

is always universal: for in this inmost ‘I’ my own solitude meets the solitude of every other man and the solitude of God. . . . It is only this inmost and solitary ‘I’ that truly loves with the love and the spirit of Christ.”³ In this light, mystery rather than meaninglessness is the transcendent possibility of all language and communication. His influence on his reading audience grew in great proportion to his articulation of this iconoclastic *theopoiesis* in both his poetry and prose.

In the decade prior to his death, Merton had reached far into and beyond his own humanity and spirituality only to renew his exploration of and commitment to oneness with all humanity and God. In studying his ontology, one realizes that he embraced his understanding that personhood is simultaneous with the freedom to ascend to truth; that the truth of humanity is found in God – “the Ground of Being”; that this Ground of Being is found in solitude; that solitude is appropriated in silence, the language of a Living God. His account of these realizations articulates the mystic’s experience of transcending the self. Ultimately, Merton has discovered and portrayed in his poetry, along with much else, the geography whose directions are mapped by Christ, the Lord of Life, the Truth and the Way.

1. Thomas Merton, *The Geography of Lograire*. (New York: New Directions, 1969) 41; Thomas Merton, *In the Dark before Dawn: New Selected Poems*, ed. Lynn R. Szabo (New York: New Directions, 2005) 162.
2. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 315.
3. Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960) 207.

Icon and/or Metaphor

By **Bonnie Thurston**

In its rootlessness, privilege and conversion, if not an icon, Thomas Merton’s life was an apt metaphor for the twentieth century. Born in France (1915) and transported to the United States due to World War I (1916), when his mother died (1920) he was taken by his father to Bermuda (1922) and back to France (1925) and then enrolled in school in England (1928). When his father died (1931), he returned to the United States. He was a man without a country and without a family, a man in search of roots, grounding and belonging.

Merton was also a person of privilege, exposed early in life to the fine arts by gifted and artistic parents. He was given an excellent education on the continent, in England and the USA and well provided for financially by his maternal grandparents and father. He travelled widely and, to say the very least, was an “experienced” young man who, much to the surprise of some of his contemporaries, found the stability and family he lacked in Christianity, specifically, the Roman Catholic Church (1938) and

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at the Trappist Abbey of Gethsemani (1941) in very un-cosmopolitan rural Kentucky. His conversion, not untypical of many battered by World Wars, led him from privilege to poverty to great riches, the riches that God lavishes on those who seek God. *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948) demonstrates that Merton understood himself as a man saved by Christ. He was, I think, saved by Christ *from* the world, *for* the world.

After the idyll of early monastic formation, and the turbulent middle decade at Gethsemani, Merton emerged as a seminal thinker in what I think are the three most important religious issues of the second half of the twentieth century: ecumenism, social justice and contemplative spirituality. “Ecumenism” is too narrow a term for Merton, who migrated from neo-paganism (let us call it what it was), through a Roman Catholic exclusivism characteristic of more than one convert to that beautiful Church, to openness not only to other Christians (strictly speaking, “ecumenism”) but to other religions. His inter-faith interests embraced ancient Eastern paths – Hinduism, the Tao and Buddhism – as well as Judaism and Islam. His work in Buddhism (first Zen and later Tibetan traditions) and in Islam (especially classical Sufism) made him a pioneer in inter-faith dialogue.¹



Merton’s Gospels-forged, incredibly profound vision of what, in actuality, the Kingdom of God should look like, led him to outspoken stands against nuclear weapons and the southeast Asian war. He was appalled by the racism and xenophobia of mid-twentieth-century America and wrote eloquently in support of civil rights. His influence on the Berrigan brothers, the Catholic Worker Movement, Pax Christi and other social justice movements is well documented in his own writing and later studies.

Certainly his understanding of how life might be lived in Christian community was shaped by monastic life. But, finally, I think it is Merton’s own prayer and devotion to Christ that were the wellspring of his creativity and energy in the many subjects that attracted his omnivorous intellect. Merton was the product of rootlessness (think of the great migrations caused by the World Wars in Europe or the founding of the states of Israel and India) and after the wars, of economic expansion. He lived among people searching for meaning in the aftermath of destruction and for “something more” in the midst of prosperity.

Merton’s writing was an oasis not only for his own spiritually thirsty generation, but for subsequent ones. His gift was not only for prayer, itself, which is wordless (pre- or post-verbal), but for articulating its experience and results. Reintroducing a stream of Eastern Christian thought, Merton espoused a theology of prayer rooted in the self, the True Self, as the person exists in God. As did other “Benedictines gone East” (for example Henri le Saux or Bede Griffiths), Merton pointed us beyond duality in prayer, primarily by helping the Western Church recover meditative or contemplative prayer, a form of prayer never lost in the Eastern Church (which did not suffer the disjunctions of the Protestant Reformation). Christian contemplative prayer, particularly the contemplative prayer

movement in the United States (under the gifted leadership of Merton's confrere Thomas Keating, OCSO) is largely due to Merton's influence through his own appropriation not only of Zen (as is often popularly assumed), but of the fourteenth-century book *The Cloud of Unknowing* which teaches this form of prayer.

There is something wonderfully instructive about a life which, with and not in spite of its warts and woundedness, has God as its central reality. By his life and writing Merton teaches us not that God is "out there" somewhere, but "in here," in ourselves as well as our world. Like the fourth-century desert Christians whom he so admired, Merton left the world and remained in the monastery not because he hated the world, but because he loved it. A consistent theme in his writing is "the primacy of love over everything else in the spiritual life."² He reminds us that we find God, not by withdrawing from life, but by becoming fully alive. "If we want to be spiritual . . . let us first of all live our lives."³

Merton the man was iconic. Merton the thinker will be listed among the great Christian intellectuals of the twentieth century. But as Merton knew, "Spiritual life is not mental life" (*TS* 27). Time marches on; other issues will claim our attention, and some of his work will seem dated. Finally, it is Merton the spiritual writer whose work will remain fresh because it is timeless and invites the reader into timelessness. Merton's lyrical and incisive descriptions of the inner life will chart the way for spiritual journeys of future travelers who will follow him to a certain point and then, as he did, make their own way into the great and beguiling mystery of God. I suspect *New Seeds of Contemplation* and *Thoughts in Solitude* will be to the twentieth century what sayings of the Desert Christians are to the fourth or *The Cloud of Unknowing* is to the fourteenth or *The Dark Night of the Soul* and *The Interior Castle* are to the sixteenth – and for the sake of future seekers, I hope I am correct.

1. In 1982, for example, Merton's *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968) was one of the texts in my Harvard Divinity School class on Buddhist-Christian dialogue. His correspondence with Abdul Aziz (Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon [New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985] 43-67) is one of the most complete Islamic-Christian "conversations" extant in English.
2. Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century* (New York: New Directions, 1960) 17.
3. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1958) 46-47; subsequent references will be cited as "TS" parenthetically in the text.

We Always Need a Prophet

By **Monica Weis, SSJ**

The world always seems to be in crisis, and people ask – Where are the prophets? Where are the visionaries? Who can show us the way to

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