

THE TRAGEDY OF THOMAS MERTON

Part I

“The quietness and hiddenness and placidity of the truly good people in the world all proclaim the glory of God. We refuse to hear the million different voices through which God speaks to us, and every refusal hardens us more and more against His grace—and yet He continues to speak to us: and we say He is without mercy! ... Glorious Mother of God, shall I ever again distrust you? Shall I ever look anywhere else but in the face of your love, to find out true counsel, and to know my way, in all the days and all the moments of my life?”

Thomas Merton¹

The Seven Storey Mountain

One of the publishing marvels of the twentieth century was a book written by a contemplative monk, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. The monk was Frater Louis (Thomas) Merton: the book was his autobiography. The fact that it had been written by an enclosed religious, coupled with its theme, the author's conversion to the Catholic faith and his subsequent entrance to one of the Church's most rigorous religious orders, the Trappists, made it a source of fascination to the reading public.² It sold some 600,000 copies in its first year of publication.

The author told of his birth in 1915 in Prades, southern France, to bohemian parents; the death of his mother (said to have been a strong personality) when he was aged six in New York; and his subsequent intermittent and disjointed rearing by his artist father in France (for two years), then in England. After his father died of a brain tumour in 1931, Thomas was allowed remarkable freedom by his guardian, Tom Bennett, a Harley Street specialist and friend of his late father. His maternal grandfather provided him and his young brother with a capital fund for their support and there was little limitation placed upon Merton's whims. Prior to starting at Cambridge, Merton visited France and Italy. As he pursued his studies at Cambridge he lived a licentious lifestyle. At the end of the university year in 1934 he accepted the suggestion of his guardian that he should return to America. There, at Columbia University, in 1938 he obtained the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English.

One day in February 1937, he entered Scribners, the New York booksellers, and picked up a copy of Etienne Gilson's *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*. He had not realised that any book on the subject would be dealing necessarily with Catholic philosophy. When he discovered the *nihil obstat* and *imprimatur* he says that he almost threw it out of the window of the train. By some actual grace, however, he was moved to read it and had his eyes opened for the first time to the Church's philosophy.

¹ *The Seven Storey Mountain*, New York, 1948. Published in Great Britain, with certain excisions and editing by Evelyn Waugh, as *Elected Silence*, London (Burns & Oates), 1949, (My copy, *Elected Silence*, 1969 reprint) at p. 92

² The Trappists are a reformed branch of the Cistercian Order, itself a reform instituted by St Bernard and others of the Order of St Benedict.

“The one big concept which I got out of its pages was to revolutionize my whole life. It is contained in one of those dry compounds that the scholastic philosophers were so prone to use: the word *aseitas*... *Aseitas* simply means the power of a being to exist absolutely in virtue of itself, requiring no cause, no other justification for its existence except that its very nature is to exist. There can be only one such being: that is God.”³

The next influence which operated to bring him to the Catholic Church was a book by the scion of the English Huxley family, the novelist, Aldous. In his book *Ends and Means*, published in 1937, Aldous Huxley recorded his conversion from materialism to a philosophical outlook based on a mysticism derived from Hindu and Buddhist concepts. Huxley argued that there *was* a supernatural order, that it was accessible, and that it could be attained by detachment and love. He argued in favour of asceticism as a means to reach this supernatural order.

Huxley’s example led Merton to explore oriental ‘mysticism’. In the meantime he came under another influence, the idiosyncratic religious views of William Blake. Merton had fallen in love with Blake’s poetry earlier in his life and, after he graduated in Arts at Columbia, he elected to do a graduate year studying Blake’s poems and religious ideas.

“As Blake worked his way into my system, I became conscious of the fact that the only way to live was in a world that was charged with the presence and reality of God.”⁴

The final influence, paradoxically, was a Hindu monk, Mahanambhrata Bramachari.⁵ This man had been sent from Calcutta by his superior to Chicago in 1932 for the ‘World Congress of Religions’ at the World Trade Fair held there that year and had stayed on in America to study at the University of Chicago where he obtained a doctorate in philosophy. Merton was pursuing him in the course of his interest in oriental ‘mysticism’ when Dr Bramachari said to him: “There are many beautiful mystical books written by the Christians. You should read St Augustine’s *Confessions*, and *The Imitation of Christ*.” Merton was moved to read these works and was affected by them. He began to pray regularly. In due course, he took instruction and was baptised, perhaps too precipitately as he admits that after his baptism he did little for more than a year to foster his new found faith.

Merton was a man of strong intellect and of sensitivity, remarkably well read, if eclectically so, and spoke, or read, a number of languages apart from English, including French, Latin, German, Spanish and Italian. He was, however, impulsive, as he later admitted, and self absorbed. This latter characteristic seems to have been

³ *Elected Silence*, op. cit., pp. 114-5

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 125

⁵ It has been suggested that Merton was converted through reading the works of James Joyce. This is not the case. He had been fascinated earlier in his life by Joyce’s faithful description of a mission at a Catholic church in *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. He went back to that description when his interest in the faith was kindled to admire the accuracy with which Joyce had portrayed the priest’s description of hell and eternal punishment. Joyce’s intention had been, doubtless, to alienate his readers from Catholicism: in Merton’s case it had had the opposite effect.

precipitated by the conduct of his mother who used to indulge him and kept a daily diary recording his behaviour until her second child, John Paul, was born. She died when Thomas was only six years old but her influence upon him remained. He had one other dominating characteristic: he was ambitious.

Merton repaired his earlier omissions towards his new found faith and began to follow the psalter in the Church's *Divine Office* and to apply himself to regular prayer and meditation. In time he came to think that he had a vocation to the religious life and applied to join the Franciscans. The Franciscans eventually rejected him which caused him great anguish. Some months went by and a chance conversation with one of the lecturers at Columbia moved him to attend a retreat during Holy Week, 1940, at the Cistercian Monastery of Gethsemani in Kentucky. This was a branch of the reformed order, the Cistercians of the strict observance—Trappists. His description of the effect upon him of Cistercian life in *The Seven Storey Mountain* is memorable. He conceived the idea of applying to join the Trappists: he applied, and was accepted. He entered the Monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani on 10th December 1941, three days after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour. He was given the religious name 'Louis'. He was subsequently simply professed on the Feast of St Joseph, 19th March 1944, and his vows solemnised on the same day three years later.

There are any number of passages in *The Seven Storey Mountain* which are inspiring. The book had a remarkable effect on the secular mind, opening to it the vista of a life of earthly happiness lived in a way utterly opposed to the tenets of materialism. It drew thousands to religious life and was to be translated in the years that followed into some fifteen different languages. The book is as compelling today as when it was published. It has, reportedly, never been out of print.

Yet for all its success, the book was to be a source of problems for its author and for the Cistercian Order.

The Problems

St Benedict sets out in his Rule the vows, and the way in which they are to be taken.

Suscipiendus autem in oratorio coram omnibus promittat de stabilitate sua et conversione morum suorum et obedientiam, coram Deo et Sanctis ejus, ut si aliquando aliter fecerit, ab eo se damnandum sciat quem irridet.⁶

Stability; conversion of life; obedience. The monk submerges himself in the Order for the love of God. No longer does he serve himself, but Christ the King. It follows that it is of the essence of the Benedictine vocation that the monk should avoid all self promotion—this at the peril not only of his vocation, but of his soul. The sanction for the monk who breaches the vows he takes could not be more explicit—*ut si aliquando aliter fecerit, ab eo se damnandum sciat quem irridet*. Almighty God gives a great deal to

⁶ 'Now this shall be the manner of his reception. In the oratory, in the presence of all, he shall promise stability, conversion of his life and obedience; and this before God and his Saints, so that he may know that should he ever do otherwise he will be condemned by him whom he mocks.' *Rule of St Benedict*, Chapter 58.

souls He calls into the contemplative life; and to him to whom more is given, more is expected.

There was, thus, a fundamental antithesis in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. For notwithstanding its value as a source of inspiration and of information about Cistercian life, the book contradicted the end it sought to serve. In the very proclamation of the vocation of the contemplative as the fruit of his personal experience, Merton breached this rule against self promotion. And there was a second contradiction. The Trappist reform of the Cistercian Order was insistent that its monks should follow rigorously Chapter 6 of St Benedict's Rule—

“[O]n account of the great value of silence, let leave to speak be seldom granted to observant disciples, even though it be for good, holy and edifying conversations; for it is written: *In much speaking thou shalt not escape sin...*[Proverbs 10: 19]”

Silence was an essential feature of the Trappist reform, such that the word ‘trappist’ came to describe a man who never spoke.⁷ Yet in the very writing of the book Merton contradicted this revelation of his vocation. He was *not* silent!

Yet, prior to these, there was another breach of St Benedict's Rule, even more fundamental. Merton could never have written his book nor would it have been published had his abbot not permitted it. Dom Frederic Dunne, Abbot of Gethsemani, had financial troubles to which the popularity of the publications of his newly professed and highly talented Frater Louis promised a solution. But the solution ought not to have been adopted at the expense of the Rule, even if it served to publish to the world the value of contemplative life. In chapter 2 of his Rule, St Benedict says:

“Above all let [the abbot] not have greater solicitude for fleeting, earthly, and perishable things, and so overlook or undervalue the salvation of the souls committed to him... And if he be tempted to complain of lack of means, let him remember the words: *Seek first the kingdom of God and his justice, and all these things shall be yours without the asking...*”

Abbot Dunne seems to have been blinded to the reality that what he was permitting was essentially discordant with the young monk's vocation. The permission overlooked, too, that the silence ordained by St Benedict, and insisted on by the Trappist reform, could be breached just as easily by the written, as by the spoken, word.

⁷ Merton set out his agony in trying to discover whether God was calling him to the Trappists: “I... thought of praying to God to let me know what I was going to do, or what I should do, or what the solution would be, by showing it to me in the Scriptures. It was the old business of opening the book and putting your finger down blindly on the page and taking the words thus designated as an answer to your question... I made the prayer, and opened the book, and put my finger down definitely on the page and said to myself: ‘Whatever it is, this is it.’ I looked, and the answer practically floored me. The words were: *Ecce eris tacens*—‘Behold, thou shalt be silent’...” *Elected Silence*, op. cit., p. 229

Now, in fairness to Abbot Dunne, the process he initiated could not have advanced beyond a proposal had ecclesiastical impediments to the book's publication not been removed. *The Seven Storey Mountain* bears both *Nihil obstat* and *Imprimi potest*, and *Imprimatur* given by no less than Francis Cardinal Spellman, Archbishop of New York. Such certification does not, of course, mean that the authorities agree with the book's content; only that it contains no theological error. But it is inevitable that any literary endeavour which reflects adversely upon Catholic life will be nipped in the bud when it is submitted to the *Censor deputatis* for consideration. This did not occur.

A critical reading of the *The Seven Storey Mountain* reveals certain failures in charity on the part of the author and, as well, a sense of superiority. One of his biographers, Michael Mott, makes this telling comment:

"On one point Merton could make no concession. He thought himself extraordinary and his fate extraordinary. This had helped when his confessor in the novitiate had tried to laugh him out of the whole idea of writing his autobiography... In a sense, *The Seven Storey Mountain* was a celebration of just this realization: that he and his fate were extraordinary, that he had had extraordinary parents, one of whom [his mother] had confirmed—for a while—his unique sense of himself and his destiny. It was no casual slip into vanity, then, for him to write in the opening pages that what he had from his parents 'ought to have made me some kind of King' and to add 'if the standards the world lives by were the real ones'."⁸

These matters alone ought to have been a matter of concern to Abbot Dunne. But there was something more. Merton hid the fact that the reason he was rejected in his earlier application to join the Franciscan Order was because he had admitted to the Franciscan authorities that he had fathered a child out of wedlock. A reading of Merton's diaries seems to show that he had revealed these facts to the abbot. Such a background provided a compelling reason, one would have thought, against the abbot permitting the publication of any book dealing with Frater Louis's previous life. For its publication would provide a motive for the revelation of the newly professed monk's prior life by the mother of his child which, had she seen fit to speak, could have caused the gravest scandal.⁹

In August 1948, just a few days prior to the book's publication, Abbot Dunne suffered a fatal heart attack on his way to a daughter house, the Monastery of the Holy Spirit in Conyers, Georgia. His successor as abbot of Gethsemani was Dom James Fox, then abbot of Conyers.

In Chapter 2 of his Rule, St Benedict directs the abbot not to make any distinction of persons in the monastery. Notwithstanding this, extracts from an earlier book Merton had produced, *Exile Ends in Glory*, a life of the Trappistine nun, Mother Mary Berchmans, was read in the refectory. This course of distinguishing Merton was

⁸ *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, Michael Mott, Boston, 1986, p. 229

⁹ Merton was to discover in 1966 that the wife of his, by then deceased, Godfather had seriously contemplated legal action over some inaccuracy in the biography on its release in England in 1949. Cf. Michael Mott, *op. cit.*, p. 87

followed by his successor, Abbot Fox, who permitted readings for evening meditation from Merton's *Seeds of Contemplation*, a book of spiritual advice about prayer published in 1949.

Quite apart from the issue of distinction, it was hardly appropriate to put before the members of the community for their edification the thoughts of someone who was effectively a neophyte, a member who had been baptised a mere eleven years; who had been in the house barely eight years, and who had been professed barely two. It is not as if Merton was established in virtue. His autobiography gives an account of his previous sinful and indulgent life¹⁰ and certain, more graphic, details had been excised at the insistence of the censor. One must assume that these were known to his abbot. The attainment of virtue involves a long and unremitting struggle. Somewhere in Tanqueray¹¹ there is a quote from St Francis de Sales which illustrates this well. On being invited by an acquaintance to engage in a certain course of conduct, the saint had responded in words to this effect: "No. Lest in twenty minutes, I lose what it has taken me twenty years to establish."

It seems that since Gethsemani owed Merton a great debt for his writings, the abbots thought it appropriate that concessions should be made for him. St Benedict's direction was ignored. Far from being just another member of the community, Merton was soon to become the member around whom the community of Gethsemani would revolve. Far from suppressing Merton's productivity, the new abbot encouraged it. Australian, John Russell, summarises what followed:

"While [Merton] kept to the rigid monastic routines, he was helped inside Gethsemane Abbey by a vast infrastructure of monks typing his manuscripts, doing his laundry and the like, enabling him to concentrate on reading and writing. One can only guess what they thought about all this, but his books brought in an amazing income stream, facilitating growth and expansion. Merton's fame also meant that hundreds of young men who had read his works applied to join Gethsemane. What was supposed to be a sequestered monastic retreat became a hive of modern American productive activity.¹²

As a consequence of the enormous success of *The Seven Storey Mountain* and the royalties it generated, the Trappists of Gethsemani, who had embraced poverty for Christ, found themselves immersed in wealth.

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¹⁰ There is in the Veech Library at the Catholic Institute of Sydney, a copy of *The Seven Storey Mountain* which formerly belonged to Norman Thomas Cardinal Gilroy. The Cardinal wrote a note on the back fly leaf, part of which runs: "Bishop McDonald, Auxiliary Bishop of Cardinal Spellman, told me in Japan—June 1949—that... many people after reading it doubted that Thos. Merton would persevere in his vocation because of his background... N.T.G. 1/7/49" [The reference is to Bishop Thomas John McDonnell, afterwards Coadjutor Bishop of Wheeling, West Virginia.]

¹¹ Adolphe Tanqueray SS, DD, *The Spiritual Life*, 1930.

¹² *Thomas Merton, the Restless Trappist*, in *Quadrant*, September 2004 edition, reproduced at http://www.quadrant.org.au/php/article_view.php?article_id=923 See also, transcript of *Thomas Merton, Celebrity Monk*, on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's television program *Encounter* produced by Russell, reproduced at <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/relig/enc/stories/s322192.htm>

A little mistake in the beginning, as Aristotle said, becomes a big mistake in the end. Consequences were to flow from the failure to adhere to St Benedict's Rule, consequences harmful not only for Frater Louis, but for Gethsemani and for Cistercian life generally. The worldly appeal precipitated by Merton's writings was to assume a momentum which would sweep aside the proper concerns of monastic life. The material ends came to dominate the infinitely more important immaterial ones. There is a passage in the epilogue to *The Seven Storey Mountain* in which Merton expresses his fears over the contradictions inherent in the whole business.

"I should have been delivered of any problems about my true identity. I had already made my simple profession. And my vows should have divested me of the last shreds of any special identity. But then there was this shadow, this double, this writer who had followed me into the cloister.

"He is still on my track. I cannot lose him. He still wears the name of Thomas Merton. Is it the name of an enemy? He is supposed to be dead. But he stands and meets me in the doorway of my prayers, and follows me into church. He kneels with me behind the pillar, the Judas, and talks to me all the time in my ear... Nobody seems to understand that one of us has got to die.

"Sometimes I am mortally afraid. There are days when there seems to be nothing left of my vocation—my contemplative vocation—but a few ashes..."¹³

For anyone who has studied Merton's subsequent history this passage makes chilling reading.

Once the book had been written and published, a strong mind was needed to rule that Merton's literary works should thenceforth cease¹⁴. There was no such mind: there was no such ruling. Years later when the harm to Merton's vocation was becoming apparent, Abbot Fox issued a temporary prohibition on his writing, but it was only temporary.

Meanwhile, unknown to Merton and to his superiors there was a groundswell—perhaps a better metaphor would be a tsunami—of change approaching the shores on which the Catholic Church was established. Within a very few years the enormous tide of Modernism which had been fomenting in the theological faculties of the Church's seminaries would sweep ashore to engulf the Church, and carry away in its undertow thousands of priests and religious. The Second Vatican Council was not evil. It was, however, a catalyst for the proliferation of Modernist and semi-Modernist ideas. Many of the *periti* (theological experts) assisting the bishops who attended the Council were infected with the Modernist virus, and quite

¹³ *Elected Silence*, op. cit., Epilogue, p. 291

¹⁴ This needs to be qualified: Merton's studies on objective subjects, such as prayer, the psalms, the liturgy, could all have been pursued to the edification of the Church's members. Many of his early works along these lines remain valuable today. The real peril lay in his 'creative writings', his diaries, poetry, opinion pieces, critica of the works of others—whatever threatened to give scope to his self absorption.

a number of the bishops. We have given elsewhere statistics to demonstrate the devastating effects that occurred within the Church following the Council¹⁵. The timing of this heretical flood could not have been worse for Thomas Merton, or for religious life.

Merton's Preoccupations and his Vows

There is a symmetry about Thomas Merton's life, in his preoccupations with worldly movements prior to his conversion to Catholicism, in his conversion and entry into religious life, and in the reversion to his former state prior to his untimely death in December 1968. With remarkable congruence, each of the three vows Merton took addressed a particular weakness, an intellectual movement which Merton had indulged, and subsequently discarded, prior to his conversion—Communism, psychoanalysis, and oriental 'mysticism'.

Psychoanalysis—and Self Absorption

Merton's diaries, or journals, (as indeed, *The Seven Storey Mountain* itself) reveal a man absorbed in himself and his own reactions. Indeed, the indulgence in a diary constituted for Merton a program of introspection. Keeping a diary may not be inappropriate in a worldly author, but it can be a dangerous thing for a religious.

Merton deals with his immersion in psychoanalysis while he was at Cambridge—

"I came to the conclusion that one of the biggest crimes in this world was introversion, and, in my efforts to be an extrovert, I entered upon a course of reflections and constant self-examinations, studying all my responses and analysing the quality of all my emotions and reactions in such a way that I could not help becoming just what I did not want to be: an introvert. If ever I had gone crazy, I think psychoanalysis would have been the one thing chiefly responsible for it."¹⁶

Yet, though he gave up psychoanalysis, he did not give up his introspection, which was coupled, moreover with something else, the view that his thoughts and ideas deserved publication. His conversion to Catholicism had not affected this. In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he tells of his attempts in 1939 to get his writings published.

"The more I failed, the more I was convinced that it was important for me to have my work printed in magazines like the *Southern Review* or *Partisan Review* or the *New Yorker*. It was as if I could not be quite satisfied that I was real until I could feed my ambition with these trivial glories, and my ancient selfishness was now matured and concentrated in this desire to see myself externalized in a public and printed and official self which I could admire at my ease..."¹⁷

In a diary entry of 4th December 1940, written before he came to consider a vocation with the Trappists, he wrote:

¹⁵ Cf *Failure of the Executive Power*, at <http://www.superflumina.org/executivefailure.html>

¹⁶ *Elected Silence*, op. cit., p. 90

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 154

“Why would I write anything if not to be read? This journal is written for publication. It is about time I realized that and wrote it with some art. All that screaming last year to convince myself a journal was worth writing, but not to be read. If a journal is written for publication, then you can tear pages out of it, emend it, correct it, write with art. If it is a personal document, every emendation amounts to a crisis of conscience and a confession, not an artistic correction.”

It does not appear that his Novice Master saw the dangers to his vocation in allowing him to indulge his inclination to ‘creative’ writing. He does not seem to have discerned Merton’s introspection or his ambition. Merton wrote:

“I brought all the instincts of a writer with me into the monastery, and I knew that I was bringing them, too. It was not a case of smuggling them in. And Father Master not only approved but encouraged me when I wanted to write poems and reflections and other things that came into my head in the novitiate.”¹⁸

A small book of his poetry, *Thirty Poems*, was published by a friend, James Laughlin, publisher of the journal, *New Directions*, in November 1944: whether this was done with, or without, permission is not clear. His life of the Trappistine, Mother Mary Berchmans, *Exile Ends in Glory*, was published in 1947. In the meantime, with the encouragement of Abbot Dunne, he had completed the proofs of *The Seven Storey Mountain* and it was published under the auspices of Gethsemani Monastery in August 1948.

On April 20th, 1947 he wrote:

“I keep thinking of Solemn Profession, and every time it comes to my mind I am more profoundly happy. There is only one thing to live for: love. There is only one unhappiness: not to love God. [It] pains me... to see my own soul so full of movement and shadows and vanities, of cross-currents of dry wind stirring up the dust and rubbish of desire. I don’t expect to avoid this humiliation in my life, but when will it become cleaner, more simple, more loving? I can’t give up writing, and everywhere I turn I find the stuff I write sticking to me like flypaper, the gramophone inside me playing the same old tune: ‘Admiration, admiration—You are my ideal—you are the one, original, cloistered genius, the tonsured wonder of the Western world. It is not comforting to be such a confounded ape.’”¹⁹

This entry is admirable for the way Merton sets out the dilemma, is able to laugh at himself, and evidences his struggle to be true to his vocation. However, it is concerning for the expression of an entrenched will—that he will not give up writing—and evidence which he does not want to accept, that it is precisely his writing which is damaging his vocation.

Once a man has found, and has given himself to, Christ, introspection is no longer necessary. The perils to Merton’s soul, and to his vocation, of being permitted once

¹⁸ *Elected Silence*, pp. 275-6

¹⁹ Diary entry. Cf *The Intimate Merton: His Life from his Journals*, Thomas Merton, ed. by Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo, Oxford, 2002, (Lion Books paperback) pp. 71-2

again to give free rein to his self-absorption do not seem to have occurred to Abbot Dunne, or to his successor, Dom James Fox.

Communism

Merton's hedonistic lifestyle had flourished while he was at Clare College, Cambridge. His guardian, Tom Bennett, called him to London and dressed him down for his behaviour. Whether before or after this warning, Merton fathered an illegitimate child. There was another interview with Bennett. Michael Mott, suggests that there was a settlement with the girl's family's lawyers brokered by Bennett.²⁰ Merton's results at the end of academic year 1934 were not good enough to warrant the continuance of his scholarship at Clare. He returned to America and Bennett wrote suggesting that in all the circumstances he should remain there. Merton accepted the suggestion. He toured in Europe and then, late in November, he left England for good. He recounts what was in his head on the boat to America:

"[W]hen the time came for me to take spiritual stock of myself, the conclusion I came to was that it was not so much I myself that was to blame for my unhappiness, but the society in which I lived. I was something that had been spawned by the selfishness and irresponsibility of the materialistic century..."²¹

He was becoming a Communist. While at Columbia University he attended party meetings and rallies, even giving an address at one stage. However, the contradictions in the movement soon began to disconcert him. He attended Communist 'peace' rallies designed to encourage America's youth to rebel against any move by the US government to engage in war, but with the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War the Party discarded this attitude in favour of overt support for the Spanish Republican side.

"I don't think that even I was gullible enough to swallow all the business about the ultimate bliss that would follow the withering away of the state... The chief weakness of Communism is that it is, itself, pieced together out of the ruins of the same ideology that once went into the vast amorphous, intellectual structure underlying capitalism in the nineteenth century. I don't know how anybody can be so naïve as to suppose that after all these centuries of corrupt and imperfect social systems, there is eventually to evolve something perfect and pure..."²²

"My active part in the world revolution was not very momentous. It lasted, in all, about three months... I decided that it would be wiser if I just remained a 'fellow traveller'. The truth is that my inspiration to do something for the good of mankind had been pretty feeble and abstract from the start. I was still interested in doing good for only one person in the world—myself."²³

Oriental 'Mysticism'

Merton followed the interest generated by his reading of Huxley's *Ends and Means*.

²⁰ *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, op. cit., p. 84

²¹ *Elected Silence* op. cit., p. 94

²² *Elected Silence*, op. cit., p. 96

²³ *Elected Silence*, op. cit., pp. 100-1

“[T]he most important effect of the book on me was to make me start ransacking the university library for books on oriental mysticism. I had the habit of reading fast, without stopping, or stopping only rarely to take a note. The strange great jumble of myths and moral aphorisms and elaborate parables made little impression on my mind, except that I put the books down with the impression that mysticism was something very esoteric and complicated. The Absolute Being was an infinite, timeless, peaceful, impersonal Nothing”.²⁴

In the end, the only thing of value that he says he got out of his study was a system of auto-suggestion that helped him to get to sleep. He concluded –

“Ultimately, I suppose, all Oriental mysticism can be reduced to techniques that do the same thing, but in a far more subtle and advanced fashion: and if that is true, it is not mysticism at all. It remains purely in the natural order. That does not make it evil, *per se*, according to Christian standards: but it does not make it good, in relation to the supernatural. It is simply more or less useless, except when it is mixed up with elements that are strictly diabolical...”²⁵

Merton confirmed this view in passing in a book on the psalms, *Bread in the Wilderness*, published in 1954.

“Adam in Eden could see through creation as through a window. God shone through the windowpane as bright as the light of the sun... But the Gentiles had begun to forget the sky, and to light lamps of their own, and presently it seemed to them that the reflection of their own room in the window was the ‘world beyond’. They began to worship what they themselves were doing... Buddha knew too well that the reflections in the window were only projections of our own existence and our own desires, but did not know that this was a window, and that there could be sunlight outside the glass...”²⁶

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Merton had thus rejected the tendencies in each of these movements well before he became a Catholic. Moreover, the vows he took in simple form on 19th March 1944, and in solemn form three years later, served to reinforce his rejection of these movements. His vow of *Stability*, which included a vow of poverty, served to inoculate him against his tendency to Communism which pretends to solve the problem of poverty by material, and violent, means. His vow of *Conversion of Manner of Life*, which included a vow of chastity, addressed his native tendency to self absorption and unchastity which his preoccupation with psychoanalysis had reinforced. His vow of *Obedience*, which involved the submission of his will to the will of God, buttressed him against the tendency to follow false gods which is one of the effects of oriental ‘mysticism’.

²⁴ *Elected Silence*, op. cit., p. 123

²⁵ *Ibid*

²⁶ Thomas Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness*, Hollis & Carter, London, 1954, pp. 56.

The terms of his vocation, then, were clear. Anything which would run counter to these undertakings given on oath to Almighty God, was anathema. In 1954, he acknowledged this explicitly:

“[P]urity of heart, which is the reason for the monk’s existence since it perfects his union with God in experience and brings him to the gate of heaven, becomes the rule and measure of all his activities. Everything that brings him closer to this end is good. Everything that draws him away from the end is either useless or obnoxious...”²⁷

Yet, as his writings show, he was to return to each of these movements in the years that followed. Why did he do so?

The Key

The key to understanding Merton’s conduct and why he came to lose sight of his vocation is his tendency to self-absorption. This is patent in the numerous entries in his extensive diaries. The one he looks to for advice is himself: regrettably, the one who gives it to him has not the resources to provide it.

Even before he entered religion Merton was familiar with the works of the Church’s *Mystical Doctor*, St John of the Cross. In an entry in his diary of October 1st, 1939 he acknowledges St John’s insistence that the soul seeking perfection must suffer the refinement of its three faculties, intellect, will and memory. But he has problems with the purging of this last, memory. He is well aware that St John says that one aspiring to sanctity must practice emptying his memory of all that has gone before, but he resists this teaching. By March 4th 1951 he is justifying to himself his continuing indulgence in the past—

“It is useless to drop [this Journal] and say I am solitary just because I am not writing a Journal, when in fact the writing could help me find my way to where I am supposed to be travelling.

“So I read about forgetting and write down all I remember. Somehow there is no contradiction here. It is simply a somewhat peculiar way of becoming a saint. I by no means insist that it is sanctity. All I say is that I must do what the situation seems to demand, and sanctity will appear when out of all this Christ in His own good time appears and manifests His glory.”

Merton regards himself as a special case: he is to have his own, unique way, of becoming a saint. He is well aware of the dangers to religious vocation of the vice of *singularity*, the attitude of the monk who thinks he is different to the others, that he need not conform to the rules of the house. He had written about it in *The Seven Storey Mountain*:

“The best of [the novices] were the ones who fell in with the common norm without fuss and without any special display. They attracted no attention to themselves, they

²⁷ *Bread in the Wilderness*, op. cit., p. 14.

just did what they were told. But they were always the happiest ones, the most at peace. They stood at the mean between two extremes. On one hand there were one or two who exaggerated everything they did... [who] seemed to be trying to make themselves saints by sheer effort... But then there were also the ones who did little or nothing to sanctify themselves... They followed the others and kept the Rule after a fashion, but as soon as they thought they were sick they started pleading for all the mitigations that they did not already have...²⁸

St John of the Cross teaches specifically also (in respect of the change in the form of prayer in the developing contemplative) the folly of returning to the means once the end has been achieved.²⁹ Yet here is Merton preoccupied with means, when he has already attained the end, the donation of himself to Christ. This blindness to the truth that he has already arrived at 'where he is supposed to be travelling' will get worse in the years to come.

The effects of this vice of self-absorption were vacillation and instability. On some days his diary shows him at peace: on others he is questioning his vocation. He is never long content, always wondering what he should be doing, where he should be aiming. His soul does not repose ultimately in God, but in himself. It is a fearful predicament. How disturbing, for example, is the diary entry on 15th November 1957:

"Feast of the Dedication of the Church This always turns out to be a feast of anguish as well as one of joy... 'They shall stand forever within the sacred walls.' I too 'stand forever', placed in a permanent position. I am glad. I am truly happy, I am really grateful to God—for it means eternal salvation.

Yet it raises again the unanswerable question: 'What on earth am I doing here?' I have answered it a million times. 'I belong here.' But that is no answer..."

And this, of 28th May, 1959, the Feast of *Corpus Christi*—

"The truth is that something inexplicable draws me away from here, something indefinable makes me uneasy here (I do not say unhappy)—always the old story of 'something missing'. What? Is it something essential? Won't there always be 'something missing'?"

The life of the religious is the love of God, a love that does not count the return it expects. *Love is a fire no waters avail to quench, no floods to drown. For love a man will give up everything he has in the world, and think nothing of his loss.*³⁰ This is the spirit that had moved him to enter Gethsemani. *The Seven Storey Mountain* is replete with it. Yet he seems to have forgotten.

²⁸ *Elected Silence* op. cit., pp. 269-270

²⁹ *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Bk II, chs 13-15: my translation, Kieran Kavanaugh & Otilio Rodriguez, *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*, Washington, 1979, pp. 140-9.

³⁰ *Song of Songs* 8: 7

There is a principle in the spiritual life that its great spiritual doctors have ever insisted on: *not to advance, is to regress*³¹. After his initial enthusiasm and rigour, Merton had ceased to advance in the spiritual life: it followed inevitably that he would regress. His renewed involvement with Communism and with oriental 'mysticism' was at first little more than dabbling, something his peers might have looked at askance as a peculiar bent but still capable of being treated in the context of a true religious life. In time, however, he began to commit himself again to these fads. This was accompanied by other signs of a weakening of faith.

First, however, he was to find himself involved once again with psychoanalysis.

[To be continued]

Michael Baker

4th March 2007 — *Second Sunday of Lent*

³¹ As relayed, for example, in Fr Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange's *The Three Ages of the Spiritual Life*, (B Herder Book Co., New York, 1947) Volume I, p. 377.