

JUNGIAN COMMENTARY ON THOMAS MERTON

Review of

Robert G. Waldron

Thomas Merton in Search of His Soul:

A Jungian Perspective

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Reviewed by **John Eudes Bamberger, OCSO**

Inevitably, any attempt to explain a person's life and work requires some point of view, or a number of points of view, perhaps. Since any chosen perspective from which to view a subject will always have its bias and fail to observe the whole person as he himself actually experienced his life, such efforts are always, at best, only approximations or near likenesses of the original. The author of this study announces in his "Introduction" that he intends to write "a Jungian commentary on Thomas Merton's life," so that this work represents an attempt, it would seem, to provide some more profound grasp of the man, Merton, making use of the principles of Jungian analysis. More specifically, Waldron announces that he will evaluate Merton's process of individuation first by a study of his encounter with his shadow. Other related concepts in the Jungian system are dealt with in this first part of his work, such the dynamics of the ego, the Self, the persona and the psychic mechanism of projection. The second section of this work explores Merton's unconscious through his encounter with his *anima*.

There are a number of helpful insights to be gained from an attentive reading of this work that make it worth reading, provided the reader does not expect too much. That Merton was a highly "individuated" person in the Jungian sense of that term was true enough, in my opinion. But I happen to have serious reservations about the relationship of this concept to the concept of holiness that the author does not share. On the contrary, he states that "There is little difference, if any, between the individuated person and the holy person." I fear that if this is the case, Jung would not qualify for either title, as anybody familiar with the most frank of his biographers and who has the slightest tinge of Christian or Jewish, for that matter, spirituality and morality is forced to admit. Jung was a very strong personality in many respects. He was a highly differentiated character on the psychological level, but he had achieved a very limited degree of integration of the anima with his actual life situation, though this had been kept out of sight by his followers as well as by his own autobiography and some of the biographical works.

These remarks on Jung seem necessary because they underline what I consider to be important reservations about any attempt to explain a person's life that makes use of such a relatively limited system as Jung's, though I consider it to be the most fertile of the modern depth psychologies. None of them is equipped to deal with the question of holiness; nor does any one system provide adequate insight into the human personality and character, however useful some of them may prove to be when properly employed to help gain partial insight into certain areas of the psychic life.

Holiness, far from being equivalent to individuation and integration, is a statement concerning the moral, ethical and spiritual worth of a person. It involves a system that transcends the psychic without excluding it. It will also be defined in somewhat different ways depending on the belief system, not primarily on psychological data. In Jung these dimensions are often unclear. If one reads his "Answer to Job" as psychology, it can be quite helpful as a confrontation with the shadow, with the evil that each of us has to encounter

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at some time or other in life. On the other hand, of one takes Jung's words as theological statements which some of them give every appearance of being, they are Gnostic and Manichean in their view of God. Judged by the standards of Gnostic morality, Jung could perhaps be considered holy; judged by Christian norms the evidence suggests that one can make no such claim for him. Because Merton's life was dedicated to the search for Christian holiness, this distinction is not a minor one. Confusion on this issue can only lead to a distorted representation of Merton's life and his character.

As I observed above, however, this work does provide some helpful insights into Merton's psychic life and does assist us to form an idea as to the significance of certain experiences in his life in terms of his personal development. For one thing the author has a very full grasp of Merton's writings, and of the biographical data. This allows him to make some helpful observations based on a careful reading of certain texts and, in particular, a careful attention to the images used in some of Merton's poetry, and also a sensitivity to the details of some dreams which he reported. Jungian analysis is at its best, perhaps, in its treatment of symbols which abound in Merton's poetry, and, still more, in its interpretation of dreams, and I consider that the section of this book treating of those dreams which provide light on Merton's anima are the most useful and profound.

The concept of confrontation of the shadow and its great importance in the process of individuation is a very fertile one, though it does not account for moral evil or treat of it from a spiritual perspective. The treatment of Merton's repeated encounters with his shadow is well described and analyzed in the first part of this book. It gives a helpful understanding of the serious conflicts and prolonged struggles Merton had as he very honestly and courageously sought to face what was least lovable in him — provided one is aware of the limitations of such a psychic reality when used to discuss the spiritual life of a monk who sought primarily to be pleasing to God by avoiding sin and by being faithful to the requirements of true love. The author of this work deftly brings out the psychic reality quite convincingly, but here too there is need to underline the fact that for Merton this was experienced essentially in the light of an encounter with God, and it was his contemplative knowledge of the holiness of God that caused him to see the evil in his own heart for what it was. There is much more here than psychic reality.

In fact, toward the end of his life Merton did speak very directly about his encounter with our shadow and obviously is speaking from intimate, personal experience. That he sees it as more than a process of integration, though it certainly includes that, is quite clear. He states the case with an eloquence that reveals something of the deep feeling he had about this matter. The specifically *religious* nature of Merton's life, and not his psychic wholeness, gives the only full picture of Merton the man. Note that in his mentioning of evil he is also conscious of the good in this passage, and that he ends with a reference to the whole Christ.

This is precisely the monk's chief service to the world: this silence, this listening, this questioning, this humble and courageous exposure to what the world ignores about itself — both good and evil He experiences in himself the emptiness, the lack of authenticity, the quest for fidelity, the "lostness" of modern man, but he experiences all this in an altogether different and deeper way than does man in the modern world, to whom this disconcerting awareness of himself and of his world comes rather as an experience of boredom and of spiritual disorganization The monk faces the worst, and discovers in it the hope of the best. From the darkness comes light. From death, life. From the abyss there comes, unaccountably, the mysterious gift of the Spirit sent by God to make all things new, to transform the created and redeemed world, and to re-establish all things in Christ.

(Contemplative Prayer, pp. 27-28)

The search Merton was engaged in found its fulfillment, not in psychic wholeness as such, though he attained a high measure of this at the end, but in the life of the Spirit that united him with all who belong to the whole Christ.