

For the Sake of the World

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THESE TIMES HAVE BEEN described by some as the new axial age or in the terms of a book recently published by Frank Tuoti, *The Dawn of the Mystical Age*. Whether those are the words we would use to define our times or not, we would probably all agree that this is a time of rapid change and great challenge. Such change and challenge are not excluded from the spiritual arena. The writings of contemporary scientists, the burgeoning of feminist theology and the seeming dissatisfaction of many with institutional religion as they exhibit a growing interest in spirituality all provide a profound challenge to those concerned with the spirit. Professor Mary Grey puts her finger on this well in her book *Prophecy and Mysticism* where she writes persuasively of the urgent need for communities that are both mystical and prophetic. She writes:

This book reflects on what mysticism and prophecy might mean today. I argue that the days of the angry prophet of the Hebrew Scriptures as individual, together with the image of the levitating mystic – and their counterparts in other cultures – have had their day; what is needed is “the community as prophet.” But to be “prophetic,” I argue, is inseparable from being a “mystical” community.¹

In this paper I want to explore whether the contemplative monastic life is merely a relic from a bygone age or whether it can give us some direction for those who are trying to build communities that are both prophetic and mystical. Is monastic life simply a self-indulgent opting out of a society that is deemed to be irredeemably corrupt? In this paper I hope to establish that authentic contemplative monasticism is not a “forsaking of the world,” but “for the sake of the world.” I wish to suggest that the apparent withdrawal of those who inhabit monasteries or follow a contemplative lifestyle are really following a path that leads to a closer engagement with the life of the larger community. The findings of this paper then may encourage us to see how monastic life can be

used as a pattern for a broader based prophetic and mystical community for our world today. First, I will look at the basis for the monastic *fuga mundi* in terms of both the Christian and the Buddhist traditions. I will then indicate how that is manifested in the well-known figures of the Christian monk, Thomas Merton, and the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh. These two figures I will suggest are models of the mystical and prophetic to inspire us today.

We look first then to the Christian tradition. If we start with the gospels we can clearly see that the central message of Jesus is about a “kingdom” which is essentially a “this world” reality. At the opening of Jesus’ ministry in Luke’s gospel we read:

The spirit of the Lord is on me,
For he has anointed me
To bring the good news to the afflicted.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives,
Sight to the blind,
To let the oppressed go free,
To proclaim a year of favour from the Lord.

The commitment to the fulfilment of these words from the prophet Isaiah together with that of the subversive Song of Mary is not only reflected in the ministry of Jesus the Carpenter, but it is consistently central to the activity of the early church. Peter Phan, commenting on the contemporary social teaching of the Catholic Church in his *Introduction to Social Thought in the Early Church Fathers*, writes:

It would be wrong, however, to claim that social concern is the exclusive and original discovery of socialism or that the social doctrine of the church is simply a belated attempt to respond to the challenges of modern social upheavals. On the contrary, it must be said that social consciousness belongs to the very essence of Christianity since the salvation it proclaims affects not only the individual but also the whole human society, indeed, the whole universe itself, in its sociological, economic and political dimensions.²

Within the Roman Catholic Church tradition, commitment to the social and political issues that are the natural outcome of the proclamation of the gospel became most explicit in the last century with the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* by Pope Leo XIII in 1891. Since that time, the Catholic Church, under the leadership of successive Popes, has linked its spirituality and prayer to economic and the social injustice of oppression, racism and the infringement of human rights. Many of the documents of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s

emphasized the inextricable link between prayer and prophecy. As Daniel Berrigan writes, "the time will come, indeed it is upon us already when contemplation will be seen as a purely subversive activity."

A similar commitment can be found in the Anglican Communion as pointed out by Ken Leech in *True Prayer*: "In the Church of England, there is a long tradition in which the Eucharistic worship of the church has been seen as the basis of social action and social criticism."³ To expand this to include other traditions we can refer to many of the documents of the World Council of Churches. Indeed there have been accusations by some that this body is too political. I do not wish to get into any details on that issue, but simply draw your attention to the fact that an authentic Christian spirituality needs to have a lively awareness of social justice and peace. The Christian monastic or contemplative is not exempt from this, but must be part of this tradition.

It must be admitted that this connection has not always been made clear, as Grace Jantzen points out in her book, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*. She demonstrates that a male dominated mysticism gives rise to a spirituality that is intellectual, and against the body. It becomes merely a way of coping with the hard things of life rather than an awakening to the social dimension of the Gospel. Prayer is reduced to a means of promoting psychological well-being, and healthy sexuality. The success of so many contemporary spiritual self-help books which do nothing more than "ease the pain" indicates how urgent is the felt need for such resources to cope with life. Admitting that, Jantzen goes on to say:

...this does not address the question of where the stresses of life originate, or whether there are unjust structures in society which generate the oppression and anxiety for which help is sought. (She then rightly points out that)...this is deeply worrying. To the extent that prayer and meditation and books on spirituality actually help to cope with the distresses of life that arise out of unjust social conditions, without challenging those conditions themselves, to that extent they act as a sedative which distracts attention from the need to dismantle the structures that perpetuate the misery. If books and practices of spirituality help to calm jangled nerves and release anxieties and renew courage to re-enter the world as it is, then whatever the good intention of the authors and practitioners (and these are usually not in doubt) what is actually happening is that the structures of injustice are being rein-

forced. The social and political policies that make for starving children, battered woman and the evils of rising fascism are still there unchallenged as people learn through prayer to find the tranquillity to live with corrupt political and social structures instead of channelling their distress and anger and anxiety into energy for constructive change.⁴

Let us now take a few minutes to look at the Buddhist tradition. For this I draw on a paper by Daniel Palmer from the Philosophy department of Purdue University entitled 'Maso Abe, Zen Buddhism and Social Ethics.' In this paper, after explicating the detailed examination of the Buddhist concepts of *nirvana* and *sunnyata* done by Maso Abe, Palmer concludes that, although criticisms can be made "that certain Buddhist doctrines are incompatible with the development of any positive social ethic" the hermeneutical strategies adopted by Abe enable one to uncover the positive social implications of Zen doctrine. It leads, as he says, to an awareness that *sunnyata* is "the ground and not the end of Buddhist life." Such an understanding has given rise in recent years to the term "Engaged Buddhism" which has been used a lot recently by the Dalai Lama himself.

In an approach that is rather more practical than philosophical, Ruben Habito, a Christian Zen Roshi trained by Yamada Koun in Kamakura in Japan, writing of the apparent gap in the connection between Zen meditation and social concern goes on to say:

The significant point for us here is to realize precisely that it is a lacuna, that is, something expected to be there but which is missing. And this is because the practice of Zen is a struggle with many stages, aimed at rooting out the fundamental self-centeredness in us that prevents us from seeing "things as they are." It is a long struggle that calls for an "inward turn," and unfortunately this inward turn, which is but an initial stage, can be so protected as to engage one for years and years, before one is able to free oneself of inner shackles. We can perhaps regard this as a "novitiate" period where we need to cut out distracting social ties in order to devote our full energy to this task of self-liberation.

But it must not be forgotten that this prominently ascetic part of Zen practice is only an initial stage that is meant to be outgrown.⁵

I suggest, then, that there is a solid basis within the spiritual and thereby monastic traditions of both Buddhism and Christianity for an engagement in the social and political implications of contemplation.

While monks and nuns have specialized in disciplines aimed at radical personal transformation...many, such as Antony and Hildegard, Bodhidharma and Sanghamitta, have stood out as moral and spiritual exemplars, not only for other monastic persons, but also for laity.⁶

It is now time to turn to the more contemporary exemplars of Thomas Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh whose lives and teachings embody a contemplative monasticism that is "for the sake of the world."

One of my favourite stories about Merton is of a time when he was walking down one of the hallways in Gethsemani with Jim Forest who was visiting him. Apparently there was a monk in a little niche reading an article by Merton which he had picked up from a small table. The article was on some social issue by Merton. As the anonymous monk saw Merton approaching he screwed up the article, and threw it in the trash with a disgruntled grunt and walked off. Merton, Forest reports, could not contain his amusement and after a hearty laugh pointed out that this monk had berated Merton in his early years for being too "other worldly" and pietistic, whereas now he took offence at his outspoken writing on the social ills of the day. (A story reminiscent of the scriptural saying: "I played a tune and you would not dance, I sang a dirge and you would not weep!") That story, I think, illustrates the difference between the early Merton — who wrote the best selling autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain* and "who had spurned New York, spat on Chicago, and tramped on Louisville" — and the later Merton whose social essays are gathered together, well edited and introduced for us by William Shannon in the book *Passion for Peace*. In the Introduction to this collection of essays, Shannon points out how prominent and influential Merton was in Catholic circles. He was highly acclaimed when he spoke on spiritual matters and a withdrawal from the wicked world. But, as Shannon writes:

Who of his thousands of readers could have anticipated that Merton, of all people, would ever start writing — and writing with deep passion — on such a worldly subject as war? Some of his many readers were scandalized and walked with him no more. Others shook their heads and asked themselves, "What in the world has happened to Thomas Merton? Why is he calling people to unite in a crusade to abolish all war? What does this have to do with his spirituality?"⁷

Merton changed over the years and not insignificant in that change was the well-known epiphany on Fourth and Walnut in the shopping district of Louisville recorded for us in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.⁸

Merton began to realize that what he said about prayer and spirituality had a great deal to do with the social problems of the time, including war. Again as Shannon points out:

What had happened to him was that his solitude had issued into what all true solitude must eventually become: compassion. Finding God in his solitude, he found God's people, who are inseparable from God and who, at the deepest level of their being (the level that only contemplation can reach), are at one with one another in God, the Hidden Ground of Love of all that is. This sense of compassion bred in solitude (something like the "karuna" of the Buddha born of his enlightenment) moved him to look once again at the world he thought he had left irrevocably twenty years earlier, in 1941, when he had entered the monastery. He now felt a duty, "precisely because he was a contemplative," to speak out and to warn his fellow men and women about what he believed was the gravest possible danger threatening the civilized world. He confides his concern to Daniel Berrigan in a letter written on June 25, 1963: "What is the contemplative life if one does not listen to God in it? What is the contemplative life if one becomes oblivious to the rights of men [sic] and the truth of God in the world and in His Church?" (HGL, 79)⁹

Merton remarked of himself that "I find myself travelling toward my destiny in the belly of a paradox." It is a life of paradox but not of contradiction. He joined one of the most withdrawn of the Catholic monastic orders, yet he wrote sixty books of prose and poetry on topics ranging from Prayer to Politics, from spirituality to social issues and from theology to literary criticism. He was deeply rooted in his commitment to Christ and yet he often felt a deeper spiritual relationship to non-Christians, as his relationship with the Dalai Lama, D.T. Suzuki and Thich Nhat Hanh clearly show.

Merton needed to embrace the paradox or his life would be nothing. As he points out in *Thoughts in Solitude* either ALL of life is spiritual or none of it is. We are, in other words, a spiritual being on a human journey and "the inner quest for personal transformation is incomplete without active concern for the welfare of others, just as the struggle for social, political, and economic justice leads to violence and the breakdown of community when not rooted in the depth of one's spiritual quest."¹⁰

As indicated this does not mean that one launches directly into social action or that the contemplative has no part to play. Merton knows this and writes:

"A certain depth of disciplined experience is a necessary ground for fruitful action. Without a more profound human understanding derived from exploration of the inner ground of human existence, love will tend to be superficial and deceptive."¹¹

I am suggesting here that Merton was a pilgrim who went first to Gethsemani and later to Asia. A monk who entered community, but ended as a hermit. He was a pilgrim in much the fashion of the central figure in the Buddhist Ox-herding pictures. These begin with the boy, who having a presentiment of the ox, goes into the wilderness and forest to find it and ends with an old man returning to the market place. We read:

Barechested and barefooted, he comes
Out into the marketplace;
Daubed with mud and ashes, how broadly
He smiles!
There is no need for the miraculous power
Of the gods,
For he touches, and lo! The dead trees are
In full bloom.¹²

Merton's human journey brings him from his voluntary marginalization (in the wilderness and forest as it were) back to the world as a powerful critic of racism, Nazism, war, injustice and intolerance. In a letter written a few months before his death he affirmed:

I am against war, against violence, against violent revolution, for the peaceful settlement of differences, for nonviolent but nevertheless radical changes. Change is needed, and violence will not really change anything: at most it will only transfer power from one set of bull-headed authorities to another. If I say these things, it is not because I am more interested in politics than in the gospel. I am not. But today more than ever the Gospel commitment has political implications, because you cannot claim to be "for Christ" and espouse a political cause that implies callous indifference to the needs of millions of human beings and even co-operate in their destruction.¹³

I find that Merton draws together and integrates his thought on the relationship between the world and the monastery best in his Introduction to the Japanese Version of *The Seven Storey Mountain*:

For one thing, when I wrote this book, [i.e., *Seven Storey Mountain*] the fact uppermost in my mind was that I had seceded from the world of my time in all clarity and with total freedom. The break and the secession were, to me, matters of the greatest importance. Hence the somewhat negative tone of so many parts of this book.

Since that time, I have learned, I believe, to look back into that world with greater compassion, seeing those in it not as alien to myself, not as peculiar and deluded strangers, but as identified with myself. In breaking from "their world" I have strangely broken from them. In freeing myself from their delusions and preoccupations I have identified myself, none the less, with their struggles and their blind, desperate hope of happiness.

But precisely because I am identified with them, I must refuse all the more definitively to make their delusions my own. I must refuse their ideology of matter, power, quantity, movement, activism and force.¹⁴

In the same Introduction, Merton goes on to say:

The monastery is not an "escape" from the world. On the contrary, by being in the monastery I take my true part in all the struggles and sufferings of the world. It is my intention to make my entire life a rejection of, a protest against the crimes and injustices of war and political tyranny which threaten to destroy the whole race of man [sic] and the world with him. By my monastic life and vows I am saying NO to all the concentration camps, the aerial bombardments, the staged political trials, the judicial murders, the racial injustice, the economic tyrannies, and the whole socio-economic apparatus which seems geared for nothing but global destruction in spite of all its fair words in favour of peace. I make monastic silence a protest against the lies of politicians, propagandists and agitators.¹⁵

Should we find that this sounds somewhat negative in tone, Merton corrects that by saying:

If I say NO to all these secular forces, I also say YES to all that is good in the world and in man. I say YES to all that is beautiful in nature, and in order that this may be the yes of a freedom and not of subjection, I must refuse to possess any thing in the world purely as my own. I say YES to all the men and women who are my brothers and sisters in the world, but for this yes to be an assent of freedom and not of subjection.¹⁶

With that clear voice of Merton resounding in our ears we should now proceed to look in a little more detail at the life and writings of Thich Nhat Hanh. Nhat Hanh is a Vietnamese Buddhist monk who has also been a University Professor. He is the founder of The School of Youth for Social Service in Vietnam and he headed the Vietnamese

Peace Delegation in Paris during the Vietnam War. He has served as Vice Chairperson of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation. A mark of his commitment to issues of justice and peace is the recognition given him when Martin Luther King, Jr. nominated him for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Today, Thich Nhat Hanh lives in a small retreat/meditation Center in France where he teaches, writes, gardens and works to help refugees from oppression worldwide. He travels widely to give mindfulness retreats for war veterans, psychotherapists, environmentalists, social change activists and many others. He is the author of over sixty books including *Peace Is Every Step: The Miracle of Mindfulness*; *Zen Keys*; and *Love In Action*. You no doubt recognize that Nhat Hanh and Merton had much in common. Both were monks, poets, and authors, and both were deeply concerned with nonviolence, social, political and economic injustice in the world.

Just as Jim Forest gave me the story which I used to illustrate Merton's changing orientation to the world, so Forest gives me a story that admirably illustrates the connection of contemplation and social concern in Thich Nhat Hanh.

During 1968 Thich Nhat Hanh was on a speaking tour in the United States. After a lecture in the auditorium of a large Christian church in the St. Louis area a man stood up and asked with a very sarcastic tone: "If you care so much about your people, Mr. Hanh, why are you here? If you care so much for the people who are wounded, why don't you spend your time with them?" When he had finished, Forest recounts that he looked at Nhat Hanh with apprehension. What would he say? Forest says that the spirit of the war itself had suddenly filled the room, and it seemed hard to breathe. There was a deafening silence.

When Thich Nhat Hanh began to speak – quietly, with deep calm and a sense of personal caring for the man who had just attacked him. The words seemed like rain falling on fire: "If you want the tree to grow," he said, "it won't help to water the leaves. You have to water the roots. Many of the roots of the war are here, in your country. To help the people who are to be bombed, to try to protect them from this suffering, I have to come here." After this response, Nhat Hanh whispered something to the chairperson and walked quickly from the room...¹⁷

Knowing that something was wrong Forest followed him out and found Thich Nhat Hanh stood on the sidewalk struggling for air.

He eventually explained that he had been extremely upset and that he had wanted to respond with great anger but he had made himself breathe deeply and slowly so that he was able to respond in the way he did. In order to return to normal he had to leave the room. It was at this point that Forest realized that there was a real connection between the spiritual practice of simply breathing and the way one responds to the world.

Nhat Hanh's book *Zen Keys* illustrates well this connection between action and contemplation. He presents Zen as a practice that leads to awakening (you may remember that Merton's definition of Contemplation was "An awakening to all that is Real in all that is real"). This awakening or awareness is an awakening to the heart of reality, a necessary prior step to social action. Nhat Hanh concludes *Zen Keys* with a section on "Zen and the World of Today." He first outlines the problems of the modern world, speaking of overpopulation, famine, political repression, nuclear war and environmental pollution from industry and technology. He answers with "what we need is not another doctrine/system, but an awakening that can restore our spiritual strengths." We need a new civilization and he suggests that:

The first phase of this civilization must be to establish social conditions in which life can be lived in a human way. "Awakened" people are certainly going to form small communities where their material life will be simple and healthy, and time and energy will be devoted to spiritual concerns. These communities of mindful living will be like Zen monasteries with no dogma. In them, the sickness of the times will be cured and spiritual health will be renewed.¹⁸

The basic solution then is to be a development of a new culture in which we can discover our true selves and thereby be thoroughly human. It will be a civilization where genuine community life is possible. Such community is needed to counter the impersonal dehumanizing effect of the urban megalopolis of today.

In short, we all need to follow the path that Thomas Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh propose. It is the path of the transformation of our consciousness through the spiritual discipline of silence and solitude. They challenge us to see the world not as something "out there" to be overcome, but within each one of us. Prayer should awaken us to our interconnectedness with the universe and this places a responsibility upon us. The direction the world takes in providing what is necessary for all to live with human dignity depends on the

direction of our own lives. Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh teach us that in contemplation we recover our true self, which in turn provides the compassion which gives us our capability of living for the sake of the world.

My own experience over the last five years or so has revealed a need for the new civilization mentioned by Thich Nhat Hanh. We need the formation of communities that are both mystical and prophetic, encouraging and supporting those who are trying to live with a spiritual practice that is authentically contemplative. It was for this reason that I began The Monos Community, members of which are primarily, though not exclusively connected through our bi-monthly journal. In the face of a culture and church that is quite alien to contemplation we aim to support those who, inspired by the lives of Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh, endeavour to live a life of prayer that is not a forsaking of the world but precisely For the Sake of the World.

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