

Joy in the Truth
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*Thomas Merton, the Emerging Catholic Paradigm
and the Catholic University*

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In the midst of the Cold War, Thomas Merton wrote of the proponents of a just war theory: "...the trouble is that the tradition in which they sit... is a boat that has slipped its moorings and is now floating off in mid ocean a thousand miles from the facts. But within that boat everything is logical, all right, and in apple pie order."¹ This assessment seems out of step with the experience of American Catholics in the period after World War II. Charles Morris remarks that the public image of the church in the 1940s and 1950s "... was nothing short of spectacular." All battle field chaplains were Catholics and Catholic chaplains were fixtures at labor union meetings, at least if the movies were to be believed. Bishop Sheen was the most successful public lecturer in the history of television and the song "Our Lady of Fatima" made the Hit Parade. Morris concludes that "a team of alien anthropologists would have reported that 1950s America was a Catholic country."²

Yet beneath the surface it would appear that "a revolution in Catholic attitudes was building steam in the 1950s," heading toward "...a catastrophic collapse in institutional confidence."³ Gary Wills has argued that Vatican II "let out the dirty little secret. It forced upon Catholics, in the most startling symbolic way, the fact that the Church changes."⁴ The story of the church in the years after the council has been well-told elsewhere and is familiar to everyone: it is a tale of decline in the number of clergy, women religious, parochial schools and Catholic colleges. There has been a dramatic increase in the number of Catholics living on the margins of the church. One recent study

¹ Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), 375.

² Charles R. Morris, *American Catholic: The Saints and Sinners Who Built America's Most Powerful Church* (New York: Times Books, 1997), ix.

³ *Ibid.*, 275.

⁴ Gary Wills, *Bare Ruined Choirs* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1971), 21.

suggests that as many as one-third of the Catholic population in the United States, about twenty million people, are not affiliated with a parish. That is, while they may consider themselves Catholics, they are unaffiliated with the institutional church.⁵ This sounds more like the description of the Church which Cardinal Ratzinger offered on the eve of the conclave: a Church in which the “small boat of thought of many Christians has often been tossed about,” swept by the “winds of doctrine,” tossed by “ideological currents” and a variety of “ways of thinking.”

The object of this paper is to briefly highlight some essential elements of that paradigm shift in Catholic life and thought and to place Thomas Merton within that larger context. I hope to suggest that Thomas Merton was an “icon of Christian wholeness” in that difficult period and that he embodied that revolution in Catholic life. Both his writings and his life challenged a generation of Catholics to understand and articulate their experience. Despite the decision of the American Catholic bishops not to tell this story in the new American Catholic Catechism it is, I think, one worth telling and one which can make a difference in the lives of students at a Catholic University.⁶

I. Elements in a Theological Revolution

The limits of time demand that I offer this admittedly impressionistic sketch of a complicated landscape.⁷ Avery Cardinal Dulles uses ten categories to summarize the essential emphases of Vatican II for the future of the Church. These include (1) *Aggiornamento*, (2) Reformability of the Church, (3) Renewed Attention to the Word of

⁵ James D. Davidson, Andrea S. Williams, Richard A. Lamanna, Jan Stenftenagel, Kathleen Maas Weigert, William J. Whalen, and Patricia Wittberg, S.C., *The Search for Common Ground* (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Press, 1997). See also Andrew Greeley, *Religious Change in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

⁶ <http://www.merton.org/Letter/index.asp>

⁷ For one preliminary and evocative attempt at a more detailed consideration of this landscape, see Hans Kung and David Tracy, (eds), *Paradigm Change in Theology: A symposium for the Future* (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

God, (4) Collegiality, (5) Religious Freedom, (6) The Active Role of the Laity, (7) Regional and Local Variety, (8) Ecumenism, (9) Dialogue with Other Religions, and (10) The Social Mission of the Church. Dulles concludes, “Who does not accept all ten of these principles...cannot honestly claim to have accepted the results of Vatican II.”⁸

Some of the key elements at the root of this revolution would include:

1. A belief that reality is unfinished, in process, and a matter of on-going creation.
2. A turn to the subject.
3. A heightened awareness of the interconnectedness of humanity and all creation.
4. A renewed and heightened awareness of history.
5. A deeper appreciation for the sources of the Christian tradition and their role in contemporary life.⁹

II. Thomas Merton and the Paradigm Shift

Donald Grayston, who wrote a particularly insightful study of Merton’s development as a spiritual theologian, has made the case that he became “very much the same kind of ikon of Christian wholeness to his own age that Bernard of Clairvaux had been to his.”¹⁰ Further, the case has been made that he became an icon of Christian wholeness because his life was “one of those events that...as in a flash of lightning, illuminate a whole landscape, throwing even the obscurest features into a sharp and

⁸ Avery Dulles, S.J., *The Reshaping of Catholicism* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 20. For another approach to this question see Rembert Weakland, *Faith and the Human Enterprise: A Post-Vatican II Vision* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1992), 7-10.

⁹ A more comprehensive list will be discussed in a presentation to be offered at The Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland Sixth General Meeting, March 31, 2006.

¹⁰ Donald Grayston, *Thomas Merton: The Development of a Spiritual Theologian* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1985), 182.

dramatic relief.”¹¹ The object of our discussion will be to advance those insights a little by looking at Merton’s writing in the light of the theological shifts which he both articulated and embodied.

1. A belief that reality is unfinished, in process, and a matter of on-going creation.

Even the casual reader of Thomas Merton cannot help but notice the profound sense in which the reader is being invited to look at one pilgrim’s spiritual journey from the inside. Admittedly this journey is observed through the prism of a consciously crafted literary life. Nonetheless it is an authentic life in which Merton describes himself and his search, warts and all. This very openness can lead Mary Jo Weaver at once to describe Merton as “...neurotic, over-published, and extraordinarily self-centered” and later to conclude that “the very things that irritate me about Merton...make him paradoxically attractive....”¹² For example, Merton admitted that he knew that he needed to revise his *Seeds of Contemplation* when “...I got a letter from a man in Pakistan who is an authority on Sufism and realized I couldn’t send him the book because of an utterly stupid remark I had made about Sufis....”¹³ He explained his reasons for a new revision in his preface: “When the book was first-written, the author had no experience in confronting the needs and problems of other men. The book was written in a kind of isolation, in which the author was alone with his own experience of the presence of God. And such a book can be written best, perhaps only, in solitude. The second writing has been no less solitary than the first: but the author’s solitude has been modified by contact with other solitudes:

¹¹ Fred Herron, *No Abiding Place: Thomas Merton and the Search for God* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2005), 4.

¹² Mary Jo Weaver, “Conjectures of a Disenchanted Reader,” *Horizons* 30/2 (Fall, 2003), 285, 296.

¹³ Robert Daggy, (ed.), *The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989), 237.

with the loneliness, the simplicity, the perplexity of novices and scholastics of his monastic community: with the loneliness of people outside any Church.”¹⁴

Merton commented upon the changes which he knew he underwent throughout his life. Humorously he remarked on a recent physical examination: “... I discovered that I was in better health than last year, weighing a hundred and eighty-five pounds, which is certainly too much. As an ikon, I am not doing too well.”¹⁵

2. *A turn to the subject*

It can be argued that Merton was a major influence in legitimizing this approach for Catholics of his generation. He signals the beginning of this shift after the publication of *The Ascent to Truth* which he judged to be his “worst book”¹⁶ He wrote in the prologue to *The Sign of Jonas*: “I have here and there attempted to write, as best I can, about spiritual things. In doing so, I have of course tried to put down my ideas in my own words, avoiding all technical terminology. I have attempted to convey something of a monk’s spiritual life and of his thoughts, not in the language of speculation but in terms of personal experience. This is always a little hazardous, because it means leaving the sure, plain path of an accepted terminology and traveling in byways of poetry and intuition. I have found in writing *The Ascent to Truth* that technical language, though it is universal and certain and accepted by theologians, does not reach the average man and does not convey what is most personal and most vital in religious experience.” He

¹⁴ Donald Grayston, *Thomas Merton’s Rewritin: The Five Versions of Seeds/New Seeds of Contemplation as a Key to the Development of his Thought* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1985), 8.

¹⁵ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Graden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1968), 339.

¹⁶ William H. Shannon, (ed.), *Thomas Merton: The Hidden Ground of Love* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985), 341.

concludes, asking that "... I may be pardoned for using my own words to talk about my own soul."¹⁷

This increased recognition of the primacy of the self and of personal experience opened new possibilities for dialogue with Eastern religions and with all those outside of the Catholic citadel. His study of the Greek and Latin fathers, along with the great mystics, left Merton firmly rooted in the thought of the theologians of experience. Anne Carr puts it this way: "In a retrieval of the early traditions of Eastern Christianity, he sought to explore a form of thought which did not separate the head from the heart.... Thus, his writing speaks to a need, felt by so many, to explore a personal realm of experience that includes but goes beyond the intellectual and is sometimes spoken of as the realm of imagination, intuition, and wholeness."¹⁸

3. A heightened awareness of the interconnectedness of humanity and all creation.

No one who reads Thomas Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain* can help but notice its triumphal tone. But by 1962 he wrote of his *New Seeds of Contemplation* that, "it is not intended for all religious people. It is not addressed primarily to Catholics...." Merton was aware that "there are very many religious people who have no need for a book like this, because theirs is a different kind of spirituality." Moving beyond those who are formally religious, he addresses "people without formal religious affiliations who will find... something that appeals to them. If they do, I am glad, as I feel myself a debtor to them more than to the others."¹⁹ Ultimately, Merton has come to consider his

¹⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1953), 8-9.

¹⁸ Anne Carr, *A Search for Wisdom and Spirit: Thomas Merton's Theology of the Self* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 5-6.

¹⁹ *Thomas Merton's Rewriting*, 8.

audience not as the community of Catholics but rather, as Donald Grayston calls them, “the holy commonwealth of contemplation.”²⁰

Merton’s openness to the world was not, however, the “professional” ecumenism of those who look to meet over doctrinal language. Rather he focused on a vision of unity that existed at the level of religious experience. This desire to focus on what unites people led him to comment humorously to a British teacher: “My concept of Christianity is far from being an old-maidish theology of hiding in the corner of the house and standing on chairs for fear of heretical mice.”²¹

His desire was to seek out the true and the beautiful in all religions. Merton remarked: “If I can unite *in myself* the thought and the devotion of Eastern and Western Christendom, the Greek and the Latin Fathers, the Russians and the Spanish mystics, I can prepare in myself the reunion of divided Christians.”²²

Commenting upon his journey from the triumphalism of *The Seven Storey Mountain* to his embrace of “the holy commonwealth of contemplation,” Merton suggested that he had moved from being a “theologically conventional member of a conservative order in a conservative church” and had become, instead, a “transcultural believer” or what he would term a “universal man.”²³

4. *A renewed and heightened awareness of history.*

Merton sketched out his understanding of “historical consciousness” a few months before his death: “God has revealed Himself to us in history by becoming man.

²⁰ *Thomas Merton: The Development of a Spiritual Theologian*, 177.

²¹ *Hidden Ground of Love*, 390.

²² *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 12/21.

²³ *Thomas Merton: The Development of a Spiritual Theologian*, 9. See also W.M. Thompson, “Merton’s Contribution to a Transcultural Consciousness,” in Donald Grayston and Michael Higgins, (eds.), *Thomas Merton: Pilgrim in Process* (Toronto: Griffin House, 1983), 147-169.

Christ, the Man-God, is the Lord of History.” He argued that an “awareness of Christ implies therefore some awareness of history, not in the abstract academic sense, but in the concrete” an awareness of the crisis of our times’ relation to Christ’s plan for the salvation of man.” He carefully makes the point that, as a result of this, “ a Christian consciousness is therefore a special kind of historical consciousness: an awareness of ‘kairos’ (the providential time of crisis and judgment) and of ‘choice.’” Merton pointed to the ‘kairos’ in which the Church is deeply involved and observed that, “she faces an historical changeover of decisive importance.” That is, “the domination of Western and European culture is at an end, and for better or for worse. A whole new world is in formation.”²⁴

5. A deeper appreciation for the sources of the tradition and their role in contemporary life.

Much of Merton’s early writing reflects the dominant scholastic theology of the time. Later he maintained that biblical, patristic, and intuitive approaches to theology were better suited to the contemplative in the contemporary situation.²⁵ In his preface to the French edition of *The Ascent to Truth*, published in 1950, he indicated that if he were to take on the same subject again he would approach it quite differently. Merton noted that he “... would prefer to draw more upon Scripture and the Fathers and to concern (himself) a little less with scholasticism which is not the true intellectual climate for a monk.”²⁶ Jean Leclercq, writing about Merton’s developing attentiveness to the sources,

²⁴ Jean Leclercq, “Merton and History,” in Gerald Twomey, (ed.), *Prophet in the Belly of a Paradox* (New York: Paulist, 1978), 228-229.

²⁵ Thomas Merton, “Introduction,” in Amedee Hallier, *The Monastic Theology of Aelred of Rievaulx* (Spencer, Massachusetts: Cistercian Publications, 1969), vii-viii.

²⁶ Robert E. Daggy, (ed.), *Introductions East and West: The Foreign Prefaces of Thomas Merton* (Greensboro, North Carolina: Unicorn Press, 1981), 28.

observed that “when he went back to the sources, Merton shook off the hampering shackles of the very recent past which grew out of the nineteenth century, and he did much in the way of liberating his immediate background from such various confines.”²⁷

Merton’s vocation to the world led him”...to retrieve for modern readers some of the richness he had himself uncovered in his studies of the writings of the church and monastic fathers, especially those of early Christianity, and the contemplative traditions of the mystics....”²⁸ This return to the sources caused Merton to look even more warily upon the manual tradition which he inherited. He summed up this new awareness in a letter written in 1949: “I have suddenly woken up to the fact that somebody needs to be teaching theology the way St. Augustine did and not the way textbooks in seminaries do. Someone should be able to find the living God in scripture... and then lead others to find him there and all theology properly ends in contemplation and love and union with God—not ideas about Him and a set of rules about how to wear your hat.”²⁹

III. Unpath’d Waters, Undreamed Shores

Thomas Merton looked critically at a tradition that was sailing blissfully off to sea and growing increasingly out of touch with the modern world and with the ancient faith. Standing in contrast to a church that was increasingly out of touch and defensive in its relationship with the world, Merton stood with one foot deeply and optimistically rooted in the culture of the modern world and with another deeply critical of that world. It was his embrace of the world in profound love that led him to make connections with so

²⁷ Jean Leclercq, “Merton and History,” 227.

²⁸ Anne Carr, *A Search for Wisdom and Spirit*, 26.

²⁹ Robert E. Daggy, (ed.), *The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989), 172.

many in such a variety of ways. Merton embraced Shakespeare's challenge to meet the world with "a wild dedication of yourselves to unpath'd waters, undreamed shores...."³⁰

Not everyone would appreciate Merton's attempt to articulate this emerging vision of Christian faith. English Benedictine Aelred Graham criticized Merton's "mysticism for the masses."³¹ Mary Jo Weaver is quick to note the many irritations of which Merton was capable but she also places them within a larger context in which they "... give him power to move into a new space, to explore new territory and to bridge the Eastern/Western monastic abyss." She notes that his failure to write a more traditional spiritual autobiography "... may be the source of his attractiveness to modern readers who believe that you need not flee the world to discover sacred space, and that political acts need not diminish the depth of one's prayer life."³² The sources of this attractiveness may make him appealing to many contemporary university students and may account for some of the discomfort experienced by the American bishops.

Merton came to see the world itself and "the holy commonwealth of contemplation" as sacred space. In doing so he anticipated Karl Rahner's description of the future: "The Christian of the future will be a mystic or will not exist at all." For the moderns of Merton's world, equipped only with a wild dedication to unpath'd waters, undreamed shores, mysticism is simply "a genuine experience of God... bursting out of the very heart of human existence and able to be experienced there."³³ The echoes of Merton's experience on the corner of Fourth and Walnut resonate in this moment and this

³⁰ William Shakespeare, *Winter's Tale*, IV, iv, 566-567.

³¹ Aelred Graham, "Thomas Merton: A Modern Man in Reverse," *Atlantic* 191 (January, 1953), 70-74.

³² "Conjectures of a Disenchanted Reader," 296.

³³ Karl Rahner, "The Spirituality of the Future," in Karl Rahner, Karl Lehmann and Albert Raffelt, (eds.), *The Practice of Faith: A Handbook of Contemporary Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 18-26.

description and possess the power to transform the landscape of contemporary Catholic universities.