

## Thomas Merton: the Once & Future Paradigm

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Mine...is a piety without a home; it survives the obsessive, annihilating image of universal disjointedness and, fortunately, allows me no safe superiority.

Czeslaw Milosz

A man has only to persist in refusal (to give his love to false gods), and one day or another God will come to him.

Simone Weil, *Science, Necessity and the Love of God*

### I. A True Man of Countless Titles

If the Zen master D.T. Suzuki was "True Man of No Title" as Thomas Merton once said of him in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, we might very well regard the monk/writer himself as "True Man of Countless Titles." To the outsider, the monk seemed to have been trying on numerous hats for size to see if they would fit; yet a reading of his writings would convince even the casual reader of the depth Merton was naturally able to enter into whatever tradition he was taking a fancy to at the moment.

Much as he assiduously studied the different traditions, what distinguished the American Trappist from others was that he savoured and cherished and was able to cull from them their richest fruits. Perhaps he was able to enter the richness of those traditions because he had the gift of understanding the natural gap between *knowing* and *loving* knowledge. His identification with others, particularly with the socially and politically downtrodden and those living on cultural

fringes, appeared at times so direct and naturally unadorned that he must have suffered intensely when he finally tasted the gift of their destitution. And I deliberately say gift because without it, the monk himself would have remained an outsider looking in and his writings would not have been filled with the compassion and anger that characterise them.

If the sense of oneness with others seemed second nature, Merton rarely, one felt, came upon this identification in any artificial or self-conscious way. For his openness, an inborn trait that with time transformed into meekness of heart, naturally appealed to those seeking a spiritual master. Yet, as his extensive correspondence suggests so well, he sought solace and insight from others as much as they did from him. In Merton, no matter how brilliantly he expostulates on a subject, one never quite gets the feeling that he has given you the definitive final answer. This is especially true in his strikingly bold Journals where there are as many questions as there are answers. My contention is that this apparent uncertainty lies in his ever-growing Christology and selfhood (neither of which can be understood without an understanding of the other) as well as deep belief in dialogue which he saw as an essential function of being. In one of many writings that reveal his simplicity of heart and faith in the necessity of dialogue anchored on the revelation of truth alone, he warns Christians of complacency and, in doing so, establishes new parameters in the practice of piety:

It is my belief that we should not be too sure of having found Christ in ourselves until we have found him also in the part of humanity that is most remote from our own. Christ is found not in loud and pompous declarations but in humble and fraternal dialogue. He is found less in a truth that is imposed than in a truth that is shared.<sup>1</sup> (Emphasis added)

The monk, driven by a deep conviction that Christ lived and breathed in all of us, especially among those most abandoned, possessed a toughness of mind that refused to accept mere contingencies for the authentic; on the other hand, he possessed a heart that could not help but love what he touched, beginning with his own Christianity. Some extraordinary spiritual tentacles led him to the vintage only, whether sweet, sour or bitter, which he found in hidden places; and he had the natural instinct for uncovering not only the esoteric but the obvious and the ordinary, though at times

he may have taken some rather extraordinary routes to get to where he got.

His knack for the discovery of universal spiritual treasures came from a strong resistance in refusing to settle down into any specific well-worn grooves or niches that were likely to shield the vintage. As a Christian monk, the heart of Christ was his 'Eternal Tao,' which in all its surface shabbiness he knew held the unimaginable splendour of the sacred and which informed and enlightened the heart of each person. This conviction made him live and love ever more nakedly and, obviously, *solitarily*, in the presence of the fully unfathomable New Law of the Gospels.

If Merton was unconventional and prophetic as a monk, it was not so much his odd idiosyncrasies but the ambiguous unconventionality of the ever radical and renewing Word of God that made him so. And what makes him all the more challenging for a Christian to grasp is that he regarded all authentic secular, intellectual and aesthetic worlds as signposts — one may even regard them as divine ciphers — leading him ever deeper into the heart of Christ. Further, his being ill-at-ease in seeing the world dualistically helped him to see the divine in the multifarious cultural manifestations. This atypical faith in the works of humankind also set him apart from other men and women of the spirit.

Constitutionally, Merton was unsettled, as it were, in the Emersonian sense of always being an outsider. What he saw he faithfully recorded without the usual pietistic sentiments that one would ordinarily associate with the religious. This faithfulness to his vision was unsettling to many who knew him personally or through his writings. Yet, in remaining true to himself he became, in time, the very paradigm of that full-grown man we see described by Lao Tzu in the *Tao Teh Ching*, who "sets his heart upon the substance rather than the husk; / Upon the fruit rather than the flower," and preferring "what is within to what is without."<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, one may justifiably ask, Should a monk or anyone else be anything else but a true man or woman of *Tao*?

The substance, the fruit and the within became so much an unflinching lighthouse that, almost by reflex, lit up from the inside whatever the monk touched, and made an otherwise dead past part and parcel of an ever-revealing Present, that asked for nothing more

than to be itself. He took his willing friends and readers into his formidable and sometimes knotty moral and spiritual world, not in order to make them over into little Mertons but challenging them to redefine their worn-out notions of culture and spirituality. The real boon of travelling with him on the crest of his noble and often evocative insights was the continuous discovery and, more truly, *recovery* of self in new yet strangely ordinary ways.

So far, we have suggested he did not deliberately lead anyone along some esoteric paths that put one above the masses; if he had an objective, it lay in the re-invention of what is in this particular point in one's history, individually and communally. He would have been one with his friend, Czeslaw Milosz, who wrote so plainly and profoundly on the matter of piety – which the future Nobel laureate felt was not a choice but a gift – and the almost always difficult consequences of trying to live out such a life. Note too how Milosz shares Merton's "unsettledness" in the following:

It seems to me that we are born either pious or impious, and I would be glad were I able to number among the former. Piety has no need of definition – either it is there or it is not. It persists independently of the division of people into believers and atheists, an illusory division today, since faith is undermined by disbelief in faith, and disbelief by disbelief in itself. The sacred exists and is stronger than all our rebellion... My piety would shame me if it meant that I possessed something others did not. *Mine, however, is a piety without a home; it survives the obsessive, annihilating image of universal disjointedness and, fortunately, allows me no safe superiority.*<sup>3</sup>  
(Emphasis added)

All the roles Merton played, including the principle ones of monk and writer, too, seemed more in the nature of distinct callings and their subsequent responses, rather than something derived from his own choosing, which would have narrowed their scope and objectives. Had they not been directed and commanded by some compelling voice from within – most assuredly, a Christian form of the Greek *daimonion* – he most surely would have been in danger of either condescension or masquerading in hats and outfits that he had hardly any business wearing. He seemed to have drunk so deeply from the well of humanity – almost indiscriminately putting on the variegated and seemingly clashing garments of humanity – and literally believed that the paschal Christ, in divesting himself of his divinity, had regained paradise for and made the brotherhood and

sisterhood of humanity no longer mere possibility but the *essential regained nature* of the human person, demanding full exploitation within the dimension of the New Man.

We may say that Merton recognized both the privilege and the cost of discipleship. The haunting words of Jesus in answer to the prophecy of Isaiah to his disciples must have both humbled and frightened the monk:

Blessed are your eyes, because they see, and your ears, because they hear. Truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and hear what you hear but did not hear it. (Matt. 13: 16-17)

By gently insinuating his love and compassion upon humankind, Christ makes it possible for each person to have a radical change of heart. This *metanoia*, or *reformatio vitae*, was, for Merton, the one essential element in any social, political or religious revolution. For it took the form of a continuous line heading outward, yet also inward, in its ever-expanding concern and search for the hidden, suffering Christ, crying to be heard in the more obscure and forgotten races and traditions both past and present, that Merton, the spiritual sojourner, was able to decipher in their purest cries of joy and agony.

To Merton, living the Christian life meant being privileged to witness the continuing work of Christ's redemption through God's creation, not so much from above but, as it were, *from below*. Our eyes and ears, particularly in the light of faith, are enlightened and informed in ways that ancient prophets and other men and women of good will were not privy to. For through collective human experience, of Christians and non-Christians, believers and non-believers and even atheists, we see and hear the contemporary message of Christ in a manner that would be alien even to the original disciples and eyewitnesses of the Paschal Mystery. This is no claim that we are greater than they were, only that we today are in a *privileged* position to view the unfolding consequences of the Incarnation and the dramatic, ongoing process of God's redemptive plan of personal and universal love from a broader and deeper historical perspective.

The scope of the brother-and-sisterhood of humanity today has grown immeasurably larger and more complex than in the past, even the proximate past when such a recent inhumane practice as

slavery, being rarely questioned except by a handful of courageous individuals, was accepted by whole races of people; or, when not long ago it was still fashionable to blame the death of Jesus on the entire Jewish race, which curiously, in the eyes of countless multitudes, justified their collective murder. Christians in our time are finally coming to terms with the universality of Christ, not through some proud and chauvinistic and, therefore, empty, claim but one that fully places the burden of good faith squarely on their shaky, often hypocritical historical shoulders; at the same time, Christians are asked to live concretely the painful ambiguities of belief that is an essential aspect of their life of faith in a God, Who, for reasons that only He knows, very often chooses to remain far more hidden than manifest.

If Christ is neither East or West, nor North or South, then what exactly is he? Among contemporary believers, there exists much confusion and pain. This surely stems from the hard fact that, first, Christians are now asked to hold a good deal more in their hearts and minds than what had been demanded of them in the past two millennia, and, secondly, the vast majority of Christians have not yet been able to come to terms with the full meaning – as defined by both the privilege and cost – of discipleship that this newer and existentially more challenging notion of universality demands of them. In fact, this confusion extends also to non-Christians, agnostics and atheists as well, for the model of the historical Christ in all its diverse levels and intricacies and ambiguities of meaning – whether the various realities of Christ are acknowledged or not – forms a critical part of our *inseparable collective human consciousness*.

There is no denying we have all come together, for the most part, unwittingly and probably unwillingly, finding ourselves suddenly responsible for one another; moreover, we come to realize we shall either die or survive as one mass humanity. This would be the mark of a growing humanism in the broadest sense; in the moral, spiritual Christian realm, we have simply hit upon the very traditional idea of the Mystical Body of Christ.

What is difficult to avoid is the reality of the paradigm of Jesus as a historical figure claiming to have taught a universal message to and for all humanity irrespective of race, country or religious belief. For the believing Christian seeking his or her divine Saviour, Christ as

the Everyman speaks, in a hidden way through each man and woman, the language – both linguistically and culturally – that rises from the very soil in which we find ourselves in our concrete lives. And, blessed indeed are those who are able to see and hear beyond all the cultural trappings and then to communicate back and share *substantially* what they have seen and heard.

The truly *seeing* Christian, it would seem, can no longer merely regard the other as even “like” Christ for, in his heightened state, he sees each person as Christ himself in both his passion and death and glorious risen state. In the end, it becomes quite clear that it is neither cultural accumulations nor deprivations that matter, as they can weigh us down. Rather, what does matter is that, in sharing our essential qualities with others, our authentic self is set free. It is this close and warm identification with the other in the sweet embrace of love and compassion rather than through some facile intellectual synthesis that brings about personal emancipation and selfhood. Was this not the truth that the life of solitude had brought home to Merton? The process may indeed begin with the will, but it ends with the will of the individual subsumed under a *greater likeness than itself*, which remains secret and hidden and to which we come to regard as *more us than we are ourselves*, as perhaps either Meister Eckhart in the West or Dr. Suzuki in the East might have said.

## II. “Stop seeking. Let it all happen!”

Particularly in his later anti-poetry, Thomas Merton seemed to have put on the vastly different and multiple lives – both consecutively and simultaneously – found among races of people, some very obscure, that few cared for, let alone understood or identified with. Yet, he was able to enter deferentially into their often long-forgotten and broken lives as one would expect a poet of compassion to do. Without self-consciousness the monk became the Desert Father, the Geshe, or the Sufi, or Chuang Tzu, Ishi, even the Zen master.

There is delight and surprise in following the manner in which Merton, shedding excess baggage and dead skins, became as it were increasingly more *weightless* and, paradoxically, more universal, the more he “put on Christ,” which became synonymous with putting on the numerous faces of humanity. From being accused of having a “strident ascetic tone”<sup>4</sup> as a young monk, Merton had soon travelled

millennia to become a trusted, warm, living, flesh and blood spokesman of the disenfranchised, of people agonizing to understand a world gone awry. Like John the Baptist, the harbinger, we see him as if crying from out of the wilderness and touching the raw chords of our own solitude, beyond words, beyond thought, even beyond conventional affectivity, in the midst of a fractured paradise he had fought so hard to regain in his own life. That recovery held the real key and gave his writings authentic weight. In *Cables to the Ace*, he wrote,

I think poetry must  
I think it must  
Stay open all night  
In beautiful cellars.<sup>5</sup>

Which is what he did for many: by keeping his capacity for inner experience in his own “cellar” open, he encouraged his readers to keep their own inner life active and well-lit even in darkest times. In many voices, he spoke with hope and a comfort becoming a man of the spirit so that those who could hear, as he wrote rhapsodically, would “gladly consent to the kindness of rays and recover the warm knowledge of each other we once had under those young trees in another May.” (*Cables*, 53, #76) Here in such simple images, Merton appears to say, the soothing and consoling hymns from that forgotten kingdom (“cellars”) are there for our asking, for paradise is as much with us as we are prepared or would allow ourselves to receive it, or to simply live in the nourishing milk flowing ever so richly from its bosom. If there is a central message in the monk, it is that Christ the New Adam has long ago recovered paradise — not for Christians alone but for all humankind and that enlightenment begins with the recognition of this paradise within each human person.

We begin a journey at birth that may at times take us so far away from ourselves that memories of our original home — our true human lineage — start to fade. Further, that remembrance, in which we belong to a time of *Unborn*, to a place of *No Place* that, though ordinary and the everyday, is one to which we sadly become strangers. As such memories of paradise recede from us, the more we settle along conventional paths leading everywhere but home, we lose our way, the more we find ourselves settled and enamoured in momentary forms, in the contingencies of life that ever more gravitate us earthward. For the greater we become intoxicated to

such seasonal excellences, the greater the degree of self-entrapment we are liable to find ourselves mired in.

By way of contrast, Merton teaches us the simplest and noblest lesson of a mystic when he says matter-of-factly, “The way that is most yours is no way” (*Cables*, 27, #38), advising us to “stop seeking. Let it all happen. Let it come and go. What? Everything: i.e., nothing.” (*Cables*, 27, #37) And what does the monk mean by the very taoistic-like paradox, “to seek without seeking?” He goes on to explain:

For each of us there is a point of nowhere-ness in the middle of movement, a point of nothingness in the midst of being: the incomparable point, not to be discovered by insight. If you seek it, you do not find it. If you stop seeking, it is there. But you must not turn to it. Once you become aware of yourself as a seeker, you are lost. But if you are content to be lost you will be found without knowing it, precisely because you are lost, for you are, at last, nowhere. (*Cables*, 58, #84. Emphasis added)

So, be not like a wilderness, but be wilderness, void and emptiness — without form, without place, without time and without name — for, as Meister Eckhart has said, “The true word of eternity is spoken only in the spirit of that man who is himself a wilderness” (*Cables*, 59 #86) that is without sand, without stone, even without darkness or night, and so poverty-stricken that there is not even any room for God Himself. You see, Merton seems to tell us, God wants the whole wilderness to Himself, for the universe is His playground by right. And perhaps from this perspective, man must be so abject in spirit and helplessly dependent on God — as Job finally became — that he must free himself even of the wilderness, and to be detached from whatever he may consider detachment to be. For the wilderness is paradise.

For no tainted happiness can ever be completely full. It is a reaching back, more truly, perhaps, a travelling without travelling, to a time before, to the no-time of the *Uncreated*, to the “Total poverty of the Creator,” yet “from this poverty springs everything... Infinite zero” (*Cables*, #84), which echoes perfectly Dr. Suzuki’s

zero=infinity, infinity=zero<sup>6</sup>

For the zero — which is infinity and, therefore, a no-thing and a no-place and a no-time — is “a storehouse or womb of all possible good or values,” perfect act, or action encompassing being and becoming, knowledge and innocence, the action of the Creator. It is,

therefore, "actionless action," or *wu wei*, the mysterious workings of *Tao* but mysterious only insofar as our puffed up fullness and narcissistic pull keep our sights and visions earthbound, shadowy and barely half-awake.

In everything, we seem to need and to keep much more than we have a right to, and are greatly troubled that in refusing or discarding anything, our very souls would be joined to the garbage heap; but most things we prize so dearly have in fact little to do or be in common with us essentially and lack the status that would raise them above what corrupts and cannot last. We forget that even a Van Gogh *Sunflower*, Chartres Cathedral, or the Great Wall of China, regardless of their status as great works of art and extraordinary engineering feats, will one day come to dust once their natural time has run full circle. Yet, we live as though temporary things were meant to last forever. This is not only vanity but idolatry.

To Abdul Aziz, his Sufi friend, Merton wrote on December 9, 1964:

I see more and more clearly that even the believers are often far short of having true faith in the Living God. *The great sin remains idolatry, and there is an idolatry of concepts as well as of graven images.* The minds of men (sic) are made vile and corrupt by the images they worship under the pretext of 'science,' 'politics,' 'technology,' etc.' (Emphasis added)

No doubt the monk had in mind certain philosophical turnings occurring in the nineteenth century when politics and technology, then followed rapidly by economics, were uncritically raised above that of the merely instrumental and given suddenly the status not very much lower than the position previously held by theology and the theological virtues themselves.

As the third millennium closes in on us, we continue to live more than ever in such a philosophically-depraved positivistic milieu. However, if for the most part large, unwieldy utopian political and economic enterprises have, in the twentieth century, through horrifying, apocalyptic experiences lost their appeal among the great masses of the world, it nonetheless is difficult to dispute the high status of technology (and now, hi-tech) and behavioural sciences as disciplines that are enjoying unprecedented popularity as continued sacred cows or idols.

Living in an increasingly technologized world, it becomes ever more difficult to remain authentic, for such a task, the natural work

of being, becomes difficult when the inner eye is misled. And for those solicitous of the disquieting effect that technology has had on the self, there is no greater enigma than how the shrinking person can be retrieved.

Merton had his solutions and he battled such demons in his own way. Particularly in his correspondence, the monk shows the depth of anxiety that he had begun to feel by increasingly identifying with both Christ's sufferings and the despair of the modern world. His solutions, though they may at times be couched in intellectual terms, were not intellectual at all. For he saw the problems in deeply personal terms and faithfully identified with the suffering masses, particularly "the excluded ones" in the world. Merton's prophetic bent helped him anticipate the many problems he would find himself facing throughout the last decade of his life as he broadened his contacts with the world through letters and the wide regimen of readings he forced upon himself.

In a letter to Louis Massignon dated July 20, 1960, Merton, besides commenting on the Sufi authority's meditations on the desert and the God of Agar and Ishmael, also remarks on Massignon's idea of "Le point vierge" ("the virginal point, the centre of the soul, where despair corners the heart of the outsider"). Typical of his interest and ability in appropriating ideas to himself, Merton writes from the heart though perhaps a bit over-dramatically:

We... have to reach that same "point vierge" in a kind of despair at the hypocrisy of our own world. It is dawning more and more on me that I have been caught in civilization as in a kind of spider's web, and I am beginning to say "No" louder and louder, though surrounded by the solicitude of those who ask me why I do so. There is no way of explaining it, and perhaps not even time to do so.<sup>8</sup>

While "despair at the hypocrisy of our own world" and being "caught in civilization as in a kind of spider's web" do not directly refer to technology, they were to my mind oblique descriptions of Merton's own despair and feeling of entrapment in a religious community which he increasingly found overly weighted down with pragmatic and organizational concerns that had little to do with the formation of monks and the building of true community life. The Journals, including *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, are full of references expressing this vexation brought on by a monastery that Merton felt had begun to reflect too precariously the neuroses of the outside

world. In short, though he never quite said it explicitly, he could see impersonalism slowly creeping inside the monastic walls as more and more monkish candidates from the video generation came calling at the gates.

Our moral and spiritual desensitization runs deep and broad and it is difficult to deny that alienation today is more the rule than the exception. One cringes in realizing the profound destruction our century has done against the sacred and, consequently, the loss of humanity to self that has invariably followed. Obviously, no deep reflection is needed to understand that the sacred and humanity affect each other intimately and exist in a tight bond.

Yet, this uncritical, technologizing way of thinking, conventionally and, I might add, conveniently, thought of as originating in the West (conveniently because, if it comes from the West, it would seem that we in the East become less morally culpable for what we do), is intractably embedded and is now breeding its poison in Asia. Asians have thoughtlessly bought nearly the entire progress package, and then some, and one cannot be overly encouraged in imagining what all this might mean in future decades when China joins what we can now only euphemistically call the "civilized community of nations."

To Thomas Merton, what we are presently witnessing might be likened to the respective hollowness and cynicism of Gog and Magog finally joining forces (as he had so well predicted), whereby the blind leads the rest of us into an unimaginable state of moral and spiritual void. What makes it all the more frightening is that, lacking any formidable idea of Transcendence by which to perceive a Self beyond the self, we will then – both East and West – be carried off into the future by a relationship mutually fuelled not by paradisiacal but parasitical interests, wholly utilitarian and pragmatic and without any clear vision nor substantive goals or values. From this rather despairing point of view, Thomas Merton suddenly becomes a most welcome paradigmatic hope upon which to hang our fractured existences.

### Notes and References

1. Thomas Merton, "A Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra Concerning Giants," *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) pp. 382-83
2. Lao Tzu, *Tao Teh Ching*. Translated by John C. H. Wu. (Boston and Shaftesbury: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1989), Chapter 38. Hereafter referred to in the text as TTC.
3. Czeslaw Milosz, *Visions from San Francisco Bay*. Translated by Richard Lourie. (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1982) Pp.33-4
4. Dom Aelred Graham, *The End of Religion: Autobiographical Explorations* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1971) p. 63
5. Thomas Merton, *Cables to the Ace* (New York: New Directions, 1968) p.37, #53. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Cables*.
6. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, (New York: New Directions, 1968) p. 107
7. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters of Religious Experience and Social Concerns*. Selected and edited by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1985), p. 60
8. Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*. Selected and edited by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1994), p. 278. Hereafter referred to in the text as WF.