

# “YOUR OWN SELF”

Review of

Anne E. Carr

*A SEARCH FOR WISDOM AND SPIRIT:*

*Thomas Merton's Theology of the Self*

Foreword by Brother Patrick Hart

Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988

xii, 171 p. \$16.95 [clothbound]

Reviewed by **Paul J. McGuire, S.C.J.**

One of the motive factors behind Sister Anne Carr's fresh and insightful study of Thomas Merton's theology of the self is her conviction that Merton has become a "classic." Father David Tracy, her colleague at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, defines a classic as any person, event, text, image or symbol which discloses permanent possibilities of meaning and truth, even though necessarily expressed within the limited context of a particular time and place. Carr finds within Merton's explorations of the fragmented self a classic instance of the experience of God which is paradigmatic for many men and women in the contemporary world. Her analysis goes a long way in accounting for Merton's great popularity, not only as a best selling author during his own lifetime, but also for the sustained interest, especially among the young and well-educated, which has not abated in the twenty years since his death.

She identifies Merton as a theologian, not in the speculative tradition of academic or professional theology, but as one whose sources were in the monastic and mystical traditions of Christianity, and later in his life from Islamic and Oriental traditions, especially those of Zen and Tibetan Buddhism. Merton's reflections are an experimental contemplation, for they arise out of his own inner struggles and experiences in prayer, and they are an invitation to others to conduct their own similar experiments. His "Search for Wisdom and Spirit" resulted in a distinctively autobiographical theology whose development Carr traces and illumines "noting the rather startling changes of perspective which emerge at each stage."

Out of the vast corpus of Merton's writings, she selects eight texts in which the theme of the self occurs most clearly and is dealt with in an explicitly sustained fashion. The eight texts are grouped into five stages which span the last two decades of Merton's twenty-seven years as a monk at Gethsemani. The story that unfolds charts Merton's transformation from the "young self-negating and world-denying monk of 1949 to the mature self-affirming and world-embracing Asian traveler and religious seeker of 1968." Her final chapter, "The Story of the Self," is a summation and review of the book; some readers might find it helpful to begin here to gain an overview before taking up the more detailed treatment in chapters one through five.

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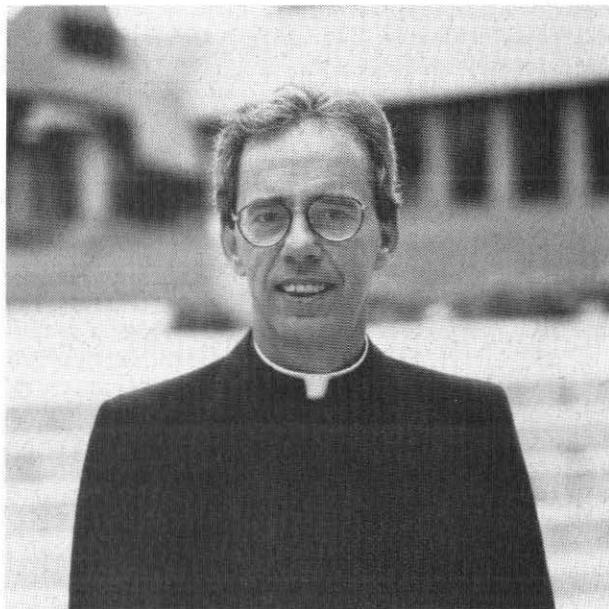
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The first of Merton's works studied for its discussion of the distinction between the real and illusory self is *Seeds of Contemplation* (1949). Merton was convinced that the monastic experience of union with God through prayer was a spiritual adventure which was open to and needed by Catholics who were not monks. Read from the vantage of forty years hindsight, the tensions and the incompatible directions of this book point to the insufficiency of Merton's underlying theological vision. Using a framework of a strict dichotomy between the natural and the supernatural, he attempts to affirm the sacramental presence of God in all things ("Everything that is, is Holy"), yet he also insists on the necessity of withdrawal and oblivion of all things. This distrust of the goodness of ordinary human life is joined to the recent convert's self-disgust which borders on self-hatred. Noting these extremities, Carr raises the issue whether Merton's vision of self-annihilation in God was "too extreme for a really Christian, that is, incarnational, foundation of spirituality."

Making good use of both primary and secondary sources, Carr presents a clear and succinct account of the differences between *Seeds of Contemplation* (1949) and *New Seeds of Contemplation* (1961). Merton's own assessment of the earlier work was mixed. He recognized its cold severity and its negativity. Twelve years later, he published a completely revised version in which he makes extensive use of Jacques Maritain's distinction between the individual and the person. The individual represents the material pole of the self which grasps, snatches and absorbs for itself; it is the "hateful ego." The person represents the spiritual pole whose potential for transformation is founded on its ability to choose to give one's self over to others and to God. Those who lack a background in Maritain's Neo-Thomism may find tough going in this section, but it is an important idea which Carr returns to several times in her text.

Carr describes the second phase of Merton's development of a theology of the self as a transition in his understanding. From this period, she examines *The Silent Life* (1957) and "The Inner Experience," a work which was partly published in 1959, but which has had an extended and complicated revision and publication history. One of the ideas which most influenced Merton at this time was the Patristic distinction between the image and the likeness of God in the human being. Even after original sin, the image remains as the indelible, God-like quality of human freedom and spiritual self-determination; the likeness, which has been lost, is the participation in the life of God by charity. The discovery of the true self is a process in which the "image" is re-integrated and restored to its full "likeness" by stripping away all that is alien to the authentic self's identity.

The textual turning point in Merton's written record of his spiritual experience is *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966), which contains materials taken from notebooks which he had been keeping since 1956. It recounts the famous "revelation" in Louisville when Merton,



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on business for the Abbey, in the heart of the downtown shopping district, was overwhelmed by a sense of love and oneness with all the people there, and by extension to the whole human race. Reversing the prayer of the Pharisee in the Gospel, Merton prayed, "Thank God that I am like other men." From this time his writings become more open, more incarnational, less elitist, less isolated. He found himself called to give creative consent to the ordinary and simple things of life, distinguishing the real and illusory selves by humbly accepting his humanity with its desires, its dark side and its ultimate indigence. Following the interpretation of Michael Mott's masterful biography, Carr situates the incident in Louisville within the context of Merton's writings of that time, especially the prose poem *Hagia Sophia* (1962).

In the final two stages of Merton's development, Carr first notes his turn toward the East which is represented in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (1968). This new openness to the spiritual traditions of the East is a marked turnabout from his hostile (and uninformed) position as a young monk. He never failed to recognize that Buddhism and Christianity were "worlds apart," but he found in Zen a way of going beyond the empirical, talking ego of the West to arrive at an awareness of true self which is always and already there. In the posthumously published works, *Contemplative Prayer* (1969) and *Contemplation in a World of Action* (1971), he celebrates the importance of achieving one's true identity as an autonomous person through the choices one makes; only in this way is someone able to give one's self completely to another "precisely because he is his own to give." In this final integration, one passes through the dread of the "dark night" which is a necessary step toward a mature spirituality wherein one finds "what one is meant to be."

Carr has produced a work which is both a valuable contribution to the ever-growing literature of Merton studies and a first-rate book of spiritual theology in its own right. It is singularly well written and clear, aside from a few dense passages in the first chapter. One issue which might have been dealt with more directly concerns the central topic of the book, which Merton variously termed the distinction between the true/ false self, the real/ illusory self, the inner/ exterior self. If, as Carr contends late in her book (p. 87 and p. 125), important differences are encoded in these various usages, then it might have been more helpful if she had pointed them out along the way. In the earlier chapters, they seem to be used in an undifferentiated manner.

Interest in Merton remains high because his writings reveal a man who was passionately engaged in life and who relentlessly searched out his own experience. His quest for self-discovery was a pursuit of inner freedom leading to self-transformation. His books are suggestions for the reader's own self-experimentations. In the preface to the Japanese edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he wrote:

*I speak to you, in some way, as your own self. Who can tell what this may mean? I myself do not know. But if you listen, things will be said that are perhaps not written in this book. And this will be due not to me, but to One who lives and speaks in both."*

