

A Liberator, a Reconciler

A.M. Allchin

When we wish to define, 'to characterize' a person, we gather together individual characteristics, 'traits of character' which are to be met with elsewhere in other individuals, and which because they belong to nature are never absolutely 'personal.' Finally, we admit that what is most dear to us in someone, what makes him himself, remains indefinable, for there is nothing in nature which properly pertains to the person, which is always unique and incomparable.

So writes Vladimir Lossky in *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*. It was true of him; it was pre-eminently true of Thomas Merton. How much he was himself; how totally impossible to describe or define. He knew that each human person is unique and incomparable. He knew too that each one mysteriously contains the whole universe in himself. He not only knew this, but he lived it, and for this reason to meet him, whether in person or in his writing, was liberating. It revealed something of the true dimensions of human life, something of its strange and unsuspected goodness.

He was then, we may say, a liberator. He set out at the beginning to liberate us from the illusions of the world. That is very clear in his earliest writings. But as he went on, he found that the illusions were subtler than at first he suspected. There were illusions to be found within religion, within spirituality, within the search for holiness itself. He went further. It will be a task for future years to trace out

the course of his development from the young, ardent idealist of those early and still popular works, to the man of wisdom, balance, of humour and compassion that one knew in the later years. The journey he made was a long and arduous one. He made it as a pioneer for there were few guides to the present state of this road; he has opened a way for others to follow.

It was a journey which enabled him to discover in himself the truth of such words as prayer, solitude, contemplation, through a rediscovery of the mystery of the human person. As he faced again and again the confusion, misery and despair which lurk at the heart of man, and as he found that in Christ there was always a further reality, so he began to find again what it means that man is made in God's image and likeness, made in the pattern of a God of mercy and love. And as he made this sometimes painful inward journey, so he was discovering 'not in word and in tongue, but in deed and in truth,' what it means that every man is one man. In God, he found the world and man again.

So he became not only a liberator, but a reconciler. Perhaps it is here that he has most clearly illuminated the mystery of man and the mystery of contemplation for us, in this perception of the link between the inner life of man, and man's life in the world and in society. He often spoke forcefully in connection with Gandhi. In *Conjectures*, he spoke of the work of Christian unity: 'If I can unite *in myself* the thought and the devotion of Eastern and Western Christendom, the Greek and the Latin Fathers, the Russian and the Spanish mystics, I can prepare in myself, the reunion of divided Christendom.' And again,

If I do not have unity in myself, how can I even think, let alone speak, of unity among Christians? Yet, of course, in seeking unity for all Christians, I also attain unity in myself. The heresy of individualism: thinking oneself a completely self-sufficient unity and asserting

this imaginary 'unity' against all others. The affirmation of the self simply as 'not the other' ... The true way is just the opposite: the more I am able to affirm others, to say 'yes' to them in myself, by discovering them in myself and myself in them, the more real I am. I am truly real if my own heart says *yes to everyone*.

Without this knowledge neither silence nor solitude can make any sense. With it they can become a way of freedom and exchange.

This was evidently how it was with Tom. His heart said *yes*: it became an understanding heart. In terms of the dialogue between Christians he saw very far. I have always been happy that it was a Southern Baptist Professor who first introduced me, an Anglican priest, at Gethsemani. Perhaps because of his own involvement with the use of the English language, Tom became deeply interested in the whole English tradition of spirituality, much of which since the 16th century runs in Anglican channels. He knew and loved our 17th-century authors, and he valued his contacts with one or two Anglican contemplative communities, which he hoped one day to be able to visit.

But of course the dialogue could not rest there. The heart must be prepared to give a universal welcome. So there was his ever increasing concern with the contemplative element in the dialogue between Christians and men of other religions. He was conscious of great debts here. It must seriously be asked whether he would have found his way forward through the rather rigid and verbal structures of the Christian tradition as it has come down to us in the West, had it not been for the healthy paradoxes and the laughter which came to him from Zen. Here, at any rate, was one of the places where he was most deeply engaged at the time of his death, keeping in touch with all the places where there was a genuinely contemplative contact between Christians and Buddhists, Christians and Moslems, Christians and Hindus.

But again the dialogue could not be confined to the overtly religious field. It must go on wherever men were struggling towards the truth. From the rediscovery of the dimensions of the human heart, which came to him through his following of the contemplative way, he found himself in contact again with that literary world, which at the outset he may have thought he had most definitively abandoned. And still further, his care went from literature to life, and he, a hermit and a solitary, wrote with a perception and a sensitivity of the underlying issues in the racial conflict, which has often been denied to those who were in the thick of the battle.



Donald Allchin and Thomas Merton

This love and concern for all men, this saying *yes* to the truth wherever it was found, did not make Thomas Merton less truly a monk, a solitary than he was before. Rather they revealed what the true meaning of the monastic calling is, and restored to the term *physike theoria*, the contemplation of the natural order, something of

its original meaning of a loving regard for the mystery of things which discerns and liberates in them, the hidden flame of the divine word. It was thus that he saw the Shakers both in their life and in their work as authentic exponents of the contemplative way, ‘the Shaker cabinet maker enabling wood to respond to the “call” to become a chest, a table, a chair, a desk.’ It was thus that he himself through the honesty and humility of his work was able to liberate something in those who came in touch with him, through his writings or in person, so that they too might respond to the call to become what God had made them to be. All this was not apart from Christ. It was through a true participation in the Spirit and the Word that in the flesh and blood of a man so simple and so human, the creative energy of God could be at work in our world.

Donald Allchin (1930–2010) was a priest, a theologian and a writer. He corresponded with Merton over a number of years and visited him on three occasions. He was the President of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland from its inauguration until his death.

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