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## THOMAS MERTON: A PERSONAL ODYSSEY

More than ten years have passed since the death of Thomas Merton. Yet to many, he still seems very much alive. Merton was a multi-faceted individual. He was a monk, a priest, an author, a poet, a revolutionary, a peacemaker. Described as a saint by some, he is most often thought of as the Western model of a contemplative mystic. Merton's personal odyssey into mysticism will be explored in this essay.

Evelyn Underhill has described mysticism as "the art of union with Reality. The mystic is a person who has attained that union in greater or lesser degree; or who aims at and believes in such attainment."<sup>1</sup>

Christians proclaim that Reality to be God: thus, all searching for God may be termed mystical. Yet, mystics also testify to a unique profundity, to a direct union with God, to that which they have experienced personally. "This knowledge of God is not the kind stored in the memory bank nor in what might be termed intellectual conviction; it is rather understanding assimilated by experience into total being."<sup>2</sup>

The biography of Thomas Merton unfolds the story of his exploration and personal experience of mysticism. Merton's lifestyle, writings, contemplation, and even his death reveal a thirst for intimate union with God. Yet, the more he advanced in his journey, the more he became convinced that he must share his struggles and discoveries with others. "Reality exists for all; all may participate in it, unite with it, according to their measure and strength and purity of their desire."<sup>3</sup>

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1. Evelyn Underhill, *Practical Mysticism*, p. 3.

2. Raymond Bailey, *Thomas Merton on Mysticism*, (New York: Image Books, 1976), p. 88.

3. Underhill, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

*The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton's autobiography, gives the first hints of the breadth that was to form the backdrop of his personal search. Extensive travel, genuine wrestling with religious-spiritual questions, and an indefatigable search for truth and beauty all characterize the young Merton. During his Columbia University days, a number of different Protestant traditions attracted him. Yet these forms "lacked vigour and were too compromised for Merton to stake his integrity, his very life on. He was looking for that pearl of great price for which a man will abandon everything"<sup>4</sup> While at Columbia, Merton met Brahmachari, a Hindu monk. In Brahmachari, Merton perceived a clearly, lived mysticism, not just spoken about in mysterious undertones, but one lived in everyday life. This was one of Merton's first exposures to religious mysticism. Yet this same Hindu monk suggested that Merton explore the *Confessions* of St. Augustine and *The Imitation of Christ*. This was important as Merton was then experiencing an inner crisis of faith. In his *Journal*, Merton records:

From Gilson's *Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, I learned a healthy respect for catholicism. Then Huxley's *Ends and means* taught me to respect mysticism. Maritain's *Ends and Scholasticism* was another important influence, and Blake's poetry. Perhaps also E. Underhill's *Mysticism...* I was fascinated by Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (and), finally, Lahey's *Life of Gerard Manley Hopkins*.<sup>5</sup>

Merton became a Catholic in November of 1938, yet even becoming a Catholic did not solve and answer his questions. On the suggestion of a friend, he made a Holy Week Retreat at the Trappist monastery in Gethsemani, Kentucky. There, in 1941, he began to find some answers to his questions; he wrote "this is the centre of America. I had wondered what had held this country together, what has been keeping the universe from cracking in pieces and falling apart. It is places like this monastery—not only this one; there must be others."<sup>6</sup> This attraction, like a magnet, led Merton to enter the Trappist community at Gethsemani later in that same year. For a while he was just another

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4. Bailey, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

5. Merton, *Secular Journal*, Entry November 27, 1931, p. 268.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 183.

member of the order, learning to pray, to work, to live with the other monks.

Yet his gift and flair for writing brought him into the public eye soon afterwards with the publication of some of his poems and his autobiography, *Seven Storey Mountain*. Merton was surprised at the fame his writings brought, and attributed this to his ability to write down what other people, as well as he, felt about God and about life.

As a monk, much time was spent in prayer. Merton began to realize that prayer was to bring him into dialogue, and hopefully, union with Reality. His books, like his prayers, reveal an intense effort to come closer to God. Merton described contemplative prayer as:

man entering into the deepest centre of himself and then passing through that centre to his true self where he discovers the freedom that is his as a son of God...to achieve this self, there is need for renunciation and sacrifice in man's life of prayer.<sup>7</sup>

Freedom achieved through inner solitude and prayer was the keynote of Merton's life. It was through this freedom that he discovered God. And approaching God, he began to share this growing relationship with others. This growth has been described as:

a gradual unfolding and a more explicit awareness in the full understanding of the message of spirituality, namely man's life is a continuous seeking of God and finding Him by love and sharing that love with other men. Such a unified message is evident in his theology of contemplative prayer. To seek and find God by love and share that love with other men through a concern for the paramount issues of humanity were the life-long preoccupations of Merton's life of prayer.<sup>8</sup>

Prayer became the centre of Merton's search. Raymond Bailey<sup>9</sup> in his study of Merton's mysticism contends that he "pre-

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7. Higgins, "Theology of Prayer," *Cistercian Studies*, p. ix.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. x-xi.

9. See Bailey's *Thomas Merton on Mysticism* for an indepth analysis of Merton's Mysticism.

sented little in the way of original thought. His great contribution...was the synthesizing and contemporizing of ancient and universal truths."<sup>10</sup> "The seeds of his mystical thought were present germinally even before he entered the monastery, and grew to full bloom in interaction."<sup>11</sup>

At Gethsemani, Merton did an extraordinary amount of reading, both for the official positions (Professor of Scholastics, Master of Novices) and his own spiritual development. This aided in his decision to work for ordination in 1949, a major turning-point in his life.

By his ordination, Merton passed through the first level (of mystical ascent), the period of struggle and external activity, and entered the second, that of fraternal union or peace with his brothers. A measure of freedom had been achieved and he knew he was on the border of a new experience.<sup>12</sup>

He felt this fraternal union with his monastic brothers, especially, during the celebration of Mass. This was a new plateau for him, where deepening occurred. "A few months of Mass have emptied me more and filled me more than seven years of monastic asceticism."<sup>13</sup> This oneness with others was of great importance in his own spirituality for "the sense of grace that overwhelmed him in the Mass evoked a sense of the potential oneness of God's love, solitude, and society...this solitude was shared with Christ as (all) were united in true priesthood of God."<sup>14</sup>

Now Merton nourished his burgeoning spirituality by turning to the classical writings of the West. He had been introduced to St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross during his Columbia days. Yet his initial impressions were not sympathetic. It was not until the 1950's that he began to assimilate the riches of a variety of mystics. His *Ascent to Truth* gives import to the Spanish mystics of the 16th century, especially John of the Cross. He marvelled at the spiritual relationship between St. John and St. Teresa. He felt that each helped the other draw closer to God.

10. Bailey, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

13. Merton, *Sign of Jonas*, (London: Burns and Oates, 1961), p. 187.

14. Bailey, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

When two mystics are friends, there arose between them a remarkable indwelling which enabled them to say, one to the other: As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love. (John 15:9)<sup>15</sup>

It was this deep love which Merton yearned to share with others.

His works of the early fifties reveal respect for the Scholastics. "His writings are replete with references to St. Thomas as the guarantor of the orthodoxy of the mystics."<sup>16</sup> The book which most reflects this spirit is the *Ascent to Truth*. During this time, Merton also began to speak of a "oneness" which enveloped all—nature, history, society and God. Yet, he continued to write of the solitude that men need to realize this total unity. In "*Seeds of Contemplation, No Man is an Island, and Thoughts in Solitude*, he advocated solitary experience for all. Every man who is to discover his personhood needs true solitude."<sup>17</sup> Merton began to feel that he did not have enough solitude at Gethsemani. With all his writing and its connected correspondence, he longed for a more solitary lifestyle. Yet it was ten years before he could move to the more secluded life of his isolated hermitage at Gethsemani.

Merton's study of the classic mystics deepened. Near the end of the fifties, Merton became attracted to the English mystics, especially Julian of Norwich. "While his enthusiasm for the theology of the Spanish mystics does not diminish, his work has less of the melancholy tone of the sombre Spanish and more of the serene joyousness and sunny hopefulness of Julian."<sup>18</sup> In *Mystics and Zen Masters*, Merton wrote that the English mystics "have a charm and simplicity that are unequalled by any other school...they are generally quite clear and down to earth, and practical even when they are concerned with the loftiest of matters."<sup>19</sup> Reflecting his appreciation for Julian, Merton described her mystical theology as:

all-embracing totality and fullness of Divine love. That is, for her, the ultimate Reality, in the light of which all

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15. W. Johnson, *Silent Music*, p. 149.

16. Bailey, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

17. Bailey, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

19. Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, (N.Y.: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967), p. 128.

created being and all the vicissitudes of life and of history fade into unimportance. Not that the world and time, the cosmos and history are unreal: but their Reality is only a revelation of love.<sup>20</sup>

Being unified with this Reality, with God, a God of love is central to all Merton's writings of this period. Yet, he does find himself criticized:

for presenting the impression that such union with God can only come to a man who lives and works in a monastery...during this period Merton himself was preoccupied with arriving at a deep and intimate union with God in his own life. Such a union demands a solitude, a silence, a certain estrangement from the world. However, once he realized his own personal sonship with a loving God, he also came to the realization of his oneness with all the other sons of God in the mystical Christ. And it was this realization that led to his more explicit concern for the larger issues of humanity—the searching for new ways to bind men together in unity, love and in peace—that was so much a part of his later writings.<sup>21</sup>

Solitude fostered self-discovery. Self-discovery clarified Merton's growing sense of vocation to share his spiritual quest with others. "Everyone has a vocation to be someone: but he must understand clearly that in order to fulfil this vocation, he can only be one person: himself."<sup>22</sup> Flowing directly from his personal spiritual discovery, Merton could testify:

We exist solely...to be the place where He has chosen for His presence, His manifestation in the world, His epiphany,...if we once began to recognize, humbly but truly, the real value of our own self, we would see that this value was the sign of God upon our being, the signature of God on our being. Fortunately the love of our fellow man is given us as the way of realizing this...<sup>23</sup>

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20. *Ibid.*, p. 141.

21. Higgins, *op. cit.*, pp. xvi-xvii.

22. Merton, *New Seeds of contemplation*, (London: Burns & Oates 1964), p. 21.

23. Merton, "As Man to Man" *Cistercian Studies*, pp. 93-4.

Here "emerges in his thought the unity metaphysic of his mysticism. It is humanity that contains man."<sup>24</sup> Therefore, he could most naturally say: "Every man is a piece of myself...for I am a part and a member of mankind."<sup>25</sup>

New directions began to be taken by Merton in the early sixties. Addressing the problem of the Vietnam War and the lack of peace and harmony throughout the world, he called attention to the ancient stance of "non-violence." *Gandhi on Non-Violence* reflects Merton's most striking thoughts on this matter.

The poet, the artist, the revolutionary, the peacemaker, and especially the mystic all seemed to come together when Merton turned to Asian sources. His remarkable translation of *The way of Chuang-Tzu*, his *Mystics and Zen Masters*, and *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* all served to deepen a growing thirst for Asian wisdom. His celebrated correspondence with D.T. Suzuki proved to be an especially helpful source of clarification and correction. Now with appreciation, Merton could write:

mystics whether Christian or non-Christian strive for an experience of metaphysical or mystical self-transcending; and at the same time an experience of...the absolute... not so much as object but as subject.<sup>26</sup>

In the autumn of 1968, Merton set off on a journey to Asia, a longed-for journey which would give him an opportunity to encounter Asian monasticism first-hand. His enthusiasm for this trip knew no bounds. His letters and conversations with friends show the importance he attached to this journey. This enthusiasm continued throughout the journey as he recorded:

Many of the monasteries, both Thai and Tibetan seem to have a life of the same kind as was lived...at Cluny in the Middle Ages; scholarly, well-trained, with much liturgy and ritual. But they are also specialists in meditation and contemplation ...This is what appeals to me most... I hope I can bring back to my monastery something of

24. Bailey, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

25. Merton, *No Man is an Island*, (London: Hollis & Carter, 1955), p. 16.

26. Merton, "What is it that has a Transcendental Experience?" p. 5.

the Asian wisdom with which I am fortunate to be in contact.<sup>27</sup>

Again, the desire to share his spiritual findings appears.

The depth and breadth of Merton's insight into the East may be sensed by his remarks on Zen:

Zen is a consciousness unstructured by particular form or particular system, a transcultural, transforming consciousness. It is in a sense "void." But it can shine through this or that system, religious or irreligious just as light can shine through glass that is blue, green, red or yellow.<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, he frequently compared:

the ecstasy of Satori with the terrifying encounter with the Absolute. It is like 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...one must qualify (it with): 'No, not like that, not like this.'<sup>29</sup>

Perhaps this is a clue which suggests where Merton's spiritual odyssey both ends and begins. As his biographer, Brother Patrick Hart records:

Merton sought fullness of man's inheritance; this inclusive view made it impossible for him to deny *any* authentic scripture or any man of faith. Indeed he discovered new aspects of truth in Hinduism, in the Madhyamika system which stood halfway between Hinduism and Buddhism, and in Zen...this lifelong search for meditative silence and prayer was found not only in his monastic experience, but also in his late Tibetan inspiration.<sup>30</sup>

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27. Merton, *Asian Journal*, p. 325.

28. Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, p. 4.

29. Bailey, *op. cit.*, p. 197.

30. Merton, *Asian Journal*, 'Introduction' by Bro. Patrick Hart, p. vii.



Merton is a man who turned away from no thing, no one, no faith, for all proved to be paths to Reality.

### Epilogue

The story of Thomas Merton is the odyssey of one man longing for the Real, the Absolute, God. His life attests:

that it is possible for human beings to love, know and... to become actually identified with the Ground (God). That to achieve this unitive knowledge, to realize this supreme identity, is the final end and purpose of human experience. That there is a law or Dharma which must be obeyed, a Tao or Way, which must be followed, if men are to achieve their final way. That the more there is of I, me, mine, the less there is of the Ground; and that, consequently, the Tao is a Way of humility and compassion, the Dharma a law of modification and self-transcending awareness.<sup>31</sup>

In his final letter, wrote Thomas Merton:

Our real journey in life is interior: it is a matter of growth, deepening and of an ever greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts.<sup>32</sup>

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31. A. Huxley, *Time Must Have a Stop*, p. 293-4.

32. Merton, *Asian Journal*, p. 296.

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