

Both IT and NOT IT

...This is the way I look at it

Exploring personal experiences of God

Fiona Gardner

Introduction

In a single letter to 'John' written in 1963 in the section 'to and about young people' and published in *The Road to Joy*,¹ Merton responds to questions raised by John about his experience whilst under the influence of LSD. John has summed up the whole experience with the phrase: 'This is IT.' The 'IT' that John believes he has experienced is a mystical experience, and he writes to Merton to enquire if this experience is the same as Merton's experience of God.

Merton was above all a theologian of experience. In *Seeds of Contemplation* he writes that he is 'talking about spiritual things from the point of view of experience rather than in the concise terms of dogmatic theology or metaphysics'.² In the prologue to *The Sign of Jonas* he explains that the book is written 'in terms of personal experience' and 'in the byways of poetry and intuition'.³ And in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* that 'Christianity begins with revelation' and 'a living experience of unity in Christ which far transcends all conceptual formulations'.⁴

Merton had great sympathy with searchers as is evidenced in much of his correspondence. He saw his on-going task as one of 'the solitary explorer' who is called to search 'the existential depths of faith in its silences, its ambiguities and in those certainties that lie deeper than the bottom of anxiety'.⁵ The searching was always to go beyond oneself, beyond the confines of expected experience, so it is no surprise to find Merton interested in John's account whilst John was under the influence of LSD.

In 1958, five years before the letter to John, Merton corresponded

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with Aldous Huxley about the same subject where Merton understands that the use of a drug could lead to 'an intuitive awareness of our inmost reality', a natural experience that can 'happen' in all sorts of ways and that he calls 'aesthetic' and 'natural'. This is to be distinguished from a supernatural or mystical experience where there is a relational aspect depending on the 'presence of a Person', and note Merton's emphasis that 'the presence of a Person . . . depends on the liberty of that Person.' In this way the experience becomes a gift and a 'free act of love on the part of Him who comes'.⁶

Using a similar distinction Merton accepts the experience that John has had as being purely natural in the sense of being human, but illusory in the sense that it seems that John has compartmentalised the concept of being. For Merton, being is a gift from God, and there is a process whereby in some experiences our being communicates directly with the Being of God who is 'in us'. Merton's reply offers John a way forward.

This stanza from the poem 'In Love for Long' by Edwin Muir seems to encapsulate both the dilemma of the question raised and the paradox of Merton's reply:

It is not any thing,
And yet all being is;
Being, being, being,
Its burden and its bliss.
How can I ever prove
What it is I love?⁷

In this paper I am going to explore three aspects of Merton's reply in further detail.

1 - The experiences of being – being human

When Merton describes in his letter to 'John' such spiritual experiences as 'universal, natural and normal', he appreciates that what he experienced whilst under the influence of LSD was a sense of being alive, an awakening of the self, the sense of being human. He also sees that implicit in John's letter there is a longing for something. This is what William Johnston has called the 'great search' fuelled by 'the great hunger' for spiritual experience rather than objective truth.⁸ Bernard Lonergan writes that the old foundations based on dogma and doctrine, whilst still true, are no longer appropriate and that the foundation now consists 'not in objective statement but in subjective reality'.⁹ But what is

meant by subjective reality? Here Lonergan means an experience of conversion which is the basis not only of Christianity but of all religion. He claims that conversion is the experience by which one becomes an authentic human being.

As in 1963 and now over fifty years later human beings are searching strongly for what have been called 'peak experiences' that can give meaning to life and tell us it is still worth living.¹⁰ In 1963 drug experiences offered this chance in part fed by Aldous Huxley's experiments with mescaline and LSD - hence Merton's earlier correspondence. When the doors of perception are cleansed, Huxley held, one has a vision of naked existence, like that of Adam on the morning of his creation. Ralph Metzner together with Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert (later Ram Dass) adapted *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* as a manual for people taking high-dose LSD trips. Metzner, writing of his own LSD experience at this time, notes the purification of the self and transformative aspects of awareness where 'very old complexes were being loosened, released and discharged ... I felt that in this upheaval a whole era in my life and in the life of the world was coming to an end. The rule of the old gods was ending.'¹¹

Such experiences are outside a religious public paradigm. Instead they are something private, often speaking mostly to the senses, and belonging exclusively to the inner forum of human conscience, without mediation or an institution. Such an experience becomes, in the words of Ralph Metzner, 'something to be lived within the sphere of private life, where each one believes and welcomes truths presented to him or her, mixing concepts, rituals and experience at will.'¹²

Metzner, like John, experienced through LSD a disturbance of the equilibrium of the self. Current spiritual consciousness, as exemplified by John, sometimes searches for mystery only through direct interior experience, and often where exterior elements that surround religious experience are then relegated by necessity to a secondary and subordinate position. There have been voices warning of the danger of this, including those who see a risk of living according to the flow of senses and thus at a level of only superficial sensibility. Such sensations are not 'experience' in the sense of mystical consciousness, and for that reason even experiences of transcendence are not necessarily mystical experiences.

Evelyn Underhill describes her understanding of the different types of spiritual experiences and how such an inner upheaval, however it happens, 'results in the shifting of the field of consciousness from lower

to higher levels, with a consequent removal of the centre of interest from the subject to an object now brought into view.'¹³ In other words something outside the normal expected way of being human is happening. Underhill thought that this is the starting point of any process of transcendence, but she was eager to differentiate this from religious conversion; and here she would have agreed with Lonergan that in religious conversion there is a sudden and emotional acceptance of theological beliefs which have previously been rejected.

For the mystic the process is more deeply intense and results in a passion for God, the Absolute, that affects the whole of life. Many of those to whom this type of experience happens are already religious, but none the less conscious of an utter change in their world when this opening of the soul's eye has taken place. The mystic is then someone who has a direct and deep experience of God and is, in some sense, aware of it.

John's experience was in the 60s; now, it has been suggested (perhaps somewhat ironically), that having uncoupled the searching for peak experiences both from the traditional religion-inspired practices of self-denial and from the psychedelic drug culture, it is now linked to the desire for possessions. So in the twenty-first century to live fully is synonymous with satisfying the endless hunger of the senses in a very material way. 'A certain deification of the consuming capacity and power is elevated to the status of real religion. . . I consume therefore I am.'¹⁴ Whatever the focus, our culture places a high value on experience in general. It is seen as a privileged way of knowing, and there is little interest in ideologies or theories not grounded in experience. Merton's great gift was to write from experience, but he framed his experience within a religious paradigm.

For peak experiences change us and they can give meaning; but as John questioned: what is the meaning that can be attributed to such events? Is it God or is it not? What is interesting about Merton's letter to John is that he tackles this concern immediately at the start of the second paragraph where he raises the distinction between the notion of God entering either 'equivocally' for John or 'analogically' for Merton. Merton's response seems based on Thomas Aquinas' teachings about the limits of human reason.

Human beings have a natural capacity but no positive ability to reach God other than by analogical knowledge. In other words Merton is saying that for him, when the idea of God enters into the way that something is experienced, it cannot be said that the experience felt by the person is one and the same as an experience of God. This is because

things cannot be said of us and of God in the same literal sense. Yet it cannot be the case that we know nothing of God; the alternative is that it is said analogously or 'according to proportion'. For example, there is a difference found between calling God wise and calling a human being wise, although wisdom in the proper sense is found in each. We might instead say that God is supreme wisdom, a wisdom that transcends the limits of human knowledge about the term. Yet an experience may not be so ambiguous that it is completely diverse or equivocal. Aquinas affirms that we can indeed see God's essence, although of course we cannot comprehend it precisely because we are finite and He is not.

All experiences of the transcendent are hard to describe as even the best attempts to give spiritual experience conscious verbal form will be inevitably flawed, simply because words provide a very rudimentary containment for the richness and complexity of such happenings. However experiences can be understood within context, thus the meaning that is evoked is not just dependent on the words. In his work *The Inner Experience* Merton notes that 'our awareness of our inner self can at least theoretically be the fruit of a purely natural and psychological purification.'¹⁵ Like Underhill and Loneragan he sees this as different from our awareness of God, which the passage goes on to describe as 'a supernatural participation in the light by which He reveals Himself interiorly as dwelling in our inmost self.' To think in this way there needs to be a recovery of basic natural unity and a reintegration of what Merton calls 'your compartmentalized being into a coordinated simple whole'.¹⁶

The difference that Merton describes lies in relationship. Human beings are relational beings who understand themselves from the perspective of relationship, for the meaning of human life can only be given and experienced through connection with others. We can only feel human through 'the revelation of the other who invites one into the adventure of mutual knowledge and love'.¹⁷ While religious experience can be an experience of 'fusion', of being dissolved in the Absolute, mystical experience is always an experience of relationship, of interchange with the otherness, with the other's mysterious difference. A Christian might speak of unity with ultimate reality, but this might mean the unity of love as between lover and beloved. Such an experience not only takes the human being beyond or above consciousness, not only physically but in the psyche and through the senses; but it is an experience that takes them out of themselves. And, indeed, as Merton experienced, it is an experience that leads to embracing the world with an ethical call and with commitment. It is an eruption of God that provokes

responses.

The danger of modern man taking the experience out of relationship, and indeed out of the religious paradigm, is described somewhat bleakly by Merton: 'And the fact that his busy narcissism is turned within and feeds upon itself in stillness and secret love will make him believe that *his experience of himself is an experience of God*.'¹⁸ Then the relationship is taking place within and between different aspects of the false self.

2 – A Kind of Inexplicable Breakthrough¹⁹

Merton in his letter to John expands on the idea of the Otherness of God, the sense that knowledge of Him is beyond our capacity. He explains that the only way that a connection can be made with Him is through some form of unexpected enlightenment, introducing the Zen concept of *satori*. In *The Inner Experience* Merton describes *satori*, 'the very heart and essence of Zen',²⁰ as

a revolutionary spiritual experience, in which, after prolonged purification and trial, and of course after determined spiritual discipline, the monk experiences a kind of inner explosion that blasts his false exterior self to pieces and leaves nothing but 'his original face', his 'original self before you were born'.²¹

To illustrate this Merton quotes the experience encapsulated in a four line poem of Chao-pien, a Chinese official and lay disciple of a Zen master:

Devoid of thought, I sat quietly by the desk in my official room,
With my fountain-mind undisturbed, as serene as water;
A sudden crash of thunder, the mind doors burst open,
And lo, there sits the old man in his homeliness.²²

Merton equates *satori* with

the wonderful, devastating, and unutterable awe of humble joy with which a *Christian* realizes: 'I and the Lord are One', and when, if one tries to explain this oneness in any way possible to human speech – for instance, as the merging of two entities – one must always qualify: 'No, not like that, not like that.'²³

For Merton the old man in the poem is the true or real self; and what he calls the

laconic little poem ... expresses the full sense of liberation experienced by one who recognizes, with immense relief, that he is not his false self after all, and that he has all along been nothing else but his real and 'homely' self, and nothing more, without glory, without self-aggrandizement, without self-righteousness, and without self-concern.²⁴

Merton writes about a number of epiphanic moments, especially in his *Journals*, with the understanding that 'when the summit of my being lies open to consciousness, I know by experience that I am the image of God.'²⁵

It is the last epiphany at Polonnaruwa²⁶ that I shall explore as an 'inexplicable breakthrough', where, in the middle of the mundane, there is the equivalent of the crash of thunder. Merton is able to approach the Buddhas 'barefoot and undisturbed'. This is perhaps not so much about the practicalities of approaching the figures and the symbolism of being on sacred ground but rather as indicative of a state of mind – again here there is a similarity with the undisturbed fountain-mind and the serenity of the Chinese official. Merton approaches, beholding the statues without thought, and it is then that the inexplicable breakthrough happens. 'I was knocked over with a rush of relief and thankfulness at the obvious clarity', and, a few sentences later, 'I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity' [note the use of the same word], 'as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious.'

The mind doors burst open and then Merton sees that, 'The rock, all matter, all life, is charged with dharmakaya – everything is emptiness and everything is compassion.' What he sees is the true self in all its 'homeliness' - 'I have pierced through the surface and have got beyond the shadow and the disguise.' This is the new man, the true self in Christ. Merton glimpsed deep union with God, and it was at this moment that his thinking on the true self was actualised in his own inner world. For Merton, the inward vision was also deeply personal and the culmination of the personal searching and struggle in his relationship with God. Part of Merton's awareness is of the mystery and the sense that what happened was so difficult to write about adequately. Indeed, as he writes in *Zen and the Birds of Paradise*, there is 'the paradox that as soon as there

is "someone there" to have a transcendent experience "the experience" is falsified and indeed has become impossible.'²⁷

3 - Being is a Gift²⁸

One of the metaphysical ideas that Merton is writing about to John is that by raising the existence of God he is already talking about God and Being, for how could God exist if God didn't have or wasn't some kind of Being. God's unique way of being is part of what it is for God to be God. But Merton understands that for John, God and being may have already gone their separate ways. If John identifies the being he experiences in some way with God then there is a connection. If John sees his being as separate from God there is no connection and yet for Merton all are made in the image of God.

In the last part of the letter Merton writes of the connection as affected by love. So here is the heart of the letter and the dilemma. Acknowledging the being that is experienced as part of a relationship brings the realization that, as Merton describes it in his letter, 'the whole shooting match is a gift.' This is the being-in-love that Lonergan describes as the gift of God's grace, and 'the reason of the heart that reason does not know. It is a religious experience by which we enter into a subject-to-subject relation with God.'²⁹

With this then is the further dilemma that this realization in itself is in turn another form of 'inexplicable breakthrough', not something that can be learnt or taken on from another. Merton's advice is to sit with it as John might with 'a kind of Ezra Pound poem', to look at it all as a form of Zen koan, and see whether anything might or might not happen. Merton encapsulates the dilemma for all of us in our communication with one another about personal spiritual experiences. His response can be put in another way through the following parable:

Imagine three people: a believer in God who has lived in faith, a Buddhist who has followed the eightfold path and a scientific reductionist who has conducted rigorous research. Each had arrived by a path proper to their belief and discipline at the realization of both being and nothing. By passing through what a Zen Buddhist would call the Great Doubt there comes the awareness of what Merton experienced at Polonnaruwa, that 'all is emptiness and compassion'. This has been described elsewhere as 'the field of nihility or emptiness ... [where] to know ourselves as we truly are and to be what we truly are requires not merely reflection on the absolute future annihilation of the self that I am, but the experience of my absolute nothingness.'³⁰ It is what Merton describes as crossing 'the Red

Sea of separation'.³¹

In the parable the three arrive at the same place and the question is - as they meet - what could be said by each to convert the other? How could the believer prove that the place and the possibility of the meeting was a gift from God, and the emptiness the fullness of Christ's Presence? What might the scientist say to prove that it was simply reality? How could the Buddhist communicate 'the wondrous Being' that emanated from the abyss of emptiness? In each case it is a way of envisaging being in the world, an understanding that can only be communicated and accepted in freedom. It is simply how the human person has seen the world, and to want someone else to see it in the same way is to stop them being who and how they are, which would mean that one would want them to cease to be themselves. Of course in the parable, as in life, conversions couldn't be ruled out but they could properly occur only on the ground of charity, as an event within the unfolding history of a friendship and as a free and heart-felt decision on the part of the one converted.

Conclusion

Here in Merton's letter is the offer not of evangelism but of friendship, and of dialogue with another; and this is the way that Merton offers to John. It is the opening of creativity where a spiritual experience does not give us a pro forma imprint for a way of understanding or of naming God as 'not this or not that' or, as Merton expresses it, as both IT and NOT IT. (In Hinduism the Sanskrit term is *neti neti* meaning neither this nor that.) It is rather that the experience is an invitation to engage in further searching, 'where to know' - as the poet Browning put it - 'rather consists in opening out the way.'³²

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends*, ed. William Shannon, (London: Collins Flame, 1990), pp. 327-328.
2. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation - Revised Edition* (London: Hollis and Carter, 1949), p. xii. This phrase first appears in this revision but was subsequently excised from *New Seeds of Contemplation*.
3. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, (London: Hollis and Carter, 1953), p. 6.
4. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 39.
5. Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence*, (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p. 213.

6. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William Shannon (London: Collins Flame, 1985), pp. 437-438. All the quotes in this paragraph are taken from this letter, dated Nov 27th, 1958.
7. Edwin Muir, 'In Love for Long' in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960), p. 159. The poem was originally published in Muir's *The Voyage Collection* in 1946.
8. William Johnston, *Arise My Love: Mysticism for a New Era* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2000), pp. 28,29.
9. Bernard Lonergan, *A Second Collection* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1974), p. 67.
10. Quoted by Maria Carla Bingemer, 'Seeking the pathos of God in a secular age: theological reflections on mystical experience in the twentieth century', *Modern Theology*, 29 (3), 2013, pp. 248-278. Original source: Zygmunt Baumann, *Postmodernity and its Discontents* (New York: New York University press, 1997).
11. Ralph Metzner, *The Unfolding Self* (Novato, California: Origin Press, 1986), p. 212.
12. Maria Clara Bingemer, 2013, p. 251.
13. Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (London: Methuen and Co, 1960), p. 176.
14. Quoted by Bingemer, 2013, as above, from Baumann.
15. Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience* (London: SPCK, 2003), p. 12.
16. *The Inner Experience*, p. 3.
17. Bingemer, 2013, p. 254.
18. Merton, 2003, p. 5.
19. The phrase comes from the letter to 'John': 'On another level, the level of religion and faith, which nevertheless enters into universal being as we know it, is God Who does not really form part of "being" and is in a sense entirely other than any being we are capable of knowing, so that we can only pass from being to Him by a kind of inexplicable breakthrough.'
20. *The Inner Experience*, p. 8.
21. *The Inner Experience*, p. 8.
22. *The Inner Experience*, p. 9.
23. *The Inner Experience*, pp. 9-10.
24. *The Inner Experience*, p. 11.
25. This quote is to be found in the article by William Shannon on 'Experience' in *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books 2002), p. 146. It is Sentence no. 80 from 'Sentences', an unpublished typescript in the archives of the Merton Centre, dating from 1952.
26. Merton's journal entry describing his experience at Polonnaruwa was originally published in: Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (London: Sheldon Press, 1974), pp. 231-236. It is also to be found in: Thomas Merton: *The Other Side of the Mountain - The Journals of Thomas Merton volume 7, 1967-68* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998), pp. 323-324. All the

subsequent quotes are taken from this journal entry.

27. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 78.
28. The phrase comes from the letter to 'John': '... then one can perhaps pass through the experience to a realization that being is a gift, love is gift, knowledge is gift and the whole shooting match is gift which calls for a gift in return.'
29. Lonergan, p. 129 (ref. note 9).
30. George Pattison, *God and Being: An Enquiry* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2011), p. 304 and adapted from pp. 316-7.
31. Thomas Merton, *The New Man*, (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1978), p. 19.
32. From *Paracelsus – Part 1*. Robert Browning, *Poetical Works 1833-1864*, (Oxford: OUP 1970), p. 58.

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Fiona with her 'Louie' at Bellarmine University during the 2015 ITMS conference. With her are (l to r) Angus Stuart, Gary Hall & Peter Ellis.