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Thomas Merton as Theologian: An Appreciation

Lawrence S. Cunningham

He was not a scholar, not an historian; he was an expert in nothing. And he knew it, and he didn’t want to be.

Dom Jean Leclercq

So I thought it quite fit, appropriate, to call him a Catholic Geshe. This name means "scholar" or "learned one."

The Dalai Lama

He was a monk; he was in touch. He was never, not for a moment relevant or efficient, those catch basins for waste and want.

Daniel Berrigan

The title heading this essay is somewhat misleading since Thomas Merton was not a theologian in any conventional sense of the term nor did he ever claim to be one. A theologian, at least in the traditional Catholic circles of Merton’s time, was almost always a cleric and a seminary professor who reflected on theological truths within the perspective of scholastic methodology in order to pass on to a new generation the fruits of that reflection. More realistically, most Catholic theologians, at least in this country, simply glossed the standard texts of scholastic theology served up by such standard authors as the French Sulpician priest, Adolphe Tanqueray (1854-1932) in order to force feed future priests enough theology to carry on their pastoral duties. Few other persons, religious or lay, studied theology, and fewer still aspired to teach it. The universal loathing for this “manual theology” today should not blind us as to its near ubiquity only a generation ago.

When Thomas Merton entered Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky in December 1941, he intended not only to become a monk but a priest as well. He was ordained in 1949. In that eight-year interval from entrance to ordination, he studied the regular theological course in the monastery while, at the same time, writing voluminously on projects for the monastic community as well as readying for publication volumes of his own poetry. His autobiography, The Seven Storey Mountain (1948), was, to the
delighted amazement of his publisher, a huge best seller. Merton, in the relative obscurity of his monastic home, had become, improbably, a celebrity.

Until his death in 1968 Thomas Merton published an astonishing amount of poetry, literary criticism, monastic history, translations, critical essays on everything from Shaker furniture and Zen mystics to the problems of racism and pacifism. Only now are we getting the publication of his letters, eventually to fill five volumes, while posthumously published works of Merton have regularly appeared with no apparent end in sight. Few have read all of his writings, but, having read most of them, it seems clear to me that Thomas Merton wrote nothing that could be called theology in the traditional sense of the word, even though his writings, especially his earlier ones, show a clear grasp of, and influence from, scholastic theology. The one book that he did write which was heavily indebted to scholastic methodology, *The Ascent to Truth* (1951), was not a very successful one; in 1967, when Merton looked back over his literary production, he put it in the category of “fair”—just two notches up from “awful” and “bad.”

Let me not labor an obvious point: Thomas Merton was not a theologian in any obvious sense of the term. There is, however, another way of understanding the word *theology*. From the time of the ancient Greeks (Hesiod uses the word) *theologia* could mean simply “talk of the gods.” In the formative years of the Christian mystical tradition, the term *theologian* meant something quite distinct from that later understanding of the theologian as a rigidly dialectical thinker. The great fourth century monastic writer and mystic Evagrius of Pontus put the matter squarely when he appealed to the old Greek sense of theology as “God talk.” Evagrius wrote, in a passage often quoted by Thomas Merton, that “if you are a theologian you pray in truth; if you pray in truth, you are a theologian.” The theologian, in the Evagrian sense of the term, is one who speaks of God with the authority of experience.

If one thinks of a theologian in that way, then we cannot only justify our essay’s title but add, further, that in that sense Thomas Merton was probably the greatest theologian that this country produced in the twentieth century. It should be noted that Merton was perceived as playing many roles: there was Thomas Merton the critic or the poet or the spiritual director or the political
activist. Merton, however, saw himself, and defined himself, as a monk. That was who he was, and it was in his monasticism that he defined himself as a person.

Monasticism has been an integral part of the Christian tradition from its very beginnings, but in the American Catholic church the role of monasticism has been a curiously unappreciated one. The church in America has had an activist image with a good part of its energies channeled into the twin tasks of accommodating its own growth since the last century and defining its place in American culture as it absorbed and acculturated the largely immigrant membership which accounted for much of that growth. When Thomas Merton came to the public attention of the American church in 1948 with the publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain* he was very much an anomaly. This somewhat rootless convert, raised in France and effortlessly bilingual, had an English and Ivy League education, spoke to the American church about rather arcane religious values that seemed, only in retrospect, curiously compelling: silence, recollection, austerity, conversion of heart, and resistance to the values of the world. Furthermore, he lived in a rural monastery whose roots were more European than American. This was no go-getting Jesuit from Fordham or All American college priest who loved God and Notre Dame football. Thomas Merton was a long way from the Bing Crosby of "Going My Way" or the priest hero of Henry Morton Robinson's *The Cardinal*, a best selling novel of 1950.

What explains the appeal of this rather esoteric figure in the American Church? My conviction, simply stated, is that Thomas Merton spoke with the authenticity of the experiential theologian about the experience of God, and, further, he did it in such a way that he uncovered a whole tradition that was largely lost to the American church so preoccupied with the problems of brick and mortar. More specifically, Thomas Merton touched on three basic issues which would become, in time, burning concerns for American Catholics.

In the first place, Thomas Merton, perhaps more than any other Catholic writer in this century, demonstrated that one could navigate a middle ground between what Jay Dolan has called "devotional Catholicism" and the rather arid propositions of traditional scholastic theology. In now classic works like *New Seeds of Contemplation* (1961) Merton called Catholics back to the spiritual classics of the patristic and monastic tradition of
Catholicism. In a whole spate of books and articles he breathed vigorous life into that stream of Christian thought that was far older than scholasticism. It was a romantic theology, rooted in the Bible, the fathers, and the liturgy, restated for an age, to use Walter Lippman’s phrase, that had been deeply etched by the acids of modernity. As luck would have it, Merton wrote just at the time when biblical and liturgical renewal was gaining momentum in the post war church of the United States and Europe, a momentum which would see its great affirmation in the reforms of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s.

Secondly, Thomas Merton demonstrated that it was possible to twin contemplative asceticism and a thirst for social justice. His interest in such issues was a long one. Indeed, as late as 1941, after his conversion to Catholicism, he could not decide whether to seek a religious vocation or work in a settlement house in New York’s Harlem. By the late 1950s, albeit from the relative isolation of his rural Kentucky monastery, he was openly and passionately committed both to the cause of racial justice and to pacifism. He not only published a whole list of books and articles on social justice issues but carried on a lengthy correspondence and a sustained personal dialogue with activists like A. J. Muste, Wilbur "Ping" Perry, Daniel Berrigan, Joan Baez, Dorothy Day, and others. To this day, two decades after his death, the Peace movement, especially the religious side of it, still looks to his personal witness and his writings as sources of inspiration.

Thirdly, in the second half of this century Merton was the only American Catholic who fully understood the urgent need for substantial dialogue between religious believers and the larger world of humane culture. Merton spoke to that world not as a zealot who wished to convert but as a fellow participant who wished to discuss and learn. Not only did he write literary criticism and poetry himself, but he carried on an enormous correspondence with literary figures, ranging from Boris Pasternak to Henry Miller. His interest in Latin American poets was a sustained one. He saw nothing odd about giving the monks at Gethsemani Sunday conferences on the novels of William Faulkner or the poetry of Edwin Muir or Rainer Maria Rilke. The hefty volumes of his collected literary essays and his poetry (of the latter, Daniel Berrigan once wrote that one does not read, one climbs aboard) are only a partial witness to his interest in those areas.
That willingness to cross over to the world outside of Catholic culture was not restricted to the area of belles lettres. He was, in fact, famous (and extremely influential) for his sympathetic understanding of non-Christian religions (especially Buddhism), and his deep conviction that those traditions had much to teach the West about the search for, and experience of, the transcendent. That conviction is a given today, but it was novel and daring when Merton began to write about it. The ongoing dialogue between the spiritual traditions of East and West, so much a part of the current scene, owes a fundamental debt to the work of Thomas Merton.

In just those three areas of spirituality, social justice, and cultural criticism, Thomas Merton made a telling and lasting impact on Catholic America. The continuing impact of his books (their sale is enormous; no major work of Merton's is out of print beyond those which he wanted to see die a quiet death) shows that his popularity has not waned. Yet, it is a bit difficult to pinpoint the basis for that popularity. It is hard to point to this or that book as the crucial or pivotal text that fuels the interest in Merton, even though it is clear that he has produced a few works which have reached the status of spiritual classics. Nor is it this or that particular cause which he championed, even though those causes are pertinent and urgent today, that seems to mark him off as special. We can identify Gandhi, for instance, with peaceful resistance and non-violence, but there is no easy calculus which sums up Merton.

It may be that Thomas Merton, for all the importance of his writings, was more important by reason of the paradigmatic quality of his life. It is not that everyone wishes to emulate a monk; it is, rather, that when one finds someone who fully pursues the monastic charism there is a depth that speaks to every human being. The early church fathers spoke of the boldness (parrhesia) of the person who speaks compellingly of God. Merton had that boldness. What saved Merton from being merely intellectually promiscuous or a dabbler in ideas was that deep center of contemplative prayer that served as an anchor and as a center for all of his writing.

Merton the public man was, paradoxically enough, a deeply private person. It was only after his death, with the publication of his private letters, that we began to see just how deep and centered his life of prayer really was. In a letter, written,
characteristically enough, to a Sufi Muslim in Pakistan, Merton describes his prayer experience in terms that any student of mysticism will recognize immediately:

Strictly speaking, I have a very simple way of prayer. It is centered entirely on attention to the presence of God and to His will and love. . . . Yet it does not mean imagining anything or conceiving a precise image of God, for to my mind this would be a kind of idolatry. . . . There is in my heart this great thirst to recognize totally the nothingness of all that is not God. My prayer is then a kind of praise rising up out of the center of Nothing and Silence. . . . It is not "thinking about" anything but a direct seeking of the Face of the Invisible, which we cannot find unless we become lost in Him who is invisible. I do not ordinarily write about such things and I ask you to be discrete about it. But I write this as a testimony of confidence and friendship.4

It is that centered life that makes Merton not only an authentic theologian but an appealing model. And appeal he has. Having participated in a number of Merton symposia and other such academic tribal rites to read a paper on this or that aspect of his writing, I never cease to be amazed that no matter how abstruse the topic or forbidding the lecture topic such gatherings bring out large and wildly disparate kinds of folks. Some, of course, are academics, but many are not interested "professionally" in Merton studies. They are believers and agnostics, young and old, activists and housewives, the educated and the blue collar parents of families. All are drawn to the life of this monk, dead now these twenty years, who spent all of his mature life in the knob country of Nelson County, Kentucky. The brothers at the gatehouse at the monastery report the same thing. People show up on a regular basis to see the hermitage or to talk to someone who knew Merton or just to visit the monastery and sit in the church tribune for a bit.

Why? Because, I think, behind that impishly round face (Henry Miller once wrote Merton saying that he looked like an "old con"; Merton wrote back saying that he had been compared to Picasso and Henry Miller himself!) there was a fine intelligence anchored and nourished in the contemplative search for ultimate reality. Merton was living testimony to those who are convinced that the
transcendent search is not a bootless one. What Thomas Merton once wrote of that old enigmatic philosopher and mystic Heraklitos was surely true of Merton himself:

He refused to hold his peace and spoke out with angry concern for the truth. He who had seen “the One” was no longer permitted to doubt, to hedge, to compromise, and to flatter. To treat his intuition as one among many opinions would have been inexcusable. False humility was an infidelity to his deepest self and a betrayal of the fundamental insights of his life. It would have been above all a betrayal of those whom he could not effectively contact except by the shock paradox. Heraklitos took the same stand as Isaias who was commanded by God to “blind the eyes of the people” by speaking to them in words that were too simple, too direct, too uncompromising to be acceptable.5

Merton, like Heraklitos, was a man of paradox, but not all of the paradoxes were of his own making. Perhaps the greatest paradox of all began when the young Thomas Merton joined the Cistercian monks at Gethsemani to flee from a world which he saw as decadent and evil. His goal in life was to disappear into the hidden life of prayer and contemplation. In his mature years as a monk he began to redefine his own monastic vocation: to be a monk was to be a person at the margins; to be irrelevant. A few weeks before his death he wrote that his call was to be a monk and a monk was a “marginal” person who withdraws deliberately to the margins of society with a view of deepening fundamental human experience.6 That was written in 1968 at a time when, in both church and society, the cry for relevancy was at its peak. The paradox is that the socially relevant clerics of the 1960s are now, at best, footnotes to church history while the irrelevant monk is still an inspiration and a model for others who thirst for that deepened experience of being human.
NOTES


2 The earliest instance I have found of Merton's use of this phrase is in his foreword to Raissa Maritain's Notes on the Lord's Prayer (New York: Kenedy, 1964).


