

Thomas Merton: A Parable for Our Time

By William Reiser, SJ

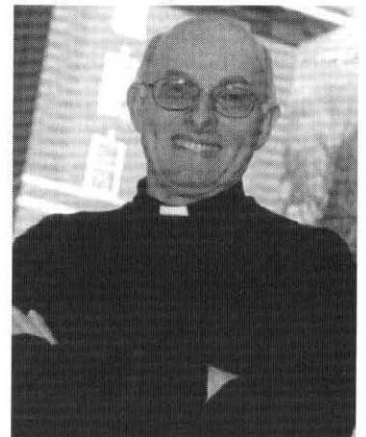
“The only One Who can teach me to find God is God, Himself, Alone.”¹

1. *Has Merton stood the test of time?*

When I mentioned to some friends that I had been reading Thomas Merton’s letters and journals, several asked whether I thought he had withstood the test of time. On the basis of the occasions when I have directed students who were open to exploring Merton or when I have incorporated some samples of his writing in a class on spirituality, I would have to confess that at the very least one needs to do some translating and explaining.² Merton’s world – so monastic, so literary, and in many respects so noticeably preconciliar – is largely foreign territory to today’s undergraduate readers. Professors do a similar kind of translating and explaining as they teach New Testament texts, of course, or as they introduce students to the religious and cultural world of Jesus. But the Gospel’s world flourished two thousand years ago – the need for translation and explanation can be presumed – whereas Merton’s life unfolded fairly close to our own. Nevertheless, it has been more than sixty years since Merton entered Gethsemani. Six decades make an enormous difference, given the pace of social, cultural, economic and political change.

On the one hand Merton’s Christian existentialism certainly remains relevant. So too, I might add, the sayings and stories of the Desert Christians of the third, fourth, and fifth centuries which nourished Merton – and countless others – with their insight into human nature.³ On the other hand Merton himself admitted that there were a number of statements in his autobiography he would have revised or dropped.⁴ Even his courageous and far-sighted reflections from the 1960s on war and peace need some transposition in light of what has happened geopolitically in the past twenty-five years or so. What has enduring value, at least in my view, is not so much what Merton actually said or wrote (though the poetry may be another matter) but the ongoing process of conversion or transformation to which his life bears eloquent witness.

If Merton had lived longer, like most of us he would have moved comfortably into the postconciliar period, absorbing the theological perspectives of Vatican II and integrating them into his self-understanding. And his approach to religious life would have continued to develop, since his writings evidence a trajectory in this regard. Merton’s spirituality was securely Christ-



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centered, but his Christ strikes me as the Christ of the dogmatic tradition, theology, and liturgical prayer, not the Jesus of the gospels and everyday life that steps forward in so much contemporary scriptural study and spiritual writing. If Merton had been able to follow the scholarly retrieval of the human, historical Jesus, we would probably have witnessed corresponding developments and revisions both of his understanding of religious life and of the relationship between Christian faith and the other world religions. I suspect, too, that Merton would have become a lot more engaged with Islam and undertaken a careful study of Arabic literature.

2. *My first contact with Merton*

It was the butcher at the local A&P who introduced me to Merton. I was a junior or senior in high school, somewhere around 1959 or 1960. One evening in early summer he and his wife invited me for strawberry rhubarb pie – they lived just down the street from us – and to show me an exciting Catholic magazine called *Jubilee* for which Thomas Merton was a contributor, along with folks like Romano Guardini and Dorothy Day. A day or two afterwards I borrowed *The Seven Storey Mountain* from the town library and once I finished it our neighbor loaned me his copy of *The Sign of Jonas*. I have a clear recollection of spending a sticky August afternoon reading about life on the monastery farm, visualizing the fields being hayed by the monks, all the while sneezing and wiping my eyes because of the ragweed in our yard. It could be as torrid in the Connecticut valley, where great leaves of cigar tobacco grew in fields shaded by cotton nets, as in Bardstown, Kentucky. I was convinced of that. Still, the idyllic tranquility, the prayerful routine, the closeness to nature, the simplicity of monastic life (and the freshly baked bread) seemed very attractive, and the sort of holy apartness where a person could read, think and write, intrigued me. In my imagination I was trying Trappist life on for size, albeit in its somewhat romantic portrayal by an enthusiastic Merton.

There was a quirky sort of adventure about monastic life – the sort of daring, I was to appreciate more as the years went by, that led people to undertake voyages, journeys and pilgrimages. But the monastic journey wound its way inward and this idea of the inner journey competed with another side of me – the side that daydreamed about traveling to places far away from small-town New England. Foreign missions sounded both scary and enchanting – remote villages of Africa where the White Fathers labored among lepers, sites in the Andes where Maryknollers worked among the descendants of the Incas, and India with the exotic images I had relished in movies, magazines and geography books. But above all I wanted to see stupas and pagodas, and the strange, curious religious figures that were to be found throughout the Far East and whose pictures I had studied in the pages of the Columban Fathers' mission magazine. In the summer of 1967 I visited Gethsemani. Whether Merton was there at the time, I do not know. I do recall thinking that there was no way Thomas Merton would want to break his silence just so a Jesuit seminarian could introduce himself, but I was able to get a mental fix on the Kentucky countryside and from then on I would have a sense of the place from which Merton wrote.

Several years later, in 1972, I made my first trip to India. I have a vague memory of spotting in the guest book of one Jesuit house, as I flipped back to the year 1968, Thomas Merton's signature. In 1974 I traced his steps in Bangkok. I stepped into the Oriental Hotel, walked along Silom Road, made my way to the Temple of the Emerald Buddha of which he writes in *The Asian Journal*,⁵ and saw from a bus window the Red Cross conference center where he died. In fact I made a number of trips to Thailand, each time sitting for hours in various wats or temples, staring at gold-leafed images

of the Buddha, observing the monks in their saffron robes and being edified by the immense reverence of the Thai people who came in. The incense sticks, the gentle bowing of the head, the flowers, the begging bowls used by the monks, the sitting cross-legged on cool marble floors, the alcoves filled with smaller Buddha images, the fierce guardian figures, and – outside – the spirit houses. In fact one morning I took a ferry across the Chao Phraya river to Wat Arun – the stunning though out-of-the-way Temple of the Dawn – because I mistakenly assumed that Merton had been there. I do not want to leave the impression that I went to Thailand because Merton had traveled there, yet I could not help but think of him and how it was that interest in Buddhism among North American Catholics got a tremendous lift because Merton died in the shadow of Asian spirituality. While I am chagrined to say that I squandered my time in Sri Lanka by not visiting Polonnaruwa, I did visit the magnificent Buddhist shrine of Borobudur in Indonesia and sat under the great Bo tree in India where the Buddha received enlightenment.

3. *A monk uncertain in his vocation*

In a letter to Mark Van Doren (dated April 14, 1942) Merton wrote about his new life as a Trappist:

And what a life! It is tremendous. Not because of any acts we perform, any penance, any single feature of the liturgy or the chant, not because we sleep on boards & straw mattresses & fast & work & sweat & sing & keep silence. These things are all utterly simple acts that have no importance whatever in themselves. But the whole unity of the life is tremendous. That is because the life *is* a real unity, because the foundation of its unity is God's unity: the ontological basis of our life is the simplicity & the purity of God. His simplicity *is* our life. We *live* His oneness: we *live* His singleness of concentration on His own immense purity and goodness. No wonder it is wonderful. . . . I am very happy. . . . Now I am here, it already seems quite clear how the whole of my life until I came here is at last intelligible. All that chaos, France & England & everywhere else I lived, straightens itself out & points to our cloister & our fields.⁶

Thirteen years later he would write to Dom Jean Leclercq: “But altogether, we have reached a point at which I think that I cannot, or even should, remain at Gethsemani, or in the Cistercian Order. There is truly no place for me here . . .” (*SCh* 83-84). After another six years Merton would confide to a close friend, the Boston University historian Herbert Mason: “I am continually coming face to face with the fact that I have lost perspective here [in Gethsemani], including religious perspective, and that to some extent we monks are out of touch with the real (religious) mystery of our times” (*WF* 270). And then in his circular letter of Easter 1968, Merton would write: “Admittedly I would hate to write a book extolling the monastic vocation today, and would be very slow to urge anyone else to enter it as it now is. What matters to me is not the monastic life but God and the Gospel” (*RJ* 113).

Between 1942 and 1968 many things had evidently been churning inside Merton. The monk may have left the world, as he would discover the more he read the early Desert Christians, but the world never leaves the monk. He would write: “But if you try to escape from this world merely by leaving the city and hiding yourself in solitude, you will only take the city with you into solitude”

(SC 57); and again: “Go into the desert not to escape other men but in order to find them in God” (SC 42). What intrigues, even puzzles many people about Merton’s life was his persistent complaint that he did not have enough solitude. He was convinced that God had called him to be a hermit, and later he believed that he was being called to lead a solitary existence perhaps with marginal pastoral responsibilities in some impoverished, forgotten village of Nicaragua or Mexico. It is hard to escape the suspicion not only that Merton was afflicted with a more than ordinary case of restlessness but also that there was chronic disjointedness at the center of his life. He wants to be a monk, a solitary, a hermit, even a recluse – although this desire apparently ran counter to his personality and the way God had made him.

Merton had a vocation to be a writer, a thinker, a philosopher of sorts, a social critic, a poet, and – like so many Christians, like so many human beings – to be a contemplative. Perhaps he romanticized the solitary life. Mother Julian, the well-known English anchoress from the fourteenth century, did not isolate herself from the village of Norwich; from her “recluse” or enclosure she still speaks to the world about divine love. The monks of Tibhirine may have enjoyed greater anonymity than Merton, but that ended when they were slain by Algerian militants seven years ago.⁷ In both of these cases it would appear that God had designs that went far beyond whatever they themselves could have imagined. Hermits may give up their voice, but God may invest them with a different one. At any rate Merton’s reflections on solitude are all the more thought-provoking when we appreciate that he was writing out of an intense longing for communion with others – not just with God – almost as if the plunge into solitude was the condition for the possibility of being human together.

To identify Merton as a Trappist would be technically correct, but in his case the particular religious form – being a Cistercian, rooted in the spiritual tradition of Saint Benedict – was not altogether adequate to the human reality that was Merton’s life. What Merton experienced, even though so far as I can see he did not adequately name it, was the form of mysticism – of daily union with God – that has increasingly showed itself in our time. One cannot be a mystic without being a prophet, and one cannot be a prophet without wading into the political realities of everyday life. Or to state the point in a slightly different way, it is unlikely that Merton would have been happy as a Carthusian; but that inclination, desire or fantasy was the reverse side of his engagement with the world. He taught us that today’s hermits will not find God except in the “body of broken bones.”⁸

4. *A life at the religious edge*

The disjointedness that Merton seems to evidence in his religious struggle was proleptic on several fronts. Not only had he experienced the tension between the prophetic and mystical poles of Christian existence – a tension that becomes increasingly clear the more stress is laid on connecting faith and justice; but he had also anticipated the tension arising from serious engagement with humanity’s other traditions of spirituality. That the major religious traditions of the world should have captured Merton’s intellectual and affective energies hardly seems surprising, given the ecumenical sensibilities that have been maturing in most of us. How could someone for whom meditation and union with God were at the heart of his or her vocation *not* be interested in religious experience everywhere? How could someone who has joined a monastic community *not* be professionally interested in the expressions of monastic life that exist outside the Christian tradition? Indeed, today we take it for granted that there are multiple wisdoms, multiple disclosures of the divine

mystery, multiple ways of responding to the overtures of grace, and maybe even “multiple religious belonging.”⁹ The business of becoming fully human and of creating a world order marked by justice and peace is far too important for God to entrust it to just one religion. Thus in this regard Merton – although there were others, too – appears to have been a religious ahead of his time.

In proposing that Merton might be a parable for the twenty-first century Church, I am trying to focus on the way Merton anticipated a number of the ambiguities and tensions many people today have been experiencing. Let me add that I am not thinking here about his issues with religious authority, his dark suspicions about the motives of government, his infatuation with “M,” or his resistance to the Christian faith being presented as a closed system. I am thinking, rather, of the disjunctions, dislocations, and relativism which have become symptomatic of what has been broadly referred to as postmodernism.¹⁰ The fault lines lie deeply embedded in Merton’s affections and psyche, but he died before the mental and spiritual plates had actually shifted. Merton belonged to a number of different worlds – the world of the Desert Christians, the world of the Cistercian spiritual tradition, the world of the cultural Catholicism of post-war America, the cultural world of Europe, the world of Gethsemani, the literary world of poets and writers, the morally charged world of the Cold War, the world of the preconciliar Church, and the world of the other major religious traditions. But as we move closer to 1968 one senses that these different worlds had never fit together neatly and tightly.

In the Prologue of *The Sign of Jonas* Merton wrote: “like Jonas himself I find myself traveling toward my destiny in the belly of a paradox.”¹¹ He was referring to the resurrection, life out of death, or life within death, or – to borrow from Paul – power being made perfect in weakness (see 2 Cor. 12:9). In this sense Christian existence is forever calling attention to itself as an apparent contradiction: we are “in” the world but not “of” the world; we are committed to transforming this world even as we recognize that we have here no permanent dwelling place; whoever loves her life or his life will lose it, while whoever loses life will find it; and so on. The tension in Merton’s life between a desire for greater solitude and a need to be in contact with the world outside his monastic enclosure should be readily comprehensible to us, even familiar. Each of us rehearses this pull in her or his own way. While we have not been created to live alone, the person unable to endure solitude is poorly qualified to live with others. Indeed, the price of evading a confrontation with solitude might well be the loss of one’s soul. We can lament not praying enough or allowing ourselves sufficient quiet time – although, following Merton, *how* we fill up that quiet time is a vital consideration – but without the world there is precious little we can talk to God about.

The tension I am highlighting here is not quite the same as the classic contrast between action and contemplation, as if the unfolding of the divine mystery in someone’s life could ever be analyzed in “either/or” or “both/and” categories. (Merton himself was clearly aware of this, as we see in Part Three of *Contemplation in a World of Action*.¹²) A Christian life cannot be described as either active or contemplative (it is a false alternative), and I am uncomfortable with the formula about being both active and contemplative since this phrasing often reflects a simplistic view of contemplation. Instead the tension that surfaces in Merton’s life has more to do with the way the mystery of God shows or reveals itself. Is Jesus central to a person’s experience of God or in some way incidental?

Merton speaks of Christ or of Jesus as if he were speaking about God, which suggests to me that he speaks to Jesus as if he were speaking to God – a most orthodox expression of faith. But I do not get the sense that he spoke to God as if he were speaking to Jesus. That is, for Merton Jesus is a

living and transcendent reality – a living and transcendent Person. But is Merton's Jesus so transcendent and timeless that the earthly, historical details which provide color, complexion, and definition to the figure of Jesus become blurry and, however unintentionally, incidental to the believer's relationship with God? Is he drawn to the "kenotic" or self-emptying Christ at the expense of what the Word fully assumes by taking flesh? George Kilcourse writes:

[Merton] finds that the self-emptying of Christ and the self-emptying of the disciple which makes the disciple one with Christ "in *His* kenosis" can be understood "in a very Zen-like sense as far as psychology and experience are concerned." Again, Merton refuses to confuse the Christian vision of God and Buddhist enlightenment, but he finds in both "this psychic 'limitlessness'" in the sense of Eckhart's poverty, John of the Cross's dark night, and the emptiness, perfect freedom, and no-mind of the two traditions. For Merton, the convergence of the two distinct traditions comes through Eckhart's statement: "A man should be so poor that he is not and has not a place for God to act in. To reserve a place would be to maintain distinctions." But in that poverty where the false self is dissolved and "no self" is left, both Buddhist and Christian recover the "true self." For Eckhart, "This true identity is the 'birth of Christ in us.'" Merton concludes that whatever Zen is, or however defined, "it is somehow there in Eckhart." He renders the sapiential nature of this convergence between the two traditions by an arresting metaphor of the mystical experience: "penetrate the outer shell and taste the inner kernel which cannot be defined."¹³

Merton's essay "Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude"¹⁴ – undoubtedly a favorite Merton text for many of us – ran into trouble with the Cistercian censors. Trappists were not basically hermits and thus Merton's persistent call for more solitude sounded like a betrayal of Cistercian spirituality. But the complaint of the censor in the matter of this essay and the concern of the Abbot General centered on obedience. Merton explained himself: "I must tell you, not to excuse myself, but to testify to my faith in the Holy Church, that I did not want at all to say and I have never thought that a Christian should prefer the interior voice to the voice of obedience!!! . . . I precisely said that the solitary was tormented by agonizing isolation in which he could not have *the security of obedience* to a Superior!!!" (*SCh* 132).

Now, there are at least three voices in Merton. There is Merton the individual, merely reporting or sharing news and events. There is Merton the naturalist, the inspired observer of the Kentucky countryside, who not merely reports what he sees but who nurtures his reader's contemplative awareness the way, say, Wendell Berry does. And there is Merton the religious author who speaks to us and for us, reflecting our shared familiarity with and experience of the interior life. The first voice is no more or less interesting than that of anybody else who wants to let the world know what is going on in his or her life. Indeed, the first voice strikes some readers as annoyingly self-absorbed. The third voice, however, represents the self struggling for integration and wholeness that each of us can relate to. Judging from his letters, I doubt very much that Merton found great security in obedience to superiors; obedience does not facilitate faith. Indeed obedience may have little to do with following the will of God since no human can directly represent Christ for another.¹⁵ As a result, the prospect of "agonizing isolation" has to be reckoned with, for the call to live totally in and for the mystery of God takes precedence over all routine, convention, conformity, and even over religious obedience.

It sounds to me as if the Abbot General's worry about subverting obedience and the license Merton may be providing to bypass superiors or church authority in favor of one's own experience is telling us something. Perhaps Merton's desire for greater solitude was in reality a yearning for greater interior independence – which he would need, the closer he should ever find himself to the margins or the edge of Christian religious identity. I do not think he was looking at things that way when he was writing the “Notes” on solitude, but I wonder about the possible connection between solitude and his defense of the eremitical life on the one hand and his engagement, perhaps some enchantment, with the religious thought of Asia on the other. Solitude would create the space for his soul to drink freely from the springs of human religiosity. Yet the very institution best poised to engage in dialogue was standing in the way.¹⁶ Once in the hermitage he could say:

My space is the world created and redeemed by God and God is in this true world, not “only” and restrictively a prisoner in the monastery. It is most important to see this, and I think that what those who are leaving see, often, is this. It is crucially important for the monastery to abandon the myth of itself as a purely sacred space . . . [T]hough the situation [of Merton's leaving the community for his hermitage] is partly understood and partly not, it is interpreted with shock as my “leaving the monastery.” And this is true. The general reproach is then that I am not clinging, in spite of reason, grace, and everything else, to something God no longer wills for me: clinging to it just because society expects me to do so!¹⁷

In suggesting that Merton might have been approaching the edge of Christian identity I do not mean to imply that he would ever have stepped beyond his tradition; that, I am pretty confident, would have been spiritually and psychologically impossible. But Christian religious experience has boundaries. The more seriously one is engaged by the religious other, the more likely it becomes that one will undergo a sort of “limit experience.” While it may be pure conjecture on my part, I suspect that Merton did not feel himself belonging – belonging, that is, at the deep human level where all of us belong to one another – simply or solely to one religion for the simple reason that no single religion could lay claim to encompassing *all* of God's daughters and sons. Humanity's original oneness is logically prior to the multiple religious expressions to be found in our common history. Conversely, Merton the writer could no longer belong to the Trappists, for by writing he would belong to the wider world of those who seek God. Indeed, the gradual shifting of ownership and allegiance was underway long before Merton died.¹⁸

5. *Merton's life as a parable*

I have suggested that Merton's life in some respects is a parable, that is, a comparison or a metaphor that illumines the situation of faith today. To appreciate his life's parabolic or metaphorical character we need first to attend to five features of our historical experience today – five signs of the times – which make Merton feel close to us because these issues were on his mind as well. Indeed Merton had a foretaste of life in the postconciliar Church. The five features or signs:

1. The phenomenon of globalization.
2. Our awareness of religious and cultural differences in a context where “perennial philosophy” – a shared conceptual framework for understanding human exist-

ence – no longer reigns. This is the legacy of the Enlightenment. And related to this, the disappearance of a normative Catholic culture. While the reasons for this disappearance are complex and not all are bad, I would argue that the twin forces of individualism and consumerism have been the major culprits.

3. Mindfulness of victims. The complement of compassion is solidarity, solidarity is founded upon the option for the poor, and making the option for the poor is very much conditioned by one's social location.

4. The urgent search for solutions to economic, political, social, moral, and cultural problems that appear, when looked at together, increasingly insurmountable and lead to a dimming of the great conciliar hope that runs through The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*).

5. An emerging awareness of the existence, aesthetic energy, and spiritual attractiveness of other world religions and a corresponding suspicion of sweeping dogmatic claims.

Let us now reflect briefly on these five markers.

I am not drawn to Merton because he had more insight than anybody else into modern events or better advice on how to keep one's interior life on track but because in the providential arrangement of things his life anticipated a number of the dislocations and interruptions we are going through now. Thus he could say in 1968: "But our life demands breakthroughs; not every day, not every week, not every month, but once in a while we must break through and go beyond where we are. You have to build up all you have done and push through with it, and then you find that you are out of the woods in a new clearing, you are somewhere else developing a new way" (*EW* 161).

The tension that refuses to go away between having to be in one place while wanting to be in every place – and which lies at the heart of the quest for solitude – is a sign of the Spirit's *presence* in a person's life. One experiences sharply and continually the difference between already and not yet – to use the classical eschatological phrase – not in temporal terms but in spatial ones. Such tension brings depth and texture to the human soul.

Second, awareness of religious difference is hardly new to the ongoing story of Christian mission. I would want to think twice about Merton's comment that "it is perhaps because the contemplative aspect of Christianity has been to a great extent ignored by so many in the west, that Christianity has been less fruitful than it might have been in the east" (*RJ* 319).¹⁹ Nevertheless, Merton anticipates the practical necessity of coming face to face with the other major spiritual traditions of the world. We cannot pretend they do not exist or that they will play merely incidental roles as the twenty-first century unfolds. Encounter and engagement are bound to be accompanied by some dislodging of long-held assumptions, not at the level of scholarship but at the level of prayer and one's familiar way of relating to God. Again, such tension is creative.

Third, Merton reached the conclusion that faith without solidarity is dead by a remarkably traditional route, namely, through the way of the desert.²⁰ If we filter out the justifiable moral outrage that appears in some of his political and social commentary from the 1960s, are we not struck by how

much he had forged a oneness with victims? Indeed, was it not his passion for the victims of genocide, racism, war, foreign policy, and the arms race that gave energy to his writing and even now draws us back to him? Merton understood the consequent spiritual challenge in terms of the need for compassion – the premier divine virtue. But for compassion to be effective there had to be solidarity, and solidarity could not be achieved without making a preferential option for the poor, that is, the victims. Furthermore, as the Latin American church would teach us, if that option is going to be real and not merely notional, sooner or later we have to step into the place of the poor. On this score I do not think Merton was able to get two sides of his life together. Yes, finding God was ultimately a matter of place; no, it could not be the hermitage. That “place” would eventually have to be internalized – the celebrated Fourth and Walnut experience demands real-life expression – and internalizing the place of the poor would create a new and distinctive sort of tension. In other words, the tension Merton tells us about with respect to the hermitage is not so foreign to us as it might first appear. Merton did not resolve this tension, so far as I can see; perhaps he was not meant to.

Fourth, people were not talking about globalization (so far as I know) during Merton’s lifetime. Yet there is no way we can review his life and writings without perceiving in Merton both a growing awareness of humanity’s interconnectedness and a deep distrust of the processes at work as economies expanded. Human beings were being controlled by, and redefined by, market forces. He resented the intrusion of such forces into life at Gethsemani, as we know. Merton might not have foreseen how rampant consumerism would become and how dramatically economic forces would remake the world, but he knew a demon when he smelled one. He also knew that the long-range solution lay in creating populations of contemplatives – ordinary women and men for whom there was no fully satisfying life apart from being centered on God. Finally, while Merton’s interior life had undergone a process of religious globalization, there is an intriguing incompleteness about that process. Needless to say, he missed the exciting biblical research into the historical Jesus of the past thirty-five years. Each time I return to his journal entries from the 1960s I wonder how his thinking might have been affected by the work, say, of New Testament scholars like James D. G. Dunn²¹ and N. T. Wright,²² or of liberation theologians of Latin America such as Gustavo Gutiérrez²³ and Jon Sobrino.²⁴ Obviously, religious and cultural life will go on after each of us dies. Like Moses, for each of us there is a Jordan that others will cross without us. Yet Merton’s life sets into relief a brand of interruption that we have had to accustom ourselves to, namely, the interruption of the patterns of meaning which for so long have helped us to know and define who and what we are. I may not be able to explain myself adequately here, so in closing it might be best to appeal to an image, a remembrance. We all know what it is like to walk into a home we have never been in before, the need we have to be put at ease. The situation feels even more awkward if the people who live there belong to a social class far above or far below our own. As I stood years ago in the Thai temples surrounded by Buddha images, I felt strange, terribly out of place, as if I were being summoned to give an accounting of myself. I had crossed a boundary. All the familiar moorings were gone. The Buddha just sat there, silent, motionless, as if waiting for an explanation – some “apology.” My mind took refuge in scenes I had visualized when I followed Merton in *The Asian Journal*. I had no answers, no apology, no rescue. I was a stranger, a learner, and a Christian in a land that was ninety-eight percent Buddhist. The only reassurance I could summon was that Thomas Merton had been there before me.

Parables, we know, contain an element of surprise. That a seed should die in order to bear fruit is to be expected; but in what particular patch of earth the seed falls, that is the point to notice. What

needs to be interrupted? What exactly has to die before the new life can start? I like to believe that Merton had discovered that answer. For paradoxically the seed was Merton himself and shading his patch of earth was the figure of the Enlightened One.²⁵

1. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1949) 30; subsequent references will be cited as "SC" parenthetically in the text.

2. Not all readers would agree that Merton has aged well. See Mary Jo Weaver, "Conjectures of a Disenchanted Reader," *Horizons* 30.2 (2003) 285-96.

3. See Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century* (New York: New Directions, 1960); see also "The Spiritual Father in the Desert Tradition" in Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 269-93.

4. He would write, for instance, "Naturally I have reservations about it because I was young then and I've changed" (Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: Letters on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. Patrick Hart [New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990] 385; subsequent references will be cited as "SCH" parenthetically in the text); and: "Of course a lot of water has gone under the bridge in the years (almost twenty) since I wrote *The Seven Storey Mountain*. I would have said many things differently today" (Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon [New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994] 310; subsequent references will be cited as "WF" parenthetically in the text); or: "Your supposition that if I wrote that book [*The Seven Storey Mountain*] again today I would speak differently of Anglicans was both charitable and correct. My thought at the time of writing was hardly matured and I just said what came to mind . . ." (WF 319).

5. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 248, 250.

6. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 15; subsequent references will be cited as "RJ" parenthetically in the text.

7. For this story see John W. Kiser, *The Monks of Tibhirine: Faith, Love, and Terror in Algeria* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002).

8. See Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 70.

9. See Peter C. Phan, "Multiple Religious Belonging: Opportunities and Challenges for Theology and Church," *Theological Studies* 64.3 (2003) 495-519.

10. For a helpful discussion of postmodernism see Paul Lakeland, *Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

11. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953) 11.

12. Merton writes elsewhere: "Solitude is necessary for spiritual freedom. But once that freedom is acquired, it demands to be put to work in the service of a love in which there is no longer subjection or slavery. Mere withdrawal, without the return to freedom in the action, would lead to a static and deathlike inertia of the spirit in which the inner self would not awaken at all. There would be no light, no voice within us, only the silence and darkness of the tomb." See Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation*, ed. William H. Shannon (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2003) 24.

13. George Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993) 214-15. The fact that the idea of self-emptying does ride analogously across religious boundaries suggests to me that it should not be thought of as a distinctive feature of Christian religious experience. There is nothing specifically Christian, in other words, about kenosis. The point of Paul's use of "emptying" in Phil. 2:7 [*heauton ekenosen*] is to compare Christ with Adam, the son of God who did think that equality with God was something to be grasped at. To understand and apply Phil 2:7 one needs to be familiar with Genesis 3.

14. The essay appears in Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960) 139-60.

15. For more discussion of this point see W. Reiser, *Seeking God in All Things: Theology and Spiritual Direction* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004).

16. Merton wrote to Cardinal Bea in 1963: “the possibilities of ecumenical contact afforded by the monastic Orders are great and in some ways unique” (Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon [New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985] 434); and in *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967) he writes: “But the fact remains that as long as the dialogue proceeds merely between research scholars and concerns only the objective study of documents, it will lack its most essential dimension. It is here that we see the need for the Christian contemplative to enter the discussion, in his own modest way, and for the non-Christian contemplative to enter it also” (208).

17. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 293-94.

18. In reading Christine Bochen, *Thomas Merton: Essential Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000) I was reminded of a passage from *Contemplation in a World of Action* (225-26) where Merton used the expression “transcultural maturity.” He wrote: “The man who has attained final integration is no longer limited by the culture in which he has grown up. . . . He accepts not only his own community, his own society, his own friends, his own culture, but all mankind. He does not remain bound to one limited set of values in such a way that he opposes them aggressively or defensively to others. He is fully ‘Catholic’ in the best sense of the word” (165-66; subsequent references will be cited as “EW” parenthetically in the text). Merton is here describing, I would suggest, the ideal behind a liberal arts education. The notion of transcultural identity is somewhat slippery, however; human beings cannot live permanently within the transcultural moment – an anthropological no-man’s-land. John S. Dunne’s idea of “passing over” into a reality different from one’s own and then coming back to one’s own tradition seems to me more helpful in terms of clarifying what goes on in a sustained encounter with the religious other. See Dunne, *The Way of All the Earth: Experiments in Truth and Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1972).

19. Because monasticism plays such a key role in Buddhism, the most obvious route for dialogue between Christians and Buddhists would be by way of the religious experience of monks. And given the nature of Buddhist meditation, Christian monks would be sure to draw upon the apophatic tradition as they dialogued with their Buddhist counterparts. But the Gospel is full of images; it is a narrative. I do not believe, therefore, that evangelization can begin in the apophatic mode. Maybe the reason why Merton was able to penetrate Buddhist thought as far as he did is that in his case the kataphatic pole of the Christian religious experience suffered an eclipse.

20. I have in mind here particularly his “Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude.”

21. See James D. G. Dunn, *Christianity in the Making*, vol. 1: *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

22. See N. T. Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, 3 vols.: *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), and *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

23. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1973).

24. For example, see Jon Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001); and his earlier works *Christology at the Crossroads* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1978) and *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993).

25. This paper was delivered at a conference on Thomas Merton that took place at Holy Cross College in Worcester, Massachusetts on December 10, 2003.