

Spiritual Theology

By **Ryan Scruggs**

In *A Secular Age* Charles Taylor argues that “we are just at the beginning of a new age of religious searching,” and that this search is characterized by the spirituality of individuals as opposed to the authority of religious institutions.¹ If, as he argues, there are certain elements of this shift to be welcomed, those on “spiritual quest” will require experienced guides along the journey; and as one who reasons from the depths of his own spiritual experience, Thomas Merton is a distinguished guide. Still, a good guide does not shy away from difficult terrain but rather equips his company for the journey to its final destination. In this sense one reason Merton still matters is his persuasive witness to the integral relationship between spirituality and theology – between authentic inner experience and the universality of truth.

In *New Seeds of Contemplation* Merton paints the picture with broad strokes:

Contemplation, far from being opposed to theology, is in fact the normal perfection of theology. We must not separate intellectual study of divinely revealed truth and contemplative experience of that truth as if they could never have anything to do with one another. On the contrary they are simply two aspects of the same thing. Dogmatic and mystical theology, or theology and “spirituality” are not to be set apart in mutually exclusive categories, as if mysticism were for saintly women and theological study were for practical but, alas, unsaintly men. This fallacious division perhaps explains much that is actually lacking both in theology and spirituality. But the two belong together, just as body and soul belong together. Unless they are united, there is no fervor, no life and no spiritual value in theology, no substance, no meaning and no sure orientation in the contemplative life.²

The “thing” of which theology and spirituality are “two aspects” (the objective and subjective aspects) is the truth of God in Jesus Christ. Theology is an understanding of that truth and spirituality is an experience of that truth.

How does theology orient spirituality? At least in two ways: first, theology is like a compass on the spiritual journey. For example, Merton notes that “Both the theologian and the ordinary believer, in the Patristic age, realized the importance of the correct theological formulation of the mystery of the Incarnation, because dogmatic error would in fact imply disastrous practical consequences in the spiritual life of each individual Christian.”³ He takes the case of Athanasius in the fourth century who “so stubbornly defended the divinity of Christ against the Arians,” because “he saw that if Christ were not God, then it followed that the Christian hope for union with God in and through Christ was a delusion” (*IE* 37).⁴ Second, the



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ecclesial nature of Christian spirituality necessarily involves the mystic upon returning from “his simple experience of God” in an attempt “to communicate it to men.” In this “he necessarily comes once again under the control of the theologian and his language is bound to strive after the clarity and distinctness and accuracy that canalize Catholic tradition” (*NSC* 149).⁵ In short, he says elsewhere, an “experience of *spirituality*” without an “experience of *theology*” is “the death of contemplation. {It promotes} experience of experience and not experience of revelation and of God revealing” (*ICM* 36).

How does spirituality breathe life into theology? For Merton theology is an intellectual communication through words and spirituality is an ontological communion in love. As such it is spirituality that brings us into contact with the object (and Subject) of our theological discourse – at first in the obscurity of faith and increasingly through the experience of love; we no longer merely talk about God, we enter into God.

Here the Truth is One Whom we not only know and possess but by Whom we are known and possessed. Here theology ceases to be a body of abstractions and becomes a Living Reality Who is God Himself. And He reveals Himself to us in our total gift of our lives to Him. Here the light of truth is not something that exists for our intellect but One in Whom and for Whom all minds and spirits exist, and theology does not truly begin to be theology until we have transcended the language and separate concepts of theologians. (*NSC* 148)

Lawrence Cunningham grasps this vital insight in commenting on Merton’s lectures on “Ascetical and Mystical Theology.” He reflects that Merton “recalled to his students, and now, gratefully, to us, the truth of one of Saint Thomas Aquinas’s most profound observations, namely, that faith has as its final end not what is articulated but the reality behind that articulation (*non ad enuntiabile sed ad rem*)” (*ICM* x).

Finally, the unity and reciprocity of theology and spirituality is most evident in Merton’s appreciation for Anselm’s *ratio fidei* in his so-called “Ontological Argument.” In an article on the medieval monk he writes:

It is true that later on, in the decadence of Scholasticism, a dry and cerebral theology was the enemy of mysticism and spiritual elevation. It is equally true that a decadent and sentimental spirituality drove men to technical theology in search of intellectual substance. But in Anselm there is no divorce between intelligence and mysticism. They are one and the same thing. Intelligence springs from mystical intuition and seeks to deepen its religious meaning in an act of homage to the truth. For Anselm reason serves adoration, and is not mere logic-chopping. The “argument for the existence of God” is itself an act of worship that takes place in the presence of God who reveals Himself to the contemplative as the One beyond all comparison, whose Being is absolutely necessary.⁶

Likewise, it is both because Merton had a rich spiritual life and because his intelligence sought to deepen the religious meaning of that inner experience “in an act of homage to the truth” that Merton still matters.

1. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007) 535.
2. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 254-55; subsequent references will be cited as “*NSC*” parenthetically in the text. For a very similar comment see the opening paragraphs of his lectures

- on “Ascetical and Mystical Theology” given to the young priests in the monastery in Thomas Merton, *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* 3, ed. Patrick F. O’Connell (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2008) 15-16; subsequent references will be cited as “*ICM*” parenthetically in the text.
3. Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation*, ed. William H. Shannon (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2003) 37; subsequent references will be cited as “*IE*” parenthetically in the text.
 4. For another example see his emphasis on the personalistic character of Christian contemplation in light of Chalcedonian Christology (*NSC* 153).
 5. See also Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968) 45-46.
 6. Louis [Thomas] Merton, “St. Anselm and His Argument,” *The American Benedictine Review* 17 (June 1966) 243.

Final Integration in Thomas Merton: The Art of Finding the Middle Way

By Cristóbal Serrán-Pagán y Fuentes

This brief reflection examines Thomas Merton’s contemplative thoughts on final integration, a term that he borrowed from the Iranian-American psychoanalyst Reza Arasteh. Merton’s holistic model of final integration has its spiritual roots in the Christian mystical tradition that a healthy life of prayer is based on good works when every single act is performed for the greater glory of God. Everything that we do then becomes a prayer, including our work. This new model of final integration in Merton’s spirituality is a call to wisdom that requires a *metanoia*, a radical change of heart in our soul.

One of the greatest influences that the late Merton experienced before his untimely death was through corresponding with Arasteh.¹ Their exchange of ideas and books began in 1965. Merton sent the psychotherapist *The Way of Chuang Tzu*² and received in turn Arasteh’s study of Rumi entitled *Rumi the Persian: Rebirth in Creativity and Love*.³ Merton showed great interest in Arasteh’s approach to Rumi in his usage of a modern tool like psychoanalysis.

By 1968 Merton had read Arasteh’s book entitled *Final Integration in the Adult Personality*.⁴ The Trappist monk gave proper credit to Arasteh for his valuable insights. Merton received great benefits from corresponding with this Sufi-turned-psychologist in his attempt to make sense of his inner experiences. After reading Arasteh’s book, Merton wrote a long essay titled “Final Integration: Toward a ‘Monastic Therapy.’”⁵ Both Merton and Arasteh were interested in developing a holistic model of spirituality that addresses the whole person. Their spirituality is envisioned as a double process of unification (in psychological terms) and of deification (in theological terms). Arasteh’s teachings resonated with Merton in his own spiritual practice.

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