Moses as an Exemplar:
The Paradoxes of Thomas Merton

by **Patrick Reilly**

It is surprising that Hollywood has not yet filmed the story of Thomas Merton with someone like Tom Cruise or Mel Gibson in the starring role. This classic Augustinian tale of the reformed sinner, the rake turned penitent, reads like the scenario of a tinseltown script with all the necessary best-selling ingredients - many years after his reception into the Trappist community of Gethsemani, Merton remarked, only half jokingly, that the Abbot was loath to let him out of his sight in case he ran away with a woman. The events of his life are almost *too* bizarrely sensationalistic - if we saw them on the screen not already knowing them to be strictly true, we might object to the excessive melodrama: do you seriously expect us to swallow this? It was a career full of the most startling inconsistencies and tangled contradictions: the would-be hermit who became a bestselling author; the Trappist seeking refuge in the desert metamorphosed into a polemicist of international stature; the scorner of the world returning to the very cockpit of its contemporary disputes concerning nuclear weapons, the Vietnam War, racism, injustice, consumerism, environmental pollution; the mystic who insisted that words were useless as a medium of spiritual revelation and who wrote sixty books to prove it; the scathing critic of monasticism who was, nevertheless, the most exalted champion of the monk's life; the chooser of silence who simply would not hold his tongue. Encountering this life, one must be prepared, at least initially, to entertain contradiction and paradox. "My life is almost totally paradoxical . . . I find myself traveling towards my destiny in the belly of a paradox". His self-conceived role was to be a modern Jonah, the prophet of an age when truth could be formulated only as a paradox, as contradiction in the strict etymological sense of the word. Think of it, a hermit who became an international celebrity - it's almost as if Long John Silver were to become the Olympic sprint champion. If his life has provoked controversy, his death has been no less hospitable to speculation and rumour. To this day there are some who dismiss as government - sponsored lies the official version of his accidental electrocution by a faulty fan while having a shower during a break in the proceedings of a Bangkok conference where he had just spoken about the similarities between monasticism and Marxism. Certainly, as far as the American government was concerned, Merton had been a meddlesome priest who had

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given them many problems with regard to both their domestic and international policies, and the notion of CIA involvement in his death is not too fanciful for those who detect conspiracy in the atmosphere of our time. In death as in life, Merton continues to be a bafflingly challenging figure.

From very early on in Christianity there had been a counter-tradition of reticent mysticism, a theology of darkness set over against the mainstream theology of light. Moses travels from the light of the burning bush to the darkness of Mount Sinai to encounter the God who is hidden - and it is Moses, not the golden-tongued Aron, who is God's prophet precisely because Moses recognizes the inadequacy of words. And what does God say to Moses by way of identifying Himself? I am who am - the supreme tautology, bewildering rather than enlightening the auditor. In this tradition it is the illegitimacy of the intelligible that is emphasized: whatever is understood is false; when we talk about God, we deform and demean Him, for he is not to be understood or verbalized. God exists outside speech, on the other side of language - it is the contrary of St. John's assertion that the word became flesh and dwelt among us.

God cannot be known either to the senses or the intellect - God is not a being whose existence can be proved like any normal object of thought. God, declared Eckhart (the medieval mystic who carried this negative theology to its extreme) was Nothing. He called God 'darkness', not to denote the absence of light, but to indicate the presence of something brighter. God could only be known by mystical experience. It was better to speak of him in negative terminology, such as desert, wilderness, darkness and nothing. We have to purify our conception of God, getting rid of our ridiculous preconceptions and anthropomorphic images. We should even avoid using the term 'God' itself. "Man's last and highest parting is when, for God's sake, he takes leave of God." Since God was nothing, we had to be prepared to be nothing, too, in order to become one with Him. The mystic must refuse to be enslaved by any finite ideas about the divine - God must not be reduced to a concept that could be expressed by a human word. In this tradition of apophatic theology, there is a stress on silence, paradox and mystery.

This way of the void, of pure nothingness, of God as beingless being, recurs in Thomas Merton. In 1938 Merton noted the name Meister Eckhart for the first time in a notebook - by 1968 he was referring to him as "my life-raft." "I think more and more of him. He towers over all his century." He speaks of the witness of mystics like Eckhart for whom it is possible to be "so poor" that one does not even "have a God." Merton denied that this meant Christian atheism or God-is-dead theology - it is simply a fact of a certain area of apophatic experience. In his book *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966) he talks about Eckhart with the air of someone who has just made a great discovery. We can hear Eckhart's message in Merton: "Stand still and do not waver from your emptiness." "Learn to be at home in this darkness" - for it is only in this darkness that you can find God.

Eckhart's void, the void that Merton inherited from Eckhart, is, of course, not the void of the modern world, the void of atheism, of the death of God, a completely negative concept. God abhors a vacuum. When we empty ourselves, when the soul dares to become nothing, then we make room for God to enter and take possession. We must avoid the temptation to precipitate ourselves into activity and thus to escape that very sense of the void which is our sole salvation. Do not waver from your emptiness; overcome the panic that

drives you to become socially and politically engaged - anything to fill up the void. "Empty yourself so that you may be filled," says Eckhart quoting St. Augustine. "Learn not to love so that you may learn how to live." Before we can build, we must raze - first clear the slums of the spirit before raising the new building: as in town planning, so with spiritual renovation.

Man in the world pursues a life of ceaseless and sterile activity - activity is an addiction, a fix. The paradox is that man's highest activity is his rest, his contemplation. The Merton who entered the Trappist monastery at Gethsemani did so as disciple of Eckhart, speaking the language of Eckhart. "The only incorruptible things are silence, not knowing, not going, not waiting, mostly not saying . . . as soon as one has finished saying something it is no longer true . . . Love is all right as long as statements are not made." When a radical Catholic criticized him for being in the monastery instead of in the real world where the moral life was to be lived, he replied that "this kind of place is where I am finally reduced to my nothingness and have to depend on God. Outside I would be much more able to depend on talk." It was precisely in the hermit life that "one gradually comes face to face with the awful need of self-emptying and even of a kind of annihilation so that God may be all." He follows Eckhart in saying that God is not experienced as an object outside ourselves. He follows Pascal in setting over against the God of the rationalist metaphysicians the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, the Living God who is defiled by the images and concepts which we so easily allow to become idols and projections.

It all seems to fit so easily with a detachment from earthly concerns, the mystic's withdrawal from a world full of sound and fury, signifying nothing, a tale told by an idiot from which the god-filled man turns away in revulsion. Yet Merton, without forsaking Eckhart, was to become increasingly, sometimes scandalously, involved in worldly affairs. How are we to explain this paradox?

We can best understand Merton's startling shift from world-denying recluse to world-affirming reformer if we remember the radical opposition in western monasticism between Desert and City. Early monasticism was based on the conviction that it was not possible to live the Christian life in the city, that Christian perfection could be achieved only by fighting the Devil in the desert. How, it was asked, could one live an authentically Christian life in the worldly Church of the Theodosian establishment? In the course of the 4th century the Church had become the World - hence the call of the desert, the summons to return to the pristine purity of the first disciples. If the world and the body belong to Satan, then the sooner we reject the one and leave the other the better for us. In his book *In Praise of the Desert*, Eucherius of Lyon refers to Moses being commanded to loosen the straps of his sandals so as not to pollute the holy place; in like fashion, he who would come to the desert must cut himself off completely from his former life and previous ties in a parallel exodus from the contemporary equivalent of Egyptian bondage. It was, essentially, a spatial separation, an actual geographical relocation, an individual farewell to soul-destroying fleshpots in exchange for the harsh austerities of the salvific wilderness.

Against this idea of solipsist survival, the self rejecting every worldly tie to find rest in God, we must set Augustine's view of the monastery as the attempt to create a perfect community, the human society that comes closest to the City of God, rather than the self-centered pursuit of individual perfection. The monastery was to be a visible challenge to all other forms of social existence, not an abandonment of the city, but a

standard, a touchstone, for assessing and, as far as possible, correcting its faults. From a Desert perspective, the world and the established church had become promiscuously confused, virtually indistinguishable. The Desert was, above all, a condemnation of a church gone astray from its calling, an apostate church in a pagan world. But Augustine feared the Desert mentality and thought it would end in a ruinous split between a spiritual elite and the mass of ordinary believers. Augustine upheld the city against the desert - the latter smacked too much of a contempt for the human condition and a hatred of the body, the old Gnostic resentment against the material world versus the Christian idea of the body as the temple of the Holy Spirit. For Augustine, an elitist privacy, a self-serving separateness, is the major temptation and the most dangerous sin and so upheld community against individualism. His monk could live anywhere for his hermitage was a state of mind and soul, not a precisely literal desert environment; there was to be no negative turning away from the world in a spirit of pessimistic revulsion, rather a positive, communitarian dedication to the truths of religion. The world was not irretrievably wicked; it simply needed to be saved: Thy will be done on *earth* as it is in heaven.

In the thirty years of his Trappist vocation, we can see Merton moving from a life-denying to a life-affirming model of monasticism. The earlier Merton talked like Eucherius of Cassian: the wicked city of Rome overthrown by the barbarians who were God's chosen instrument for the fully deserved punishment of sin, became replicated in the wicked society of the modern USA, destined for a similar chastisement at the hands of the communists, the instrument of divine wrath in our time. Some of his early statements about the decision to become a monk might have been spoken by any of the Desert Fathers, so anxious at whatever cost to avoid and evade the corrupting world. He described modern civilization, plunging into world war, as "a shipwreck from which each single individual man had to swim for his life" - those who fail to save themselves will perish in the inevitable collective disaster. Swim away from the wreck - it is all you can do. "It seems to me that saving souls, and, of course, our own souls first (because that is the only case where selfishness is not a sin) is a long way ahead of economics and art and politics and the European war" - was the world ever more explicitly, decisively rejected? He described how he himself came to the monastery "in revolt against the meaningless confusion of a life in which there was so much activity, so much movement, so much useless talk, so much superficial and needless stimulation." He came to Gethsemani seeking the void, the refuge from the demonic activism, the dynamic ephemeralism, the cluttered emptiness, the junkyard that was modern culture. Is it unfair to speculate that he was as much, perhaps even more, in flight from himself as from the world he denounced? He seems to have turned away from the world the way a reformed alcoholic turns away from a drink; it may or may not be bad in itself, but it is most certainly bad for him. He had lived in his own person the philosophy of pleasure and he knew, no one better, that it ends in self-destruction and slavery. Moses fled Egyptian bondage, external chains; Merton came to Gethsemani to escape the fetters of self: "Who will deliver me from the body of this death?" It was to expiate his own sins that he sat, a guilty man in a silent cell, with no right to open his mouth save in self-accusation. It was almost as though self-detestation were the path to healing. In later years he was to speculate concerning the possible injustice he had done the world: "Perhaps the things I had resented about the world when I left it were defects of my own that I had projected upon it." In 1966 he self-mockingly referred to the great success of his bestseller, *The Seven Storey Mountain*: "Due to a book I wrote 30 years ago, I have myself become a sort of stereotype of the world-denying contemplative - the man who spurned New York, spat on Chicago, and tromped on Louisville, heading for the woods with Thoreau in one pocket, St. John of the Cross in another, and holding the Bible open at the Apocalypse." He now tended

to see the world as the scapegoat for his own sins. In an article entitled "Is the World a Problem?" he hints that the real problem is much closer to home: "The old problem came from the Carolingian view of the world and of Christian society. A world-denying society in the midst of the world - monks the professional world-deniers within that society. They cannot be left to their own freedom or even God's loving grace. Freedom must be taken away because it is their greatest peril. They have to be told at every step what to do - it is better if what they are told to do is displeasing to their corrupt nature, for this will keep them out of further subtle forms of mischief." Merton had clearly ceased to collude with the world-denying strain in monasticism. For him, rejection of the world and contempt of it is, now, *not* a choice, but the evasion of choice - the real Christian commitment is to *choose* the world. Our best adviser on sexual matters is not necessarily a reformed womanizer, nor is a reformed alcoholic our surest guide to a sensible use of strong drink. The recommendations of ex-libertines and ex-drunkards, valuable though they be, are too strongly conditioned by the negatives of their own personal experiences. Too fierce a denunciation of the world may just as easily signify a defect in the speaker as in the object of his attack.

The crucial change in Merton occurs in the 1960's, the period of the Vietnam War, nuclear proliferation, racial conflict, environmental pollution. His early attitude of total detachment from the world, his swim away from the wreck, gave way to a new stance of growing involvement with the sin and suffering of humanity. The chilling example of Eighmann showed that even the old hitherto unquestioned virtue of obedience to superiors might lead to abominations: to obey may be to offend God. He had come far from his statement in *The Waters of Siloe* in 1953 that the contemplative community will prosper to the extent that it "shuts out the world, and withdraws from the commotion and excitement of the active life, and gives itself entirely to penance and prayer." He now threw himself into the world of politics with all the partisan fervour of an Old Testament prophet, attacking all manner of social evils - the exploitation of the poor in South America abetted by the US government, the readiness of American Catholics to support the H-Bomb as a weapon of defence (he described this as Christ crucified anew by His own followers), a compromised church now safely integrated into the American power structure and giving its blessing to the consumerism, affluent society which stood at odds with the monastic ideal. He poured scorn on monks who sat in their bomb-proof shelters secure with the Blessed Sacrament. He now lambasted those who "retire into the ivory tower of private spirituality and let the world blow itself to pieces." The once-silent monk was now sounding forth on every conceivable social, political and economic issue. The vocation of the monk in the modern world, he declared, is not survival but prophecy: if the monk denies the existing world, it is because he insists that it must change, become God's creation rather than the world of Satan, of principalities and powers.

It is, above all, the unChristianity of the Christians that he denounces. It is the Christians who are the worst idolators because it is the affluent society they truly, secretly worship and they are prepared to kill at home and aboard to defend it: "We have to recognize that this order is disorder, and join the Negro in protesting against it." "This country lives by everything that is hostile to a truly monastic life," he declared, and we must imagine Moses in Egypt, trying to persuade the Israelites to turn away from the Egyptian equivalents of American consumerism, and forever being frustrated and rebutted. The old order is perishing, yet "instead of being spiritually liberated, Christians are rushing to submit to much more tyrannical structures: the absolute dominion of technology-politics-business (or state capitalism)." He vigorously defended his paradoxical posi-

tion as a contemplative monk immersed in the world's concerns in writing to Pope John as early as 1958: "the contemplative must have a grasp of the political, intellectual, artistic and social movements in this world . . . this poor world has a right to a place in my solitude."

Himself highly critical of what he saw as shortcomings in contemporary monastic life, he nevertheless reacted sharply to attacks from outsiders, even Catholic outsiders. He denies that the monastery is a hideaway from the world and that only in the latter does God wish us to confront and grapple with the problems of life. On the contrary, the monastery is simpler and saner than the world and only through contemplation can our problems be solved. But he was equally aware - he would have learned it from Eckhart if from nowhere else - how disastrously easy it is to make God in our own image and likeness and to substitute some idol of our own devising for the living God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Even Christ can be deformed into an idol, as in those American missionaries who carry culture to heathen lands and unconsciously pass it off as Christianity. Michaelangelo, too, is upbraided for turning Christ into Prometheus when he depicts Him in the Sistine Chapel with his great Greek muscles whipping the moneychangers from the temple. Some such distortions lie behind the image of Christ as Crusader, whether it be in the ancient crusades against Islam or in the modern crusade against Moscow. My Christ, our Christ - which is to say my, our degradation of Christ.

Even to speak of God, far worse to speak of my God - it is Eckhart's insight - is the dire occupational hazard of the religious mind. Instead of the self-annihilation, the void, the desert, in which we fall through the abyss of the self to rest in God, we have an egotistic fabrication of an idol to serve our needs and minister to our desires. My cow, we say, and we cherish it because it gives us milk. Eckhart's worst fear is that we are forever reducing the lord of the universe to a contrivance for supplying our wants and placating our egos. "My God loves me": we sing the hymn, blithely unaware of the scorn which this blatant egoism excites in the minds of ascetic thinkers like Eckhart, Nietzsche and, at least occasionally, Merton. Even in so intimate, so ostensibly unpractical a relationship as the soul-God one, the old human selfishness can sneak in, the more offensive because it is disguised in its Sunday clothes. For Eckhart and Merton, such religiosity is worse than atheism because it is, at bottom, idolatry; better no God at all than a God designed as a private or public convenience. Forget yourself or there will be no void for God to enter. Merton is contemptuous of the bogus mysticism that cultivates visions and heavenly sounds and raptures, all the redundant paraphernalia that accompanies the self-induced illumination of the psychedelic, the drug-taking drop-out, the do-it-yourself mystic. He preaches a total self-forgetting, "and this will take care of the rapture and all the rest because who will there be to be rapt?" God will come only when self departs.

I want to end in the desert, the desert where Merton did not so much try to find God as allow God to find him. Merton may have entered the desert in the spirit of the old Desert Fathers, renouncing both world and self as illusions, intent on creating the void so that the spirit of God might completely fill the vacuum. But, once there, he discovered the true self and the real world, God's creations both, from which he had so long been divorced. And if world and self are not, as in Eastern mysticism, pure illusion, but are the creation of God, then it is the human task to return them to the Creator in their pristine purity. It is the last of the paradoxes of Thomas Merton: we must first annihilate all creatures, the self included, so that God may be everything and the world nothing; but only as the necessary prelude for seeking a greater solidarity with all creatures so that the world

may acknowledge its Creator. You must first, as Thomas Merton, take a vow of silence in order to become a spokesman for God. You must throw away your life that you may save it, you must abandon the world that you may possess it completely - the meek shall inherit the earth, but only on the strict condition that their meekness should not be a strategy for annexation. Whatever it be - God, Christ, Heaven, contemplation - if we are too graspingly acquisitive, too programmatically proprietorial, in chasing after it, we shall thereby ensure its loss. Only those who forget themselves will come to the most consummate self-possession: the meek shall inherit the earth. Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. If nothing can comfort you save God, says Eckhart, truly God will comfort you. For every valley will be exalted and every mountain made low.

Not the Desert Fathers, but Moses is the true exemplar for Merton, the real clue as to what his experience of the desert truly means. I am who am. At first hearing, God's self-identification seems perversely niggardly, for He has told Moses nothing in this most insulting of tautologies. Only when we ponder this astounding communication does it break upon us that God has told Moses everything, that the fullness of Being is contained in these four simple words, that only He is and that every other created think, ourselves included, would fall into a black hole of non-being were it not for His sustaining hand. And it is with these words ringing in his ears that Moses leads his people, at God's command, into the desert. But Moses does not go into the wilderness to escape the world - or if he does, it is to escape the false world of Pharaoh and bondage. Moses travels through the desert, admittedly for many years, with many setbacks, with repeated backslidings and idolatries and hardships, so that in the end Israel may reach the promised land of milk and honey. As with Moses, so with Merton: the desert is not his destination, is not an end in itself; it is the wasteland, the place of stone and desolation through which everyone of us, Christ Himself not excepted, must pass before entering into beatitude.