

Thomas Merton's *New Seeds of Contemplation:* Revolutionary Happiness, Contemplation, and Solitude

by Timothy Mahoney

Editor's Note

Last year when Timothy Mahoney's article "Thomas Merton's *New Seeds of Contemplation: Revolutionary Happiness, Contemplation, and Solitude*" was accepted for publication in *The Merton Seasonal*, we hoped to devote an entire issue to the theme of contemplation in our times. As a result, the essay was put aside until more material of a similar nature was submitted. Rather than wait any longer, I have decided to publish it here as an opening article, which I trust will stimulate other writers to respond to some of the ideas offered in the present article.

This issue will complete my service as Interim Editor of *The Merton Seasonal*. With this final number under my editorship, I would like to express my gratitude to all who have assisted me, especially Brother Paul Quenon who has acted as Poetry Editor this past year. The ITMS Publications Committee has appointed Dr. Patrick O'Connell editor of the *Seasonal* for calendar year 1998. Submissions for the quarterly may be sent to him at Box 1028, Gannon University, University Square, Erie, PA 16541.

One way to distinguish conceptions of the ultimate state of human well-being—I will call it "happiness," even though most uses of the term today denote something that falls far short of that—is to divide them between *normal* conceptions and *revolutionary* conceptions.

Normal conceptions include those which assume that most people have conceptions of happiness that are roughly adequate; the problem of attaining happiness is essentially getting what one already wants. This rules out neither that people may improve their understanding of happiness by incremental revisions, nor that certain individuals may have defective understandings of happiness (for example, those who think that a lifetime of taking drugs is happiness). Nonetheless, if a conception of happiness is normal, it maintains that the average person's idea of happiness is roughly correct.

Revolutionary conceptions, by contrast, assume that the

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average person's conception of happiness is radically inadequate. Many ancient philosophers' conceptions of happiness are revolutionary; and those include Plato, the Stoics, and Plotinus among others. Some of these, for example Plato, believe that the vast majority of people are simply unable to understand genuine happiness. To the majority who share the conventional conception, a revolutionary conception of happiness seems to dismiss as irrelevant all that makes life worth living. Even the few who are capable of understanding the genuine conception must overcome the conventional conceptions that their societies impose on them (see, for example, Plato's *Republic* VI.490b ff.), and that is a long difficult process, so the seeming price of revolutionary concepts of happiness is very high. ("Seeming" because the long-term price of *not* grasping and pursuing the revolutionary conception, if it is correct, is even higher.) In addition, the one who sets out on the path described by a revolutionary conception forsakes what is known for what, at the very best, is dimly perceived, and at worst, is nothing more than a hope in some uncomprehended goal.

Contemplation, as described by Thomas Merton in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, is a conception of happiness. It is "the highest expression of man's intellectual and spiritual life";¹ it is the gift of God that "completes the hidden and mysterious work of creation,"² thereby bringing a person into the fullness of being with God,³ a fullness that God intends for everyone. It is a *revolutionary* conception of happiness, in the sense just described. It is quite opposed to normal conceptions of happiness: normal conceptions of happiness are constituted by getting what most people want. Most people do not want God alone; yet Merton writes: "Everything you love for its own sake, outside of God alone, blinds the intellect and destroys your judgment of moral values."⁴ One must detach oneself not only from material goods, but also "from rational and intellectual and spiritual goods,"⁵ including such seeming "contemplative goods" as "recollection and interior peace and the sense of the presence of God."⁶ What is required is a "blind leap of ascetic detachment"⁷ spurred by the attempt "to undertake a *total renunciation of all attachments*."⁸ This attempt is successful only when the grace of the Holy Spirit "leads us into the true darkness, the heart of mystic desolation."⁹

This description is repugnant to those who hold a normal conception of happiness. I further suspect that most professed religious people of whatever faith, people who might give some *verbal* allegiance to such an ideal, also find it repulsive, even if they dare not say so. Nietzsche mocks this ideal as a terminally sick and unnatural masochism,¹⁰ and many would agree if forced to speak their minds.

But Merton does not conceive of this happiness as appropriate for the few; it is God's goal for every person.¹¹ To be sure, this end, for which we are all made, "cannot be clearly explained. It can only be hinted at, suggested, pointed to, symbolized. The more objectively and scientifically one tries to analyze it, the more he empties it of its real content, for this experience is beyond the reach of verbalization and of rationalization."¹²

Thus, to set out on this path is to head towards something that is defined only by various shades of darkness, and the darkness thickens the closer one comes to the goal.

Merton's conception is revolutionary (in the sense defined), but it is not new; Christ claims that one must take up one's cross to follow Him and that to fulfill one's life, one must lose it (Matt. 16:24–25). For centuries the contemplative ideal was promoted within a culture that was centered on Christianity and the Church. But such an ideal has become harder to sustain since the dawn of modernity when various forces—including murderous religious divisions, the rise of the nation state, and economic and technological innovations—cast Christianity from the center of Western culture. As the

very entity that nourished contemplation moved to the periphery, contemplation itself became more and more alien. Besides the weakening of the Church, other powerful forces also militated against contemplation. Merton himself castigates one of the fathers of modernity: “Nothing could be more alien to contemplation than the *cogito ergo sum* of Descartes.”¹³ Descartes’ conception of the ego is a prototype of the modern conception of the heroic, solitary individual: Descartes’ conception makes thinking the essential human activity; others will identify this activity as feeling or willing, but the focus is the solitary self making its own way through the world. As Hobbes is quick to note, these solitary selves are forced to take account of each other in their mutual contact, but the self remains the center, even if it happens to be located in a liberal, free-market democracy rather than in the totalitarian state Hobbes envisaged. But the self is not at the center of contemplation; God is: “For the contemplative there is no *cogito* (“I think”) and no *ergo* (“therefore”) but only *SUM*, I Am. Not in the sense of a futile assertion of our individuality as ultimately real, but in the humble realization of our mysterious being in whom God dwells.”¹⁴ (As we shall see below, solitude is necessary for contemplation, but this is not to be understood so much as a turning inward toward the self, but as a process in which one breaks the bonds of the self that keep one from realizing the presence of the great “I Am.”)

Other pressures of modernity bring the collective rather than the self to the fore. Science, which is *the* paradigm for knowledge in the modern era, is an impersonal entity in which the collective, not the individual, is the norm. There are, of course, towering individuals such as Newton and Einstein, but even these giants do not attain their status unless their ideas are certified by the impersonal collective applying the standard of reproducible results. And contemplation cannot be grasped by science: “The more objectively and scientifically one tries to analyze it [contemplation], the more he empties it of its real content.”¹⁵ Even outside of science, the individual today tends to become a “mass man,” buffeted by powerful, dynamic forces that destroy his identity and uproot him from what previous generations would have considered his “native soil,” whether this be considered in geographic, religious, economic, or social terms. The standard of judgment seems to be registered by public opinion polls and shaped by mass marketers, whether their product is soap, self-help, or religion.¹⁶ But solitude, not conformity to the mass, is the path of contemplation:

The need for true solitude is a complex and dangerous thing, but it is a real need. It is all the more real today when the collectivity tends more and more to swallow up the person in its shapeless and faceless mass. The temptation of our day is to equate “love” and “conformity”—passive subservience to the mass-mind or to the organization.¹⁷

But perhaps the most difficult obstacle modernity has put in front of the gate that opens to the path of contemplation is the general prosperity of Western societies. Although there is still much more poverty and individuals continue to face great uncertainties, we have come to expect increasing convenience, ease, and material welfare. We judge and are judged by our economic success; poverty is a sign of indolence and failure. Driven by a kind of greed, a greed that is invisible because it is shared by so many of us who are “respectable,” we cannot take contemplation seriously in deed, even if we claim otherwise in speech. “Love of poverty” makes saints, but “many religious people, who say they love God, detest and fear the very thought of poverty.”¹⁸

Paradoxically, this very obstacle may also be what frees some. Some experience “success” and

understand it well enough to know that it will not fill the hole in their souls. They turn toward contemplation, not out of despair of ever achieving “success,” but out of despair in *having achieved* it. Perhaps when we have received enough gifts from the idols, we will see them for what they really are. In this case, filling oneself with the goods of this world rather than emptying oneself may result in release from what is less than God, and we will see that this radical conception of happiness is our only hope.

But if one turns away from worldly “success” to pursue the path Merton describes, one immediately runs head on into the kind of paradoxes that permeate any radical conception of happiness. Here I will focus on one such problem, the problem of solitude.

“Solitude Is Not Separation,” the title of Chapter Seven of *New Seeds of Contemplation*, is a paradox. How can one achieve solitude without being separated? The paradox is repeated if one juxtaposes the title of Chapter Eleven—“Learn To Be Alone”—with the title of Chapter Nine—“We Are One Man.” Isn’t “learning to be alone” completely contrary to our being “one man”? Part of what Merton is trying to convey with these paradoxes is his vision of the monastic life: monks, particularly hermits (which Merton was near the end of his life), physically withdraw from the world, and this withdrawal is seen as a way of fulfilling *both* of the great commandments to love God and *to love our neighbor*. It is not too difficult to understand how this withdrawal can nurture the love of God. But it is hard to see how this seeming aloofness from one’s fellows can nurture the love of our neighbor. To many active people, both religious and non-religious, this flight from the world seems to be a paradigm of a warped, superstitious, and self-centered “religion” that abandons the social message at the heart of the Gospel. Merton understands this perspective. Part of his use of paradoxical language is meant to shake us loose from our assumptions so that we can transcend this perspective and come to a better understanding of what is necessary if we are to live more fully according to the social message of the Gospel that the opponents of monasticism cite against it.

The best way to understand this seems to be as follows. We are meant to be attached to both the world and to God. But we are attached to the world in the *wrong* way so that we are not genuinely attached to either the world or to God. It is just as if we had some terrible physical deformity or had suffered some frightful accident; all the right parts are there, but they are so connected with each other that activity is most often painful and actually harmful. Merton uses the image of “A Body of Broken Bones” (Chapter Ten) to depict our state. The remedy for this condition is painful. Some muscles must be torn from where they are anchored now so that they can be reattached to where they belong. Many bones will have to be re-broken and reset because they now are fixed in their harmful positions. The image is powerful. Even if we have never had to undergo such an experience, we have some idea of the terrible pain involved, and we shrink back from it even though we may perceive that there is no other way to healing and health.

The image of “A Body of Broken Bones” represents material creation, including humanity, and God Himself—all brought together in the mystical Body of Christ. Although the bones of the physical body of Christ were not broken, the bones of His mystical Body are. The glorified Christ continues to suffer in agony because of His mangled mystical Body, the body of all creation that He assumed in an act of love of which only God is capable. The monk sees how, after the awesome “accident” of original sin, the parts of this Body have been torn from their rightful places and have become fused together by hatred, lust, greed, and pride in a way that creates pain and distress. The only way to heal this body is to attack the bonds that hold the damaged parts together in their un-

healthy state. The monk does this by detaching his own part from virtually all others by what may be a painful discipline which, with God's help, gradually dissolves the hate, lust, greed, etc. that holds the body together in its sickened state. Only then may the monk, through God's grace, reattach himself with new bonds of love to the rest of the body of creation, the mystical Body of Christ.

But even if the monk does reattach himself in the way God intended, he continues to suffer with every pain that shoots through the rest of the body. For now that there has been healing in the small part he represents, he has more, not less, sensitivity to the pain of the rest of the body.¹⁹ Out of compassion, he has identified himself with the mystical Body of Christ, that is, with the body of all creation, and he, like Christ Himself, continues to suffer with it. Paradoxically, there is a deep and profound peace, a peace that passes all understanding, because this peace is experienced in the very midst of compassionate suffering with the whole of creation. The grace of God brings both the peace and the compassionate suffering. And it is by identifying with the mystical Body of Christ, that is, the body of all creation, that the two great commandments are fulfilled.

The mistake made by those who attack monasticism is to underestimate just how radical the therapy must be to bring the Body back to health. This is not to say monasticism is the only way, but it is a way that addresses the burning need to come into right relation both with God and all His creation.

I have described the Mystical Body of Christ as the body of all creation. Let me expand on this so I will not be misunderstood.

Christ's Body may be understood rightly in various ways. There is His physical body, killed in the Crucifixion, glorified in the Resurrection, and ascended into heaven. But the Body of Christ goes beyond His physical body, as is affirmed by the traditional understanding of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ. (I will come back to that understanding shortly.) Inspired by Merton's last chapter, "The General Dance," I want to identify the Body of Christ with all of material creation.

The love of God extends to all creation, or perhaps even more accurately, one might say that creation simply is an expression of the love of God, so that to consider creation apart from the love of God is to misunderstand its very essence.²⁰ In the free act of love that is creation, God not only brings things into existence, but He also *identifies* Himself with His own expression of love. Christ is not simply the God-man, but the god-creature, the unfathomable union of Creator and created, the incomprehensible wedding of lover and beloved in which two become one. Material creation is God's body because it is the material expression of His love and it is loved as all creatures are. By becoming human, God becomes the creature who unites the material and immaterial and who shares in the divine task of caring for all material creation.²¹ In uniting God and humanity, God has given humanity the power to love all of material creation (including the material/immaterial creature that is man) and bring it into the fullness intended by its Creator. For the healing presence of both the God-man's entry into creation and the Holy Spirit, who was promised and arrived at Pentecost, lives on in the Church. The Church is the mystical Union of God not with a single human, but with a multitude of humans. The Church is the vehicle by which the vocation of human—to love God and neighbor, that is, all the rest of creation—will be achieved. The Church, which begins as the Mystical Union of God with some humans, achieves its destiny only when it has finally brought all creation into itself, for the vocation of the Church is the redemption of all creation. This Mystical Body of Christ infuses humans with the Spirit of God, thereby spreading the healing presence of God through all creation so that all creation becomes the glorified body of Christ, the material expression of God's love that now

expresses its own love for God fully according to its nature. The perfect, mutual, interpenetrating love that is God Himself, the Trinity, is fully expressed at the material level as a mutual, interpenetrating love of all the parts of creation for the rest of creation and for God Himself. Since God is love, this means the divinization of creation. So the gap between the Mystical Body of Christ as the Church and the Mystical Body of Christ as all material creation is temporary, for it is precisely the mission of the Church to eliminate the gap.

To be united with Christ in contemplation is to be united with God by His grace in suffering compassionately with the whole of material creation and to act as an expression of His love for creation by joining in the travail of bringing all of it into the fullness of love for which it was created. One joins with creation in its “hope of being freed, like us, from its slavery and decadence” (Rom. 8:21), and one participates in all creation’s “groaning in one great act of giving birth” (Rom. 8:22). That, I take it, is Merton’s vision of the monastic task, and more generally, the contemplative task to which we are all called.²²

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1972) 1.
2. *New Seeds of Contemplation* 5.
3. *New Seeds of Contemplation* 3.
4. *New Seeds of Contemplation* 203.
5. *New Seeds of Contemplation* 208.
6. *New Seeds of Contemplation* 205.
7. *New Seeds of Contemplation* 209.
8. *New Seeds of Contemplation* 210 (emphasis in original).
9. *New Seeds of Contemplation* 210.
10. See *Beyond Good and Evil*, among other works. I do not wish to imply that Nietzsche had a normal conception of happiness. In fact, he mocks normal conceptions of happiness. It seems that he too had a revolutionary conception of happiness. Like Merton, he seems to counsel ridding oneself of all attachments save one. But in Nietzsche’s case the one attachment is to one’s own will.
11. *New Seeds of Contemplation* 70.
12. *New Seeds of Contemplation* 6.
13. *New Seeds of Contemplation* 8. Descartes’ *Meditations*, where the famous *cogito* occurs, is by no means anti-religious. In fact, the work seems patterned on Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* (Descartes was educated at a Jesuit institution, La Fleche) and provides arguments for the existence of God. Indeed, much of that work argues ways reminiscent of Augustine. But contemplation does not enter into Descartes’ thought there or in his other works, as far as I know.
14. *New Seeds of Contemplation* 9.
15. *New Seeds of Contemplation* 6.
16. It is all too easy to turn on the television to see preaching that makes religion subservient to the very attachments that are obstacles to contemplation and genuine religion. In his own time, Kierkegaard emphasized subjectivity against the moribund, “mass” religion of modernity, but this subjectivity is a far cry from Descartes’ ego. For Kierkegaard, the emphasis on subjectivity is meant to force a person to a radical decision for or against Christianity, a decision that cannot be based on cool reason. (For Kierkegaard, Hegel takes the place of Descartes as the representative of the “philosophical approach” to religion.) See John Douglas Mullen, *Kierkegaard’s Philosophy* (New York: Meridian, 1988).
17. *New Seeds of Contemplation* 53.
18. *New Seeds of Contemplation* 252.
19. *New Seeds of Contemplation* 76–77.
20. *New Seeds of Contemplation* 291.
21. *New Seeds of Contemplation* 291.
22. I should like to express my gratitude to Kathy Rotondo, John Sommerfeldt, and Lynn Baumann for their comments on previous drafts of this paper.