

Thomas Merton 1915-1968

AN APPRECIATION OF HIS LIFE AND WORK, BY ONE WHO KNEW HIM.

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THE death at the age of fifty-three of Father Louis, as he was named in religion, while taking part in a multi-monastic conference at Bangkok—an early report said he was the victim of an accident caused by contact with a defective electric fan, while a later version spoke of unsuspected heart trouble—sent a feeling of shock round the world. For many people Thomas Merton had stood for what was most hopeful in the Catholic Church and this was true even of some who were critical of things he wrote, for he was a most prolific author of books and articles; rather too prolific as some had thought.

Among those persons whose interest in "dialogue" between the religions which hitherto have shared the allegiance of mankind goes beyond superficial expressions of goodwill, regret at the sudden passing of this man will be felt with especial poignancy; for many had come to see, with Thomas Merton, that this unprecedented intercourse across what formerly seemed like impenetrable religious barriers corresponds to a very present spiritual necessity, one which itself is a bi-product of the crisis through which the Christian Churches, and other religions in greater or lesser degree, are passing at the present time. To be able (and willing) to recognise the action of the Spirit wherever and howsoever it chooses to manifest itself—whether within or without the circle of one's own personal and traditional loyalties—this has in fact become one of the prime conditions for regaining one's intellectual balance in a world which has virtually discarded all that the word "religion" stands for. More particularly, this power of recognition constitutes an almost indispensable qualification for anyone wishing to follow a contemplative discipline today, whether under one of the accepted monastic forms, as with Father Thomas Merton, or else while remaining in the lay state and practising, for instance, the "Jesus Prayer", or any other corresponding form if a non-Christian way be in question.

A great heresy of our time, one to which many other current errors can be referred directly or indirectly, is the belief now being propagated on all sides that God is not approachable except by way of human love and service; in practice, it is especially in collective form that this love is expected to be applied—a Marxist touch most characteristic of the times. In other words, it is argued that of Christ's two commandments, love of God and love of neighbour, it is the second which alone can render the first effective, so much so that love of God can practically be ignored as hardly imposing any claims in its own right; thus regarded it becomes an abstraction to which it is unnecessary to pay serious attention.

The traditional teaching of all the great religions, on the other hand, declares just the opposite, namely that the love or service of mankind, or indeed any desirable activity at

the level of this world, can only become effective as a means of salvation in function of a prior love of God, whereof it will be a reflection as to its intention and a symbolical enactment in the realm of human intercourse. The order in which Christ named his two commandments therefore remains principal: to reverse the emphasis, whether explicitly or else by ignoring the prior term, is to divorce one's own attempts to carry out that second commandment from their empowering cause, thus condemning them to a kind of illegitimacy; it is to spread the smear of idolatry over all one does in this world, since this is what idolatry really means, namely to value things apart from God as if they were self-created and self-subsistent. As God's creations they can (and must) be loved and served within the limits imposed by their respective natures, their *svadharma* as Hindus would say, that which displays the divine purpose behind each form and determines for each being its intrinsic vocation. Regarded in this way, love of creatures both derives from the love of God and leads back to it, and that is why Christ was able to say, of the second commandment, that it is "like unto" the first. An effect always retains something of its cause, from which moreover it never becomes entirely dissociated. In its own order, the love of "neighbour" is a necessary expression of the love of God, but this fact certainly does not make it co-extensive with the possibilities of that love either in theory or practice.

From all this, it should be sufficiently apparent that the field for the exercise of the love of God corresponds, for human beings, to the Contemplative Life under its various aspects—prayer, meditation, communion with Nature (for this too belongs here) and that ineffable state of recollection that makes the saint; while the field for the exercise of the love of neighbour (taking this word in its universal sense, as embracing all creation "down to the last blade of grass" as Buddhism puts it) corresponds to the Active Life of men in the world. As for liturgy and the sacramental life under all its forms, this displays something of both lives or loves, seeing that its exercise does not go without action outwardly directed, yet its context and motivation remain implicitly contemplative, failing which any ritual action would become virtually unintelligible.

It is in the light of the *foregoing* considerations that the life of Thomas Merton has to be viewed; for that life to deliver its message in a form answering to our condition it has to be read in the context of the cardinal truth concerning the essential primacy of Contemplation to which he clung during all his years as a monk and of which he was always trying to deepen awareness at whatever cost to himself. Nor did he merely regard this as the special concern of a monastic vocation, for (as he told me himself) he considered this to be the greatest lack of the world today. From this conviction he never swerved; we must not let ourselves be deceived, on this score, by a number of dubious opinions he allowed himself to voice at times, opinions which caused many people to dub him a "modernist", whether with approval or otherwise. Despite an openness of mind which sometimes took an imprudent turn—even to the point of unwitting, lapse into error—and despite his castigation of the many intellectual and moral evasions that had become conventional in the Christian Church, the one thing Thomas Merton never did was to surrender his soul to the "activist" trend now in vogue, of which an anti-metaphysical, anti-contemplative, anti-traditional and anti-symbolical bias is the sinister hallmark.

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My own acquaintance with Thomas Merton dates from the year 1963, when we were put in touch by a third party in connection with an article of mine he thought Father Merton would find of particular interest, as proved to be the case. This first encounter started a correspondence between us which gradually grew more frequent and intimate; his own evident fondness for Buddhistic ways of thinking and not thinking—the second especially—helped further to foster a mutual sympathy. Soon we were exchanging books; I sent him one of mine, and several by other authors: among the latter was included *A Moslem Saint of the Twentieth Century* by Martin Lings (Allen and Unwin) which contains some marvellous English renderings of poems by the saint in question, the Algerian Shaikh Ahmad al-‘Allawī, one of the great Masters of Sufism. His life, and especially his poems, so moved Father Merton that he decided forthwith to take them as a subject for intensive meditation: this was typical of the man—he would plunge for the pearl of great price the moment he caught sight of it.

Reciprocally, Father Merton sent me a wide selection from his own earlier works, including the autobiographical volume *The Seven Storey Mountain* describing his entry into the Catholic Church and his subsequent urge to embrace a monastic discipline. After that, other things of his followed at intervals: separate papers on a variety of subjects, collections of essays, some poetry, also one or two longer works dealing with questions of the day such as racial relations in American society and the question of war, concerning which his own views owed much to the Gandhian idea of "non-violent resistance". With all this material in my possession I was able to gain a considerable insight into the many-facetted structure of the author's mind.

In the fall of 1964, while touring in the States as a member of *The English Consort of Viols* I found myself, between two concerts, quite close to the abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky where Thomas Merton belonged; with the abbot's permission a meeting was arranged, the only meeting face to face we ever had. Never shall I forget that afternoon spent in his company pacing slowly round the wide courtyard adjoining the abbey buildings or else sitting under a great tree turned to sheer gold by the magic touch of the North American autumn. On that day I got the clearest impression that I was with a man who walked with the Spirit and this impression has not been dimmed with the passage of time.

Thomas Merton was a man who, to judge by what he said by word of mouth and in private letters, was clearly opposed to the "dynamism" (his own word) now become fashionable in the Church which, for all its claims to teach, seems unaccountably eager to take its cue from the profane world; even in his own Cistercian Order, so he said, the change of outlook during the last few years had been almost unbelievable; walls and rules were quite powerless to keep the worldly influences at bay. A rekindling of the genuinely contemplative spirit in such manner as to affect both teachings and the way those teachings shall be lived, by this means alone could the Christian Church hope to find its soul again; but, as he also told me once, those who have it in them to voice this unpopular truth can have little expectation of being listened to, yet speak of it they must.

Given these views, one may well ask how came it about that our author, when

expressing himself *in print*, often resorted to phraseology which, given the bias of the times, was bound to be read in the sense of a concession to that very relativism and activism he privately disavowed? That such was the case is proved both by the praise he won from so-called "progressives" with whose opinions he was at variance and, conversely, by the criticisms he incurred at the hands of persons to whom he stood much closer as to essentials and who, for this very reason, were surprised at what appeared like unaccountable intellectual inconsistencies on the part of a man they otherwise esteemed highly.

The fact is that Thomas Merton was very much of a "traveller" in the realms he had set out to explore with such unquestionable ardour. Rigorous discrimination was not always his strong point, so that he easily let his enthusiasms outrun his perspicacity. When the subject being written about has a spiritual bearing, this only makes it doubly incumbent upon an author to weigh his words, and all the more so since nowadays so many words and terms formerly precise have become vague by dint of loose usage or, worse still, have developed false overtones by reason of their employment by persons of tendentious intent. To guard against these dangers one has to be fully conscious of all that is at stake, which also means one has to train oneself in the rigorous use of language in a degree that goes much beyond a mere question of good literary technique. Failure in this respect will usually imply some kind of sentimental intrusion into the intellectual field causing at least a momentary obscuration in the thinking mind of the individual concerned.

It would be easy to spread oneself in a detailed analysis of Thomas Merton's many sided activities as a writer, those which earned him his reputation with the world at large, but this is not the purpose of the present study; if these have been mentioned to some extent, this was in order to clear the ground for consideration of what became for him in the end a virtually exclusive concern, namely the search for a perfect contemplativity in God. In pursuit of this aim, which had led him into the Trappist Order in the first place, he was prepared to jettison whatever might seem, at any given time or stage of the way, to have become a factor of distraction; the only limits he would recognise in this respect were the obligations imposed by his monastic vow of obedience which he always observed with the utmost strictness in the knowledge that what other people might regard as irksome restrictions, when freely accepted, but served to canalise a man's spiritual activity thus giving it all the greater force, as happens to a stream hemmed in closely by high rocky banks. His colleagues at the Bangkok conference, in reporting his death to the abbot of Gethsemani in a tone of mixed sadness and joy, summed him up well when they said "here indeed was a true monk".

It is from this overwhelming urge to lose himself in God that Thomas Merton's interest in Eastern religions primarily stemmed. Within the Christian mystical tradition he had already found a model to attract him among the Desert Fathers of Egypt during the early centuries as revealed in their legends; soon he was discovering parallels between what he read there and the meditational practices of Hindu and Buddhist contemplative saints. The essential association of *Guru* and disciple taken for granted in all the Oriental initiations was something which, as he soon perceived, had practically disappeared from the Christian scene—certainly as far as the Latin Church is concerned—and he was convinced that this absence of qualified instruction represented a spiritual lacuna of the

most serious kind: too much had been sacrificed to the collective interest at its most mediocre and this largely accounted for the present defencelessness of Christian faith in the face of materialist and humanist pressures. Christian doctrine had become too abstract, it lacked the dimension of "method" which, as Mahāyāna Buddhism continually stresses, is necessary if wisdom is to ripen in effective fruit. Led on by his wish to restore the missing dimension he read all he could lay his hands on of the Eastern traditions and it was in the direction of Zen Buddhism, as presented in the works of the late Dr. D. T. Suzuki, its eminent spokesman to the West, that Father Merton felt himself immediately drawn; a personal meeting with Dr. Suzuki, for whom he developed a great feeling of reverence, helped to deepen his understanding still further.

The reasons why Zen had such a strong appeal for Thomas Merton are not difficult to divine: for one who had received his schooling between the solid four walls of Latin Scholasticism, cemented all over, as these are, with syllogisms—the advantages of such a schooling are far from negligible—the contrast offered by Zen could be both refreshing and illuminating; just as it could become merely disruptive, as frequently happens to Westerners who approach Zen from the angle of a Christian faith that has collapsed on them. Deprived of their normal traditional background, these people are apt to seize on a few tag-ends of a noticeably paradoxical kind and think that here is the essential; to the travesty that results they then give the name of Zen and proceed to inflict it on others under that label.

The great value of Zen, when rightly appreciated, as of Buddhism generally, is that it acts as an antidote to the poison of a too persistent conceptualism. The philosophism inherited from the Greeks, the Roman legalism and lastly the collectivist obsession are all factors which, historically speaking, have operated to Christianity's great detriment, with the modern anti-religion as their end product. Whatever helps to free the mind from the intellectual cramping these things spell in the aggregate will be to the good: it is here that a sound knowledge of Eastern teachings and methods can be so valuable to a Christian today, as Thomas Merton clearly perceived, and that is why he never missed an opportunity to widen his own knowledge, with a special emphasis on Buddhism. A collection of essays on Zen of recent date (*Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, a New Directions book) testifies to the depth to which his mind had been able to penetrate this side of the Buddhist wisdom.

If one were asked to define in a few words the aim which Thomas Merton kept in view, letting it determine for him, to the best of his ability, both actions and abstentions and relations with his fellow-beings, this aim could be summed up in the phrase "the uninterrupted practice of the Presence of God". All through his life as a monk, in fact, he had been feeling his way towards a fulfilment of a contemplative vocation that would go further than just the observance of a very strict monastic discipline coupled with a piety content to float upon the surface of things. As the years passed he became ever more concerned with the fact that the old-time defences against the intrusions of "the world" were ceasing to work because the conditions which in past centuries had made them work, at least on an average showing, no longer applied. The hitherto coherent structure of Christian tradition was suffering a disintegration inconceivable to those who drew up the ancient rule; on all sides the dykes were being eroded, gaping breaches were appearing in every direction. All this was no cause for despair, however—for a man like

Thomas Merton such words as optimism and pessimism hold little meaning—but rather was it an occasion for a frank and fearless questioning of conventional assumptions and, still more, for testing one's own intellectual and moral attitudes in the fire of an unflinching self-examination. Above all, it was an occasion for deepening one's communion with God or, in other words, for rendering one's contemplative professions real; if Church and world were in crisis, this was no excuse for neglecting this innermost work which, did people but know it, provides their surest hope.

Some considerable time prior to receiving the astonishing call that took him to the East, he had asked his abbot's consent to his withdrawing into a hermitage in order to give himself up to a life of solitary meditation and prayer; that this would incidentally curtail his activities as a writer whether of articles and books or of private letters was evident; in fact during that period I only heard from him once very briefly. Just before going into retreat at the hermitage he wrote to me that he was pulling out from various movements with which his name had been publicly associated; as he then said, many of those who had regarded his participation as a great asset would feel disappointed and would most probably misconstrue his motives for thus retiring into solitude, an act which, for them, might well savour of "quietism", not to say "selfishness"; nevertheless he was convinced that his vocation required of him this step and that if it caused misunderstanding in the minds of some, this was an incidental cross that had to be accepted. There things remained until the summons came to attend the conference in the East, that East which by now had come to mean so much to Thomas Melton but which he never hoped to see and from which he was fated never to return.

One of the first things he did after being informed of his assignment was to consult me about possible contacts both in Japan where I have one or two personal connections and in India where I have many, mostly in Sikkim and among the Tibetan refugee community. This first request for introductions was followed by another in which he put a number of far-reaching questions about how best to proceed once he reached the Asiatic scene. To which I answered that to do full justice to these questions a discussion by word of mouth would be desirable, for which reason I invited him to travel via Europe so that he might spend at least some days with me here in London. The course of *karma* did not run this way for him, however, and he replied that it was already too late to alter existing arrangements which were that he should cross the Pacific from California, with the result that we were never able to meet again, much as we both desired it.

Not long after his arrival in India Father Merton, piloted by a friend, was received in audience by the Dalai Lama at his place of residence at Dharmasala in the Panjab hills; this meeting, during which the deeper implications of a monastic vocation was the chief subject of discussion, was twice repeated at His Holiness' own wish. Soon after that, Father Merton moved over to Darjeeling with the intention of visiting Sikkim where he was already awaited as a result of my letters to friends there. In particular it was hoped he would spend some time with His Holiness the Karmapa Laina at his newly established centre at Rumtek, but unusually heavy rains followed by landslides which destroyed the bridges over the Tista river and disrupted local communications for several weeks prevented him from reaching this more distant objective. However it was during his stay in the hills of northern Bengal that he was destined to find what he had long been imagining but had never actually seen in the flesh—his contemplative ideal embodied in

a man, this is what Providence unexpectedly offered to Thomas Merton.

The Spiritual Master in question belonged to the initiatic family known as *Dzogchhen* ("great accomplishment") which is a branch of the *Nyingmapa* or "Order of the Ancients", the one that represents the original foundation of Buddhism in Tibet. By comparison with the much later "reformed" foundation of the *Gelugpa* (= Order of Virtuous Usage) to which the Dalai Lama belongs, the Nyingmapa remain relatively less strictly organised and correspondingly more open, on the one hand, to possible human laxities and, on the other, to the liberating influx of the Spirit "that bloweth where it listeth". In our time the great spiritual lights among the Tibetan Lamas have been most commonly (but not exclusively) found among the older "un-reformed" Orders.

In fact the Lama Father Merton met was one of those who passed for being slightly "queer", a description which among Tibetans is not accounted a reproach, but rather a sign of unwonted sanctity, of an intelligence going beyond ordinary human capacity; an Islamic parallel is to be found in the *Malamatiyah* or "men of blame", namely persons who display a certain outrageousness in their public behaviour which, however, masks a deeply contemplative spirit, the peace that passeth understanding. The ordinary people leave these Lamas alone, by reason of their strange ways, but reverence them nonetheless, feeling instinctively that their presence in the world is a great blessing in itself and a protection for the community on the fringe of which they dwell. The Taoists of China had much the same attitude: the Sage of crazy appearance is a well-known Taoist figure, whose contempt for conventional ties translates, not a disorder, but a norm in which all may participate, if indirectly. According to my informant, the Lama was of this kind.

There is no doubt that Thomas Merton was very deeply affected by his meeting with this Master, which he hoped to repeat later. His immediate response was to withdraw for four days to a secluded spot where he could recapitulate his experience in meditation. I happen to know the place, it lies surrounded by virgin forest full of birds and animals, like a forgotten corner of paradise waiting to welcome one that would fain recollect himself following a soul-stirring episode. From there Father Merton went on to the Bangkok conference where he met his end.

As for the Lama, he showed by unmistakable signs that he recognised in his visitor the qualities that belong to a true aspiration; after conversing with him for some time, his parting remark to Thomas Merton was "You have made me at last understand Christianity". To another European who came to see him soon after he said "now I know more about your religion than you do", in evident allusion to his meeting with Father Merton.

"You have made me understand Christianity": could a Christian monk about to die ask for any better epitaph than these words the sainted Nyingmapa Master spoke?

MARCO PALLIS.

(Original editorial inclusions that followed the essay:)

A man engaged in spiritual struggle should not only withdraw from all evil deeds, but should also try to be free from thoughts and ideas (opposed to the commandments and the will of God), and must always be occupied with salutary and spiritual recollections, remaining detached from all worldly cares.

St. Simeon.