

# Reading Thomas Merton as a Non-Christian

by **Vincent J. Matsko**

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Allow me to take a moment to explain myself as a “non-christian.” I do not dispute the historical accuracy of the New Testament — even to the point of Jesus Christ’s resurrection — for, indeed, is anything impossible to God? Nor do I discredit accounts of miracles or the profound impact that Christ still makes on people today. But I do not accept Christ as a personal Savior; I do not experience an intimate relationship with Christ; nor do I read the New Testament with any regularity.

And yet Thomas Merton speaks to me. It began as I “stumbled upon” a copy of *New Seeds of Contemplation* in a used bookstore in Pittsburgh. Or, perhaps I could say that I found what God had placed before me. For it is this book, along with *Peace Pilgrim: Her Life and Work in Her Own Words*,<sup>1</sup> which has spoken to me like no other. Were I stranded on a remote desert island, only being able to take along with me, say, six pages of printed text, I would choose the chapter “Integrity” in *New Seeds of Contemplation*.<sup>2</sup> Why this chapter? Merton begins by exposing our inauthenticity:

Many poets are not poets for the same reason that many religious men are not saints: they never succeed in being themselves. They never get around to being the particular poet or the particular monk they are intended to be by God. They never become the man or the artist who is called for by the circumstances of their individual lives.

They waste their years in vain efforts to be some other poet, some other saint . . . [p. 98].

We are tempted to counter this sentiment with an almost cliché response of “just be true to yourself.” Indeed, Merton uses similar words later, but then he hurls an exquisite wrench into our musings by offering this: “[i]n great saints you find that perfect humility and perfect integrity coincide.”

Unsurprisingly, Merton in this chapter addresses two crazed twentieth-century values which are obstacles to being humble, success and acquisition:

Hurry ruins saints as well as artists. They want quick success and they are in such haste to get it that they cannot take time to be true to themselves. And when the madness is upon them they argue that their very haste is a species of integrity. . . . [T]he humble man takes whatever there is in the world that helps him to find God and leaves the rest aside [pp. 99-100].

These are just a few points in a totally appealing chapter. I experience inexplicable peace of mind as I imagine integrity as humility. Merton creates a context for integrity which cracks upon the oyster of conventional wisdom — integrity as honesty — and reveals the pearl inside.

Merton does all this without once referring to the person of Jesus Christ, although he refers to God. This chapter is a perfect example of why, for me, Merton is first a theist and only secondarily a Christian. My impression is that Thomas Merton relates *to God through Christ*. Although my impression might be doctrinally unsound and/or perhaps in opposition to the words of Merton himself (I have far to go in reading his work), it is this impression which strikes a chord in me with which the writings of Thomas Merton resonate. This resonance is truly life-altering — not in any sense dramatically — the overtones quietly and gradually carry one heavenward almost against one's will.

Although I am not a Christian, I am a theist as Merton is a theist, but Merton finds God through Christ, whereas I do not. I can relate to Merton's more ostensibly Christian writings by using Christ as a metaphor for one's "path." I believe that God does carve out different routes for different people. Merton's path was a monk's; my path is a mathematician's and educator's. I cannot resist quoting Agnes de Mille (presented to me only as a quote without a score):

There is a vitality, a life-force, an energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all of time, this expression is unique and if you block it, it will never exist through any medium and will be lost. . . the world will not have it. . . It is not your business to determine how good [your life-force and energy] is, nor how valuable, nor how it compares with other expressions . . . it is your business to keep it yours clearly and directly, to keep the channel open.

So I read Merton's "Christ" as "path," or perhaps "talent," and Merton makes sense to me. He makes more than merely sense: he imparts Truth. Merton so willingly allows his soul to be used as a mirror that the reflection of God in his writing seems to leap off the page at times. The delight is that there is no mirage here for God's reflection is actually no less than God. Merton is God's polished and reflected image, sharp and undistorted.

The curious reader may wonder (as did an advisor of the *Seasonal* who read a draft of this essay) why Merton appeals to me as a mathematician. As a matter of fact, I had never thought about this before and so I address the issue here for the first time. As an initial response I would say that Merton appeals to me as a mathematician because his writing is clear, simple and comprehensive. The world of mathematics is neither

black, white nor gray, but painted with all colors of the rainbow. There is an elegant, beautiful mathematics, as there is an ugly, plodding mathematics. There could be two theories which, from a purely technical point of view, explain a range of mathematical experiences, but one can be concise, lucid and lean, while the other can be wordy, obscure and cumbersome. I truly experienced my thesis advisor as an artist: he thought and did mathematics with an ongoing concern for elegance, precision, expressiveness, economy, and, yes, beauty. Doesn't an artist have the same concerns? I like my theology, as I like my mathematics, with clarity, simplicity and comprehensiveness but also with warmth, depth and compassion.

Purposefully avoiding closure, I take this opportunity to suggest that I find deep connections between the writings of Thomas Merton and those of Tibetan Buddhist Chögyam Trungpa. I invite comments from those who think similarly. In this spirit I close with a prayer offered by the Dalai Lama at the end of his autobiography:

“For as long as space endures and for as long as living beings remain,  
until then may I abide to dispel the misery of the world.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ocean Tree Books, Box 1295, Sante Fe, NM 87504.

<sup>2</sup>All Merton references are to *New Seeds of Contemplation*. New York: A New Directions Book, 1961.

<sup>3</sup>Tenzin Gyatso. *Freedom In Exile: The Autobiography of The Dalai Lama*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990, p. 271.