

Thomas Merton: American Mystic

It is hard to imagine a religion that has not been influenced by the idea of mystery. In fact, it could be argued that religion began as an attempt to explain the mysterious. Because of this core idea of mystery at the heart of religion, mysticism is still today a part of most of the major religions. In some, like Zen Buddhism or Taoism, the entire religion is structured around mysticism, or around some practical method for uniting with the mystical. In the West, mysticism has been on somewhat less of a sure footing. Sufism, Cabalism, and Christian mysticism have all been seen as part of the fringe, and sometimes as stepping over the bounds and becoming heretical. This is probably because these religions are theistic, and their God is the transcendent creator of the universe.

The reason this is a problem is that mystical experiences tend to be experienced as a kind of union with the ultimate, and in a theistic system, union with God in such a way as to make oneself identical with God in a unequivocal way is not acceptable. Another problem is that a mystical experience tends to give the person a sense that God is somehow present in all things. This is pantheism and also unacceptable.

The limitations of language in expressing the mystical may be part of the problem because even such Christian giants as Augustine have expressed themselves in ways that border on pantheism. In his struggle to understand God, Augustine asks Him, "since nothing that exists could exist without you, does this mean that whatever exist does, in this sense, contain you"?¹

If Augustine had asserted this instead of asking, he may have gotten into trouble. For these reasons, mysticism in Christianity has always been, to a more or less degree, at odds with the authority of the church. However, it has never been stamped out, nor has the church ever really made a concerted effort to destroy mysticism; instead, they exist in a state of tension.

One of the most respected and well known Christian mystics of the twentieth century was the Trappist monk Thomas Merton. This paper will give a brief biographical sketch of Merton's life, focusing on the high points of his spiritual development, and then take a look at how he fit into the traditions of Christian mysticism.

Thomas Merton was born on December 31, 1915, in France, to an American mother and a New Zealander father. Both of his parents were artist, painters in particular. His father was religious but did not make an issue of it out of deference to his wife. Merton's mother wanted to keep her children from any

¹ St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Penguin Classics, New York, 1964. p. 22.

religious superstition, so he did not receive any religious training. Once, his mother took him to a Quaker meeting. For this reason, when Merton first became interested in religion he tried the Quakers, but found them unsatisfactory.²

Death played an important role in Merton's formation. His mother died of stomach cancer in 1921, when he was only six years old. At his mother's request he was not allowed to see her in the hospital, and she sent him a note telling him good-bye. She did not want his mind tainted by death. Merton's father died about ten years later, he never gives an exact date, of a brain tumor. He was left in the care of his maternal grandparents, both of whom died while he was in college. He himself had a close brush with death from gangrene, and his brother was killed in WWII.

One can see Merton's mystical struggle with death in the poem he wrote to his brother, John Paul, found at the end of *The Seven Storey Mountain*:

FOR MY BROTHER: REPORTED MISSING IN ACTION, 1943

*Sweet brother, if I do not sleep
My eyes are flowers for your tomb;
And if I cannot eat my bread,
My fasts shall live like willows where you died.
If in the heat I find no water for my thirst,
My thirst shall turn to springs for you, poor traveller.*

*Where, in what desolate and smokey country,
Lies your poor body, lost and dead?
And in what landscape of disaster
Has your unhappy spirit lost its road?*

*Come, in my labor find a resting place
And in my sorrows lay your head,
Or rather take my life and blood
And buy yourself a better bed --
Or take my breath and take my death
And buy yourself a better rest.*

*When all the men of war are shot
And flags have fallen into dust,
Your cross and mine shall tell men still
Christ died on each, for both of us.*

² Merton, Thomas, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, HBJ Publishing, 1948. All biographical information, unless otherwise noted is from this source. This is the first book Merton wrote upon entering the monastery, and he did so under his abbot's orders. It is the best single source for information of Merton's life and thought.

*For in the wreckage of your April Christ lies slain,
And Christ weeps in the ruins of my spring;
The money of Whose tears shall fall
Into your weak and friendless hand,
And buy you back to your own land:*

*The silence of Whose tears shall fall
Like bells upon your alien tomb.
Hear them and come: they call you home.*

Death is in some sense a part of all religion, and to the extent that it touched Merton's life, it directed him to spiritual matters. One case in point is that Merton first began to pray as his father lay sick and dying.

In regards to his education, Merton had a very diverse one. It began in America where his parents moved just before his mother became ill, and continued in Bermuda where his father went to paint. After there, he returned to France, and then into the English public school system. It was in England that Merton first went to college at Cambridge. He was majoring in French Literature. Merton did not like Cambridge, so he transferred to Columbia in New York after one year. It was here that he completed his bachelor's degree, and then went on to get a Master's degree in the literature of the Romantics.

It was one of these Romantics, William Blake that had a profound effect on Merton's spiritual development. Merton writes that it was "through Blake that I would one day come, in a round-about way, to the only true Church."³ Dante also had an influence on Merton. Upon reflection he considered Dante the only good reading he did at Cambridge.

Merton flirted with Communism and Freudian psychoanalysis, but dropped them at Columbia after he came under the influence of Etienne Gilson who wrote *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*. This led him into Scholastic thought and in turn led him to St. John of the Cross. Things began to move fast now. After reading Aldous Huxley's *Ends and Means*, Merton became fascinated with mysticism.⁴

Finally Merton could take the pull God was placing on him no longer, and he converted and was baptized into the Catholic church. After teaching for a few years, he decided to join the Trappist monastery of Gethsemani. Here he wrote extensively on everything from war to Zen. He went to Asia for a conference on eastern and western mysticism. It was here on December 10, 1968 that he accidentally electrocuted himself in the shower.⁵

³ Ibid, p.88.

⁴ Merton, Thomas, *The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton*, Farrar, Strauss, and Cudahy, New York, 1959., p.268.

⁵ de Waal, Ester, *A Seven Day Journey With Thomas Merton*, Servant Publications, 1992., p.29.

Mysticism is frequently seen as a kind of ascent. This is true of Christian mysticism as well but with a difference. In Christian mysticism, man's ascent to God can not begin until God has first descended to man. The apostle John, the most mystical of the original twelve disciples writes, "we love because He first loved us"(I John 4:19).

This is true for Merton as well. One of his foremost books about the mystical life is titled *The Ascent To Truth*. Merton believed that this ascent began with baptism. He writes that "the essential thing was to begin the climb. Baptism was that beginning, and a most generous one, on the part of God".⁶ In this regard he was following in the footsteps of one of the first of the Christian mystics-Origen.

The Christian mystic that Merton is probably most like is Augustine. This shows itself in many ways. The first is in how he chose his vocation. The way he finally decided to join the Trappist, which is what he wanted to do, was to open the Bible at random and point to a verse. He picks the verse in Luke where the angel says "behold, thou shall be silent" (Luke 1:20) The Latin word for silence, *Tacerns*, is the closet word to Trappist in the Bible.⁷ Merton admits that he distrusted this and was confused how to take it, but he believed that it held an underlying truth for him.

Another important way in which he was like Augustine, is his idea of a mystic developing in a community. Some traditions, like Evagrius', believe that a person had to be completely isolated. Augustine had an unresolved tension in his theology between solitude and community, but he did believe that he mystical life involved communion with others.

It was "in silence that Merton discovered that being a monk is preeminently a social calling".⁸ This is one of the reasons that Merton joined the Trappist. For, while they had no unnecessary conservation, they did everything together. The Carthusians, an order he almost joined, did everything separately, in cells. Merton believed this was not as good as working, studying, singing, and eating in community.

One other way in which he was like Augustine is in the importance he places on love. Augustine believed that one should pursue God with single minded devotion. Likewise, Merton believed that love is "the heart and life of all true mysticism".⁹ He also believed that the only way to truly love one's fellow man was through loving God. He writes that "if I am to love my brother, I must somehow enter deep into the mystery of God's love for him".¹⁰

⁶ *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p.221.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.334.

⁸ Nouwen, Henri J., *Pray to Live: Thomas Merton: a Contemplative Critic*, Fides Publishing, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1972., p. 51.

⁹ *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 187.

¹⁰ Merton, Thomas, *No Man is an Island*, HBJ Publishing, New

Like all mystics, Merton believed that one had to exert his will to make the ascent. The first step has to be in the realm of purification. One has to rid themselves of their fears and anxieties and above all their concern for self. In reflecting on his past, Merton realized that before his conversion he had "at last become a true child of the modern world, completely tangled up in petty and useless concerns with myself".¹¹

To overcome this one has to engage in some measure of silence, solitude, and contemplation. Merton believed that "you cannot love Him [God] unless you know Him. And you cannot come to know Him unless you have a little time and a little peace in which to pray and to think about Him and study His truth".¹²

One of the most important processes of purification, for Merton, is prayer. Here he is like Evagrius even if he did not agree that it had to be done in complete solitude. Merton believed that the greatest work of the monk would be prayer.¹³

This purification process also had a moral element to it. However it was not an end in itself, only a process. The end goal was union with God. Like purification, union is common to all mystical traditions. The difference is that in theistic mysticism union is with God. Merton writes that "the moral life leads to something beyond itself- to the experience of union with God, and to our transformation in Him".¹⁴

Merton also saw mysticism as having an element of illumination. Merton had a mystical experience in Cuba, before entering the monastery, in which he experienced illumination. In describing it he writes that "it was as if I had been suddenly illuminated by being blinded by the manifestation of God's presence. The reason why the light was blinding and neutralizing was that there was and could be simply nothing in it of sense or imagination".¹⁵

Illumination as blindness is an interesting paradox, and it leads directly into a final aspect of Merton's mysticism. Merton like many mystics, especially Denys, was a follower of apophatic theology. He did not believe that any "idea of ours, let alone any image, could adequately represent God, but also that we should *not* [emphasis his] allow ourselves to be satisfied with any such knowledge of Him".¹⁶

York, 1955., p.7.

¹¹ *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p.163.

¹² Merton, Thomas, *The Ascent to Truth*, HBJ Publishing, New York, 1951., p. 4.

¹³ Merton, Thomas, *The Monastic Journey*, Sheed, Andrews, and McMeel, Inc., Kansas City, 1977., p.141.

¹⁴ *The Ascent to Truth*, p.8.

¹⁵ *The Seven Storey Mountain*, pp. 284-285.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 174-175.

In order to know God, one must "cease to rely on concepts as approximate means of union with Him".¹⁷ In his views on such matters Merton was influenced greatly by St. John of the Cross, however he acknowledges the influence of others when he writes that "the Fathers and the great Scholastics agree that the via negation is the way to a true contact with God, a true possession of God in darkness".¹⁸

Thomas Merton, then, like all mystics, believed that the ascent to God involved purification, illumination, and union. He thought that the process must include prayer, solitude, silence, and effort, but within in the context of God's grace (by necessity). He also believed that one could never truly know God in any positive sense alone, and that the final goal of union with God would not take place until death had worked our final transformation.

However, like most Christian mystics, he was not immune from charges of unorthodoxy. In his final years he was very interested in Zen, but besides that there appears to be something about describing a mystical experience that gets mystics in trouble. After the mystical experience in Cuba mentioned above, Merton's first thought was "Heaven is right here in front of me: Heaven, Heaven!"¹⁹

This is very similar to the verse in *The Gospel of Thomas*, which Merton would not have read by this time in his life. It is because of expressions like this that mysticism exists in tension with the church. However Merton believed that mysticism was necessary to an active pursuit of God. He also believed that America was beginning to turn back to mysticism, and to the extent that this is true, Thomas Merton played a large role in bringing it about.

¹⁷ *The Ascent to Truth*, p.89. A great deal of this book is devoted to apophatic theology particularly chapters III, IV, V, VI, and VII, with such titles as "On a Dark Night" (III) and "The Crisis of Dark Knowledge" (VII).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.95.

¹⁹ *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p.285.