Recovering Paradise:
# The Self and the Problem of Evil

By Thomas Del Prete

It should be clear from what John has said that Thomas Merton does not enter this conversation about evil as a systematic theologian or an analytic philosopher. He is not a Biblical scholar in the strict sense. He is by no means an ethicist. In fact, he regarded ethics with some measure of uneasiness, concerned for the potential they contained "to devaluate and to reject life" – that is, to put abstraction above people.[1]

Merton would shun the notion of spiritual master as a way of introducing him. For all his writing on the spiritual life he was suspicious of an overly self-conscious or zealous approach to it. He regarded inward spiritual pride as misleading and ineffectual in terms of saving our souls as an outward show of virtue. Accordingly, he wrote to those interested in how he lived: "The spiritual life is something that people worry about when they are so busy with something else they think they ought to be spiritual."[2] While teaching in the monastery, he asserted, "There's no point in becoming spiritual – [that's] a waste of time."[3] To those who suspected him of being a practitioner of Zen, he coolly advised, "If you see a meditation going by, shoot it" (*DS* 41).

He renounced the man who wrote a best-selling autobiography with the same name as his (*LL* 11). The secular idea of success carried no more weight for him than its spiritual counterpart. In explaining his response to someone who sought his contribution to a kind of "Chicken Soup for the Soul" book focused on how to be a success, he wrote: "I swore I had spent my life strenuously avoiding success. . . . If I had a message to my contemporaries, I said, it was surely this: Be anything you like, be madmen, drunks, and bastards of every shape and form, but at all costs avoid one thing: success" (*LL* 11).

When asked to describe his life, Merton responded, "What I wear is pants. What I do is live. How I pray is breathe" (*DS* 41). This is not a mocking or evasive statement. It is rather one through which Merton dissolves the duality of mind and self, or self and the image of self. It is Merton confounding what are largely social expectations or social constructions about who he is, and, by implication, who we think that we are. At the same time and more importantly, it is Merton emphatically affirming the value of his own existence and of life itself. Merton is asking us to shed our notions of how we think we should be so that we might find and discover the value and meaning of our ordinary irreducible naked selves.

Merton speaks to us, then, with an existentialist and contemplative voice. But he is also a spiritual theologian, using
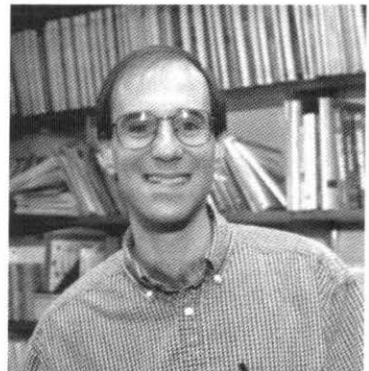
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concepts to explain intellectually what can be understood fully only by experience, and is deeply Christian in his contemplative orientation. Thus Merton says that at the point of discovering our inmost naked self, we actually discover our unique Christ-self ("Bear"). This Christian mystical perspective is the ground of his thought and underlies all that I will say.

Having introduced Merton, let me return to the concept of the naked self and expand from there into a discussion of how Merton might regard evil. Our inmost naked self does not belong to us – it is not an object that we can control. To talk about it as if apart from us is a contradiction – it is the living whole of us, "the very self that finds" (*LL* 4). Merton tells us that it is in the discovery of our inmost naked self that true freedom begins. True freedom is "the freedom that cannot be guaranteed by the death of somebody else. The point where you become free not to kill, not to exploit, not to destroy, not to compete, because you are no longer afraid of death or the devil or poverty or failure" (*LL* 5). Put differently, we are free from evil in proportion as we are free from our dependence on something outside ourselves, or some assertion of ourselves, or some visible sign of our power as a way of affirming or convincing ourselves of the value of our existence.

This is a central point, and I will spend the rest of my time exploring it by referring to Merton's commentary on the biblical origins of the knowledge of good and evil, and to aspects of his understanding of what it means to be a person and a member of the human community.

In the archetypal Judeo-Christian story, Adam and Eve acquire knowledge of good and evil at the expense of their residence in paradise. As Merton explains it, the realms of knowledge and paradise correspond essentially to two different states of being.[4] The state of knowledge is characterized by a consciousness of separateness from God. In this dualistic state, there is a tendency to view good and evil in terms of the self, not God, and a corresponding tendency to exercise the will in favor of self-affirmation. Typically the self develops a dependence on things outside itself, primarily material and temporal concerns, as a source of self-affirmation. There is a seductive version of this inclination that results in spiritual pride. It is precisely when we become convinced of our own virtuousness, moral rectitude and spiritual advancement, that is, when we are "puffed up" or full of ourselves, that we enter most into the realm of illusion, and are subject, so to speak, to the influence of the devil.

In the state of separation from God that comes with the knowledge of good and evil we are prone to construct an illusory self that seeks to affirm itself in various ways, often over and against others. We live enslaved to the power of illusion. Mistaking this false, exterior and egotistical self for the real thing, to use Merton's terms, we live in our separateness with a divided heart.

In contrast, the state of paradise is a realm of innocence, purity of heart, and unity with God. Innocent, the self is free from self-deception. Pure of heart, it is emptied of the illusions of the false and separate self, and thus opened to the love of God. As Merton says, "Purity of heart establishes [us] in a state of unity and emptiness in which [we are] one with God" (*ZBA* 132).

The state of paradise is thus another way of referring to our whole, naked, ordinary selves, the self that lives and breathes and, it should be said, dies. This ordinary self is charged with life, meaning, freedom and love. It is undivided, not fabricated, not an effort at self-assertion and self-affirmation. Merton puts it succinctly, "Paradise is simply the person, the self, but the radical self in its uninhibited freedom. The self no longer clothed with an ego" (*LL* 8). Paradise is the discovery of the true ground of our personality at the inmost center of our being. And there we find "a freedom beyond freedom, an identity beyond essence . . . a consciousness that transcends all division, all

separation" (*LL* 9).

Is this paradise state attainable? Merton says that it is, since it is no more or less than who we really are, and, furthermore, that attaining it should be the goal of one's education. But he also acknowledges that the attainment entails a considerable struggle. We must paradoxically become who we are, and that process of becoming requires some understanding of how the knowledge of good and evil can either mislead or guide us. As Merton points out, "Once we find ourselves in the state of 'knowledge of good and evil' we have to accept the fact and understand our position, see it in relation to the innocence for which we were created, which we have lost and which we can regain. But in the meantime it is a question of treating knowledge and innocence as complementary realities" (*ZBA* 128). We cannot become innocent unless we are willing to confront the force of illusion in our selves, empty ourselves of it, and thus become open to the greater power of God's love at the center of our lives.

Viewed in light of his understanding of paradise, it seems safe to conclude that, for Merton, evil derives from the freedom to be and act untrue to ourselves (*LL* 8). In other words, it is the freedom to act as a partial and divided rather than a whole self, the freedom to use the knowledge of good and evil to perpetuate the state of separation from God, the freedom to weave an illusory life. The problem of evil thus becomes a problem of knowing and accepting who we are on the deepest level. This is not simply a problem for us as individuals, however; it is magnified in the collective realm of society, with potentially devastating results, as Merton points out forcefully in passages such as the following:

> The contemplative way requires first of all and above all renunciation of [an] ob-session with the triumph of the individual or collective will to power. . . . The aggressive and dominative view of reality places at the center the individual self with its bodily form, its feelings and emotions, its appetites and needs, its loves and hates, its actions and reactions. All these are seen as forming together a basic and indubitable reality to which everything else must be referred, so that all other things are also estimated in their individuality, their actions and reactions, and all the ways in which they impinge upon the interests of the individual self. The world is then seen as a multiplicity of conflicting and limited beings, all enclosed in the prisons of their own individuality, . . . all seeking to find a certain complete-ness by asserting themselves at the expense of others . . . . Thus there arises a spurious, inconclusive unity: the unity of the massive aggregate.[5]

To be a person, in contrast, is to be free from the cares of the illusory self and to relinquish what Merton calls the "hidden drive to self-assertion" or futile effort at self-affirmation (*FV* 23). It is knowing and acting in full affirmation of life and so in an uninhibited freedom. It should be stressed, however, that the freedom of personhood, in contrast to the illusory freedom of the separated self, is not merely an individualistic freedom. As one realizes one's authentic identity in relation to God, there is a corresponding awakening of one's identity in relation to others. To return to Merton's words, "One must not forget the dimension of relatedness to others. True freedom is openness, availability, the capacity for gift. But we must also remember that the difficult dialectic of fidelity to others in fidelity to oneself requires one to break through the veils of infidelity which, as individual egoists or as a selfish community, we set up to prevent ourselves from living in the truth" (*LL* 8).

Thus, in Merton's Christian existential perspective, to be a person is not only to have discovered

one's own undivided, or whole, naked self, but to recognize in one's unity with God a unity with others. As persons we come to realize that we are "at one with everything in that hidden ground of Love for which there can be no explanations."[6] Self-discovery and other-discovery, so to speak, are intimately and mysteriously intertwined.[7] The separated and individual self gives way to the related and unified self, the self-serving collectivity becomes a community with space for love to emerge and guide it.

Merton states explicitly, "The grace and the mystery and the sacrament of community work when there is relatedness between one another."[8] The grace that nourishes community life is tapped when we identify completely with and experience empathy for those with whom we live. As Merton explains in reference to the monastery, "You not only identify with [your fellow monk], but you are able by your identification to value him. You see him as a good in himself because he is a person" ("Hope"). Identification in this sense is as much a matter of consciousness and spiritual insight as emotion, a felt intuitive awareness of the spiritual reality that we do not exist as isolated individuals. It means much more than virtue or even "the moral conscience," much more than judgment in terms of "right" or "wrong."[9] Merton elaborates, "Relatedness means this capacity to leave oneself behind . . . [to think] in terms of other . . . not 'I' . . . but 'we.' [You] are no longer there as a mere individual; you are functioning as two related people" ("Hope").

For those of us whose sense of social identity is shaped by Western culture, Merton's idea of relatedness is counterintuitive. It is the spiritual counterweight to the culture of individualism and self-assertion that sets one over and against another as objects, that perpetuates an illusion of separateness. What we lose in becoming related is not ourselves in any deep sense, but the illusion of our individuality.

It is all too easy in this cultural context to mistake group identification for relatedness and true community. These are essentially power-based rather than person-oriented entities. Merton refers in this regard to Eberhard Arnold, the German Anabaptist theologian who articulated the spiritual basis for community as a fellowship in the Spirit in love, even as he was confronted by, and saw as equally problematic, the political alternatives of Nazism and Communism in the 1930s (*TMA* 108-109). The latter represent types of "groupthink" that Merton saw as symptomatic of the unforgiving, collective will to power that co-opts our deep need to experience relatedness. More than once, Merton cautioned against the creation of these forms of pseudo-community, whether of the monolithic variety or in the guise of activist groups which zealously set cause and ideology above people (e.g., *HGL* 294-297; *TMA* 104).[10]

To move from a state of separateness to one of relatedness, from partiality to wholeness, from individualism to personhood, and from isolation to community is a complex inner and social dynamic that depends above all on the experience of love. The monastery in which Merton lived is meant to serve that purpose, and Jonathan will speak to that. But let me conclude with some suggestion of what this transformation, which he likens to rising from the dead, meant for Merton.

In an introduction to a Japanese edition of one of his works, Merton explains, "I must . . . not retain the semblance of a self which is an object or a 'thing.' I too must be no-thing. And when I am no-thing, I am in the All, and Christ lives in me. But He who lives in me is in all those around me . . . is hidden [in them]. . . . My monastery is . . . a place in which I disappear from the world as an object of interest in order to be everywhere in it by hiddenness and compassion."[11] To the extent that we treat ourselves as an object of interest, we exist in the world of false self-reliance and self-absorp-

tion in which our whole identity rests on the need to maintain a separation from each other and from God. We cannot in this state accept our own lives, and indeed, spend our lives trying to find a way out of quiet desperation, to echo Thoreau.

The state of unity or relatedness also has its claims, however; it is not a state of quietude or passivity. To live in compassionate identification with others compels a response to their needs, and requires that we work to dispel illusion and all that devalues and disaffirms our ordinary selves and life itself. This does not mean that we set ourselves over and against others as a force of good against a force of evil; this is the world of separation and objects. The wisdom of the person is not a self-congratulatory virtuousness but a commitment to finding a true way in love for all.

Merton expresses this perspective in a dramatic way to his Japanese readers. He is writing in 1963, so please excuse his use of the masculine voice. He should otherwise sound extraordinarily current:

> To adopt a life that is essentially non-assertive, non-violent, a life of humility and peace is in itself a statement of one's position. But each one in such a life can, by the personal modality of his decision, give his whole life a special orientation. It is my intention to make my entire life a rejection of, a protest against the crimes and injustices of war and political tyranny which threaten to destroy the whole [of humanity] and the world. . . . I am saying NO to all the concentration camps, the aerial bombardments, the staged political trials, the judicial murders, the racial injustices, the economic tyrannies, and the whole socio-economic apparatus which seems geared for nothing but global destruction in spite of all its fair words in favor of peace. I make monastic silence a protest against the lies of politicians, propagandists and agitators . . . . [T]he faith in which I believe is also invoked by many who believe in war, believe in racial injustices, believe in self-righteous and lying forms of tyranny. My life must, then, be a protest against these also . . . .
> If I say NO to all these secular forces, I also say YES to all that is good in the world and in [humanity]. I say YES to all that is beautiful in nature, and in order that this may be the yes of a freedom and not of subjection, I must refuse to possess any thing in the world purely as my own. I say YES to all the men and women who are my brothers and sisters in the world, but for this yes to be an assent of freedom and not of subjection, I must live so that no one of them may seem to belong to me, and that I may not belong to any of them (*HR* 65-66).

It was from this life-affirming, unified and personalistic stance that Merton confronted the manifestations of inhumanity in the world of the 1960s, and that he forged relationships and communication across the boundaries of religion, race, nationality, place, and culture. His silence as well as his words provided ample testimony of the power of what he called the qualitative values of life – such as inner integrity, relatedness, peace, nonviolence, and compassion – to prevent us from succumbing to the lure of separateness, to help us discover our whole selves, and, once there, to ensure that we cannot be untrue to who we are.

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1 Thomas Merton, *Love and Living* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1979) 128; subsequent references will be cited as "*LL*" parenthetically in the text.

2 Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981) 41; subsequent references will be cited as "*DS*" parenthetically in the text.

3 Thomas Merton, "The Bear" (1967), (Cassette Recording No. AA2079) (Kansas City, MO: Credence Cassettes); subsequent references will be cited as "Bear" parenthetically in the text.

4 Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968) 116-17; subsequent references will be cited as "*ZBA*" parenthetically in the text.

5 Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 219; subsequent references will be cited as "*FV*" parenthetically in the text.

6 Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, edited by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985) 115; subsequent references will be cited as "*HGL*" parenthetically in the text.

7 Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1955) xv-xxi.

8 Thomas Merton, "Christian Hope and Relatedness" (1966), Cassette Recording #243B, Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY; subsequent references will be cited as "Hope" parenthetically in the text.

9 Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska: The Alaskan Conferences, Journals, and Letters* (New York: New Directions, 1988) 134; subsequent references will be cited as "*TMA*" parenthetically in the text.

10 This discussion of Merton's views on relatedness and community derives from a paper given by the author at the bi-annual conference of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland in April, 2002.

11 Thomas Merton, "*Honorable Reader*": *Reflections on My Work*, edited by Robert E. Daggy (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 64-65; subsequent references will be cited as "*HR*" parenthetically in the text.