

The essence, of course, of the best of the Christian humanist way is “the very fullness of an integrated life.” E. Glenn Hinson has ably tracked Merton’s more complicated integrated journey from the pre-Fourth and Walnut Street years in his fine article, “*Contemptus Mundi – Amor Mundi: Merton’s Progression from World Denial to World Affirmation.*”¹² The fact that Merton went through a momentary and somewhat romanticized *contemptus mundi* phase must be set in the context of his much more integrated and consistent humanist and fox-like *amor mundi* faith pilgrimage – it is this probing fullness, this searching integration and authentic Christian humanism that makes Merton also perennially attractive. Merton was, in short, very much the free-rambling intellectual fox.

Why was Thomas Merton an appealing and controversial person both when he was alive and today? I think the fact that he combines the role of the contemplative hedgehog who knows “one big thing” and the curious and investigative fox who “knows many things” makes Merton a fascinating human being and a person who has yet much to teach us about life and our all-too-human faith journey. It is this depth and breadth in Merton that, in many ways, as Victor Kramer has mentioned, reminds us of the patristic tradition of the Church as embodied in the Fathers (West and East) of whom Merton was most fond.

1. Victor A. Kramer, *Thomas Merton: Monk and Artist* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1987) 193.
2. Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy’s View of History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1953).
3. Thomas Merton, *What Is Contemplation?* (Holy Cross, IN: Saint Mary’s College, 1948); rev. ed. (Springfield, IL: Templegate, [1951] 1981).
4. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1949).
5. Daniel J. Adams, *Thomas Merton’s Shared Contemplation: A Protestant Perspective* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1979).
6. William H. Shannon, *Thomas Merton’s Dark Path: The Inner Experience of a Contemplative* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1982).
7. James Finley, *Merton’s Palace of Nowhere: A Search for God through Awareness of the True Self* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1978).
8. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961); subsequent references will be cited as “NSC” parenthetically in the text.
9. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969).
10. Thomas Merton, “The Moment of Truth,” *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 777.
11. Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart, OCSO (New York: New Directions, 1981) 339.
12. E. Glenn Hinson, “*Contemptus Mundi – Amor Mundi: Merton’s Progression from World Denial to World Affirmation.*” *Cistercian Studies* 26 (1991) 339-49.

Silence as Attention and Antidote

By Paul R. Dekar

An undergraduate from 1961-65 at the University of California, Berkeley, I heard Mario Savio inveigh against “the operation of the machine . . . so odious, it makes you sick at heart.” Naming as a great challenge “depersonalized, unresponsive bureaucracy,” Savio helped me name my issue. I sought in response intellectual mentors such as Saul Alinsky, Ivan Illich and Thomas Merton, who

helped me shape an ethic of responsible use of technology.

Technology for Merton engendered busy-ness and noisy-ness. Merton's spiritual discipline of silence served as antidote. His practice of silence was diverse. Merton participated daily in the monastic office at the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani. He prayed. He withdrew to nature where he could walk, meditate and write. He considered silence as a prerequisite to personal growth. In *No Man Is an Island*, Merton observed,

If we fill our lives with silence, then we live in hope, and Christ lives in us and gives our virtues much substance. Then, when the time comes, we confess Him openly before men, and our confession has much meaning because it is rooted in deep silence. It awakens the silence of Christ in the hearts of those who hear us, so that they themselves fall silent and begin to wonder and to listen. For they have begun to discover their true selves.¹

In his essay "Rain and the Rhinoceros," Merton wrote of

a whole world of meaning . . . of silence Think of it: all that speech pouring down, selling nothing, judging nobody . . . washing out the places where men have stripped the hillside! What a thing it is to sit absolutely alone, in the forest, at night, cherished by this wonderful, unintelligible, perfectly innocent speech, the most comforting speech in the world, the talk that rain makes by itself all over the ridges, and the talk of the watercourses everywhere in the hollows!²

In "Apologies to an Unbeliever," Merton characterized his particular task in the church and in the world as that of "the solitary explorer who, instead of jumping on all the latest bandwagons at once, is bound to search the existential depths of faith in its silences, its ambiguities, and in those certainties which lie deeper than the bottom of anxiety. . . . a kind of submarine life in which faith sometimes mysteriously takes on the aspect of doubt."³

Merton rarely described his own experience of silence. He did respond to Abdul Aziz, a Pakistani student of Sufism, who first wrote Merton in 1960. A lively correspondence developed between the two men. On January 2, 1966, Merton explained that he had a very simple way of prayer centered entirely on attention to the presence of God, God's will and God's love. Drawing comparisons with practices of Muslims, Merton wrote that his prayers grew from faith and silence:

my meditation [has] the character described by the Prophet as "being before God as if you saw Him." Yet it does not mean imagining anything or conceiving a precise image of God, for to my mind this would be a kind of idolatry. On the contrary, it is a matter of adoring Him as invisible and infinitely beyond our comprehension, and realizing Him as all. My prayer tends very much toward what you call *fana*. There is in my heart this great thirst to recognize totally the nothingness of all that is not God. My prayer is then a kind of praise rising up out of the center of Nothing and Silence. If I am still present "myself" this I recognize as an obstacle about which I can do nothing unless

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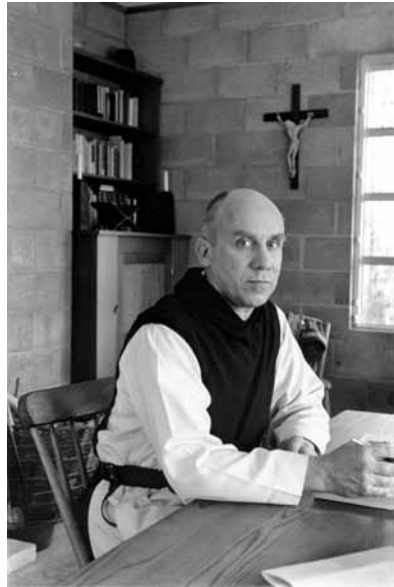
He Himself removes the obstacle. If He wills He can then make the Nothingness into a total clarity. If He does not will, then the Nothingness seems to itself to be an object and remains an obstacle. Such is my ordinary way of prayer, or meditation. It is not “thinking about” anything, but a direct seeking of the Face of the Invisible, which cannot be found unless we become lost in Him who is Invisible.⁴

Merton chafed at business aspects of monastic life, and activity that undermined his desire to spend more time in silence, stillness and solitude. Recognizing this need, Abbot James Fox granted Merton use of an abandoned shed in the woods. On February 9, 1953, Merton noted in his journal,

It is a tremendous thing no longer to have to debate in my mind about “being a hermit,” even though I am not one. At least now solitude is something concrete – it is “St. Anne’s” – the long view of hills, the empty cornfields in the bottoms, the crows in the trees, and the cedars bunched together on the hillside. And when I am here there is always lots of sky and lots of peace and I don’t have distractions and everything is serene.⁵

On January 28, 1963, Merton affirmed the importance of silence: “I need very much this silence and this snow. Here alone can I find my way because here alone the way is right in front of my face and it is God’s way for me – there is really no other.”⁶ Subsequently, Abbot Fox allowed Merton to become a hermit.

Merton greatly helped me when, in my late teens, I began to explore silence. He has continued to give spiritual direction to those who discern computers, mobile phones and other technological gizmos as an “addiction.” Recent best-sellers such as Kathleen Norris’ *The Cloister Walk*,⁷ or Philip Gröning’s film *Into Great Silence* (2005)⁸ may attest to a deeply felt need by contemporaries to respond to a biblical priority: “Be still, and know that I am God: I am exalted among the nations; I am exalted in the earth” (Ps. 46:10). Merton’s writings on silence still matter.



1. Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955) 259.
2. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 10.
3. Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 213.
4. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 63-64.
5. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk’s True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 29.
6. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 295.
7. Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996).
8. *Into Great Silence*, dir. Philip Gröning (Zeitgeist Films, 2005).