

Thomas Merton: A personal appreciation

Basil Loftus

An embassy cocktail-party in a luxury hotel that could have been the setting for a novel by Somerset Maugham is not the most obvious place to encounter a Trappist monk. Yet it was on just such an occasion at the 'Oriental' on the banks of Bangkok's Chao Phrya river that I met Thomas Merton.

Or rather, that I was approached by a well-dressed, middle-aged man, in a smart business suit, collar and tie, who expertly juggled drink and canapés, and in a mid-Atlantic accent which confirmed my initial impression of him as an American, introduced himself as Fr Louis (his monastic name). He explained that he had been put up there by the airline, and asked if there was anywhere in Bangkok where Mass could be celebrated in English. Thus he came with me to the chapel of the Apostolic Nunciature, staying on for lunch. Later, refusing my offer to drive him south, he opted for the bus to take him to the resort where he was to address an international Buddhist conference and where he was tragically electrocuted as he adjusted an electric fan as he came out of the shower.

The few hours I spent with him taught me the distinction between belief that Christ is God, and conviction that during Christ's life on earth God was with him, just as he is with holy men and women of all religions today. The imitation of Christ consists in having God with us, as he was with Christ. Zechariah speaks of the day when 'ten men, of nations of every language, will take a Jew by the sleeve and say "we want to go with you, since we have learnt that God is with you"' (Zech 8:23). And for that same reason I wanted to go with the man I had by then come to know as Thomas Merton. He fulfilled for me Paul's description of what should happen if an 'uninitiated person' comes to a church assembly: 'he would

find his secret thoughts laid bare, and there fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is amongst you indeed.' (1 Cor 14:25) I was the 'uninitiated one', and I recognised that God was with Merton. His spiritual direction on that day has stayed with me ever since.

Merton was then coming to the end of a three month world tour, studying mysticism in Eastern religions. What was totally remarkable was the serenity with which he contemplated the outcome of his forthcoming book. 'The Holy Office have already condemned it and me before I've even written it,' he said. 'How,' he asked, 'can the accusation of syncretism (the fusion of differing religious beliefs and practices) be levelled at mysticism, the purest knowledge of God, whatever the religion concerned?' He laughed politely at my suggestion that perhaps this was because a great deal of what is written about mysticism is fifty per cent 'misty' and fifty per cent 'schism'; and he then gave a magisterial *tour d'horizon* of St John of the Cross and St Teresa, the Cloud of Unknowing, and Hindu, Buddhist and Carmelite spirituality, to demonstrate that through mysticism God is with us, God is recognised in us by those we meet, and men and women are united. For Merton to have published these reflections as the basis of a true mysticism which embraces all men and women would have been too much for the Holy Office.

The total calmness with which he faced the prospect of seeing his life's work demolished reminded me of what St Ignatius is reputed to have said when asked what he would do if the Pope banned the Jesuits: 'I would need a few minutes in prayer in order for it not to disturb me.'

The huge swell of affection which has engulfed Merton's memory since his death is surely an indication of the problems that would have been caused to the whole Church if he had lived to write his book, and thus openly fallen foul of the Holy Office. As it is, the only synopsis of that book is the one he dictated to me, and which is written on my heart. I re-read a chapter of it when first Pope John Paul II and then Holy Father Francis prayed openly at Assisi with contemplative men and women of all religions and none. This was Merton's vision.

So much of the Eastern Mysticism which Merton treasured, and of which he spoke to me, is rooted in the world rather than the Word. His book would have anticipated John Paul II's conviction that 'the human condition is to preserve the earthly garden (of) Genesis' (*Evangelium Vitae*, n. 41), and his urging that we need to 'change the spiritual attitudes which define each individuals relationship...with nature itself' (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, section 5).

From my short conversation with Merton I am convinced that for him

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'the real itself' went beyond not only Catholicism, but even Christianity, to what the Preface of the Mass of Christ the King acknowledges to be 'the indivisible relationship between God, human beings, and the whole of creation'.

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