can include those who are religious, who only adhere to words. Merton makes a plea not just for spiritual values, but for a spiritual sanity that includes anxieties and doubts, admits to contra-

dictions, anger, guilt and an awareness of absurdities.

This article explores Merton's ideas on sanity mainly from his experience of dealing with others, although we know that he had his own personal issues to resolve. The second part of the article will explore how Merton gradually developed his ideas on spiritual sanity—what this might mean and how it would be manifested. I shall explore three aspects of spiritual sanity that are implicit and sometimes explicit in his writing.

### Merton and the concept of sanity

Merton rightly picked up on the lack of clarity about the meaning of sanity, it's a hard word to define other than it's not madness and its meaning is rarely spelled out.

Sanity, as Adam Phillips writes, 'gathers up in its own furtive way, a vast number of mostly tacit preferences and assumptions, of prejudice and ideals about what we think we should be, or should be like when we are at our best'.<sup>9</sup> Sometimes it appears that sanity, as in the judgement of Eichmann, means complicity with everything that is most dehumanizing and most deadening. As R. D. Laing put it, pseudo-sanity or false sanity is 'an estranged and estranging integration of bits and pieces of compliant but efficient adaptation to a world we are terrified of... we have been seduced or tempted by false gods'.<sup>10</sup>

Merton knew about the differ-

ence between sanity and madness in the sense that he knew about his own areas of inner stress and emotional distress and recognised this in fellow monks; there are comments in various journals. In the 1960s Thomas Merton engaged in an interesting correspondence with a woman then known as Linda (Parsons) Sabbath. Aspects of the correspondence well illustrate the saying from Polonius in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, 'A happiness that often madness hits on, which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of' (Act 2 scene 2) as Linda's conversion is followed by a series of vivid and even violent ecstasies, experiences of joy and elation which she first interpreted as part of a manic-depressive psychosis, but which a colleague insisted were religious experiences.

In *The Hidden Ground of Love* we can read Merton's side of the correspondence where he suggests that Linda should try not to make too much of her rather florid experiences, but instead remain united with God's will. Linda, in her reply to Merton's letter, states her concern that most of the changes that have taken place are symptoms of psychosis. She gives Merton a potent version of her life history which is covered in her book *The Unveiling of God*. There she details her abusive childhood, unconventional family life, serious emotional distress, erratic behaviours and the psychiatric help offered.<sup>11</sup>

What is interesting for the purposes of this article is that an analysis of Merton's reply to a particularly challenging letter is a masterpiece of spiritual sanity and guidance. He acknowledges Linda's experience and in a non-threatening way, he wants to help her to unravel the issues of psychosis and religious experience and to cooperate with her, but provides clear boundaries and picks up her projections. He makes immediate connections and intuitions that Linda despite her bravado is frightened of madness.

Not that I agree with your diagnosis of yourself as psychotic. But I can see where you could easily have one fantastic time... I just don't think you can sweep it all away with the word 'psychotic' and I think you are just kicking yourself in the pants when you say it, which would be a good thing not to do.... the thing looks to me to be pretty mixed up, like you could be a mystic and you could also be getting a lot of static and side effects that are partly mental (which is quite usual).<sup>12</sup>

Later in the letter Merton returns to Linda's self-hatred and the rubbing of herself as less good than others. He reminds her that religious conversion and experience is not rational and straightforward

anyway. This stance is one written about by Anderton where he notes, 'If faith transcends the rational, and if rationality is sanity, faith can be considered as a form of delusion and madness'. More importantly he adds, and as we will see this is indeed the case for the consideration of spiritual sanity, 'there is in true faith, its own transformation of the mind, into sanity'.<sup>13</sup>

Above all Merton's advice is that for spiritual sanity spiritual exercises such as praying, meditating and contemplation need to be grounded. The regular practice of these traditions embodies a safeguarding of conscious psychological continuity and so the practitioner in turn becomes grounded in their faith. Meditation and prayer leads to an altered state of consciousness, and these can produce compensatory contents from the unconscious that are both unusual and beyond the more common experience of the majority of people. Here again a psychological container is needed to manage spiritual experiences. As Costello says, 'in between so-called normality and madness there are many shades of sanity, spirituality, wholeness and holiness'.<sup>14</sup>

### Merton's concept of spiritual sanity

The concept of spiritual sanity runs implicitly and at times explicitly through Merton's work. From the account of his conversion one might hear resonances with the first two steps of the 12 step pro-

gramme for addiction:

Step 1: We admitted we were powerless over our addiction—that our lives had become unmanageable.

Step 2: Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

In the *Seven Storey Mountain* Merton writes about his fear that he would go insane in a monastery, 'What I eventually found out was that as soon as I started to fast and deny myself pleasures and devote time to prayer and meditation and to the various exercises that belong to the religious life, I quickly got over all my bad health, and became sound and strong and immensely happy.'<sup>15</sup>

The restoration to sanity described in step 2 of the 12 step programme is not a restoration to the so-called sanity of the world but rather to a state of mind informed by spiritual values. It is a true sanity which is about becoming the person that we are meant to be, or as R. D. Laing put it, becoming who you are. This sort of sanity is the understanding of inner experience both psychological and spiritual, held within a theological frame.

For the purposes of this exploration I shall look at three aspects of this spiritual sanity that permeate Merton's writings. The first is authenticity, the second, awareness, and the third, the glimpses beyond duality. Inevitably each overlap and intertwine with one another.

### Authenticity

Merton's thinking on the false and true self are central to his work and to understanding his concept of spiritual sanity. The authenticity of the true self is generated by a creative act of genuine understanding born of experience. This is the move from being just like a person to being a person, or as Laing describes it, as not acting human but being human. Laing also thought that there is little conjunction of truth and social 'reality'. He writes, 'Around us are pseudo-events, to which we adjust with a false consciousness, adapted to see these events as true and real'. He continues, 'we are strangers to our true selves, to one another, and to the spiritual and material world'.<sup>16</sup> His words echo Merton's writing on this 'liturgy of pseudo-events' where through the 'mental snake-handling' of those in charge (including in the church) society enters a realm where, 'the whole meaning of truth and falsity' takes on an entirely new logic: 'one must follow on from one irrationality to the next in a demonic consistency dictated by machines'.<sup>17</sup>

Whether for the individual or at the societal level, the creative act requires a move from the pretend state to the authentic state. For both Merton and Laing 'true sanity' is about a reunion with divine creative power. This involves understanding what is happening experientially and as a result acting freely within that. The analyst Neville

Symington writes about a patient who felt a fraud:

He not only felt a fraud as a lawyer, but in himself. He felt a phoney husband, an artificial father, and a fraudulent worshipper in his parish church. He had memorized a schema for living but felt a fraud because he was a façade; there was suppression of the person in favour of accommodation to social expectation.<sup>18</sup>

Merton's thinking on authenticity as the crux of spiritual sanity is born of his experiential understanding of the identity-giving structures of the false self. He sees this as sin in the sense of separation from God.

To say I was born in sin is to say I came into the world with a false self. ... And thus I came into existence and non-existence at the same time because from the very start I was something that I was not.... Every one of us is shadowed by an illusory person: a false self... My false and private self is the one who wants to exist outside the reach of God's will and God's love—outside of reality and outside of life.<sup>19</sup>

But the very questioning of the perplexity linked to what Merton calls

'the problem of my own personal-ity' is to be sane. 'Any perplexity is liable to be a spiritual gestation, leading to a new birth and a mystical regeneration'.<sup>20</sup> Any personal transformation or awakening to the 'true self' for Merton involved attention to religious experience: spiritual experience grounded within theology.

### Awareness

The second aspect of spiritual sanity follows on from being rather than acting human, and the associated freedom which is the realisation that this humanity applies to everyone, *everyone* is in the image of God. The awareness leads to acknowledgement of our interdependence on each other and with all of God's creation. 'I must look for my identity, somehow, not only in God but in others... I will never be able to find myself if I isolate myself from the rest of humankind as if I were a different kind of being'. For Merton the emergence of the true self included the awareness of, to quote Pramuk, 'resting in the womb of God, in creation, and in one another'.<sup>21</sup> It is, as Merton described his experience at Fourth and Walnut, 'like waking from a dream of separateness'.<sup>22</sup>

For Merton this awareness is linked to contemplation. 'The importance of a *purely immanent activity* (the contemplative does not do nothing). This can be a basis for an incomparably deep understanding of another's suffering'. In the



same journal entry Merton quotes Jacques Maritain, one must... 'undertake seriously to recognise the innumerable universes that one's fellow being carries'.<sup>23</sup> With this realization division, prejudice and warfare become insupportable.

Worth emphasising in this aspect of spiritual sanity is Merton's awareness of our interdependence on creation. In a later chapter in *Raids*, 'Atlas and the Fatman', Merton urges us to open our eyes and see the glory of God in the beauty of the world, and in one another: 'Every star that man has not counted is a world of sanity and perfection. Every blade of grass is an angel singing in a shower of glory...'<sup>24</sup>

### Glimpses beyond duality

This third aspect of spiritual sanity involves recognition of the false gods that we create and the centrality of the true God and this is linked to a deepening of our relationship with God. The false God is the greedy-envious-jealous God that interferes with and prevents the creativity that is needed to generate the true self. It can also be the false God used for self-justification that leads to behaviour that differentiates between one human and another, so counteracting both the first and second aspect of spiritual sanity. In contrast, the true God, and I quote Symington here, 'the infinite, the absolute, ultimate truth—that all realities is', this is the God that promotes growth and

creativity, authenticity and awareness.<sup>25</sup> To glimpse this true God we need to let go of the strong attachment to the system that Symington refers to as 'God and the worm'. To let go of the comfort of this positioning of the terrible, sinful, worthless penitent and the powerful, mighty God requires an act of faith—a belief and a trust in the something more than our selves.

At times Merton is in the position of the worm vis-a-vis God. For example he writes,

I never imagined when I was a novice and when 'His lamp shone over my head' what it would mean to suffer the darkness which He Himself suffers in me. Filthy? We are utterly abominable and vile, all of us. How we can get through a day without constant retching is to me almost incomprehensible.<sup>26</sup>

At other times we can see, especially from his correspondence and in some of the taped talks to novices, that Merton has been placed in the position of God through the projections of others. Some of the correspondence like with Linda (Parsons) Sabbath suggests how she has projected god-like qualities onto Merton who becomes the one who is supposed to know all about her and her state of mind. Merton in his responses rightly understands that Linda needs 'holding' and some form of containment for

her disturbance. Possibly in his own anxiety Merton then veers rather towards direct instruction reminding her of his role as priest and occasionally adopting an authoritative style.

Honestly, I assure you that from what I know of you, you seem to be a privileged person to whom God will refuse nothing that you need. I repeat, you may have a great deal to suffer, but if you accept it realistically and without too much fear, with real trust in Him, it will do great things for you. But it may be quite painful and confusing...<sup>27</sup>

In Eichmann's sanity his God and the worm view is very powerful. So that once Eichmann's gods/superiors had spoken and his course was determined for him, he was free to obey and follow it without compunction. Merton, aware of this dynamic, wrote to Naomi Burton Stone about the censorship of his writings on war and peace, '... with all the attention that has been drawn to the obedience of an Eichmann... One is faced with the very harrowing idea that in obeying one is really doing wrong and offending God'.<sup>28</sup>

The deepening of our relationship with God through contemplation takes us to glimpses beyond this duality. The experience of contemplation is the experience of God's

life and presence within us not as an object, but as the transcendent source of our own subjectivity. 'When the realization of His presence bursts upon us, our own self disappears in Him, and we pass mystically through the red Sea of separation to lose ourselves (and thus find our true selves) in Him'.<sup>29</sup>

So to conclude, in 'A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann' Merton raises fundamental questions about the meaning of sanity and the power of spirituality to transform sanity into a meaningful embodied state of mind. It has been pointed out that the essay is placed both ironically and meaningfully after Merton's elegy to the writer Flannery O'Connor, for all the truth and all the craft with which she shows man's fall and dishonour, and is followed significantly by 'Letter to an Innocent Bystander', with its challenge to us the reader to take on responsibility for speaking truth to power, rather than adopting the role of intellectual detached observers.

### Notes

1. Thomas Merton, 'A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann', in *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1964).
2. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns and Oates, 1965), p.290.
3. J. S. Porter, 'Thomas Merton on Adolf Eichmann', *The Merton Journal* 14 (2) (2007), p.30.

4. Thomas Merton, *Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions Book, 1977), p.703.
5. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem, A report on the banality of evil* (London: Penguin, 1963), p.287.
6. David Cesarani, *Eichmann* (London: Vintage, 2005) pp. 6, 16 and 367.
7. *ibid.* (2005), p.317.
8. Thomas Merton, 'A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann' in *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1964), pp.46-7.
9. Adam Phillips, *Going Sane* (London: Penguin, 2005), p.2.
10. R. D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience and the Bird of Paradise* (London: Penguin, 1967), p.28.
11. Linda Miroslava Sabbath, *The Unveiling of God* (self-published 2010).
12. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love* (London: Collins Flame 1985), p.523.
13. Michael Anderton, *Saint or Psychotic, Jung and Mysticism* (Guild lecture no 268 The Guild of Pastoral Psychology, Undated), p.3.
14. John Costello, *Psychosis or Religious Experience: is there a difference* (The Guild of Pastoral Psychology 1989), p.12.
15. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company 1948), p.315.
16. *The Politics of Experience and the Bird of Paradise*, pp.11-12.
17. Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia, the Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2009), quoted p.276.
18. Neville Symington, *The Spirit of Sanity* (London: Karnac Press, 2001), p.193.
19. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York and London: Burns and Oates, 1962), p.33.
20. Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence, The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume 2* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p.311.
21. *Sophia, the Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton*, p.136.
22. *Conjectures of a Guilty By-stander*, p.156.
23. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume 6* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p.138.
24. 'A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann', p.106.
25. *The Spirit of Sanity*, p.96.
26. Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), p.137.
27. *The Hidden Ground of Love*, p.525.
28. Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom*, edited by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994), p.143.
29. Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1961), p.19.

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