

ON DISCOVERING  
DIVINE FOOLISHNESS:  
Merton as Bridge-Person

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Thomas Merton was a bridge-person, the sort of human being who knows that he must make decisive choices, yet is forever concerned lest the decisions made will result — as often they do — in shrinking one's horizons, especially as the original enthusiasm becomes routinized. We all know the syndrome — in our work, in our lives — in marriages, in religious communities. We see it so clearly in the history of the Church, in the periodic need for reformations — in the consummate irony that the massive unleashing of creative spiritual energies in the sixteenth century resulted in — yet more churches.

Merton determined that would not happen to him — or his psyche did. Restlessness, we call it from the outside; from within, a clear call to individuation that involves the reconciling of opposites. So every collective will resist such a person, since each collective way must think itself to be adequate; especially given the investment required to staff it and keep it

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going. Monasticism is no exception, of course, so the image of Merton as a maverick in the monastery was inevitable.

Yet his concern to bridge the institutional moat between monastic and contemporary culture, to explore the tantalizing connections between Christian faith and other religious responses, responds more adequately than monasticism ever can to the initial world-breaking impulse that the Gospel spelled in the Greco-Roman world. In fact, it was precisely such a concern to relate Hebrew Scriptures to Hellenic culture and Roman politics, which inaugurated very early on the discipline called theology in the fledgling Christian communities. I want to focus on an early example of this explicit relating — in this case, of faith to reason (another of Merton's recurrent concerns, though never an anxiety!). The individual whose reflections I shall be reprising — Paul — was never a particular favorite of Merton's, as I recall. But his topic certainly was: divine foolishness. For one of the ways in which Merton regularly fended off the establishment (whatever it was) to reassert his freedom and his vocation — to bridge divides, introduce strangers, reconcile opposites — was to play the fool. For the most part, to be sure, this took the somewhat indirect form of praising the foolishness, yet he certainly would have relished more opportunities actually to play the fool! These reflections are offered in that spirit.



Some very special circumstances conspired with the earliest preaching of Jesus as Lord to generate the reflective religious enterprise we call theology. The prominent place given in the canonical Christian writings to a single individual — Paul — indicates this curious fact better than anything else. For it was Paul who was forced to grapple with the twin realities which compelled so early and so incisively theological a turn. As a Jew preaching to the Greek-speaking people, he needed to capture portions of that language to do the work he needed to make it do: and in speaking with non-Jews, he had to relate them to a body of Scripture not their own, while establishing a distinct relation to those Scriptures himself. Even if the process of Hellenization had prepared him somewhat for the first effort, nothing — needless to say — could have prepared him (or anyone) for the second. For the very newness of the Gospels consisted largely in the manner in which Jesus is seen to “fulfill” the Scriptures!

Remember that for the early followers of Jesus the “scriptures” referred to the many-faceted account of God’s dealing with Israel — the books which the established Christian Church would later denominate “The Old Testament,” often leaving Christians in a quandary regarding the proper attitude they should assume towards it. The saving feature remained the Church’s single-minded adherence to the Psalms as its privileged book of prayer. Yet the quandary persisted, and it showed itself at the very beginning: how to graft a world that did not share this story onto the “olive tree” which is Israel in order to “share [its] rich sap” — as Paul puts it in Romans 11:17. The cultural gap had to be negotiated, and this fact forced Christian preaching to assume a theological mode required neither of Judaism nor later of Islam.

To translate into another language would be taxing enough, yet to ask those same language speakers to adopt a new set of ancestors compounds the difficulties in an alarming degree. Is it any wonder that Paul often comes up with formulas that are inherently ambiguous — as if to underscore the continuing *theological* task, or that he sometimes loses his equanimity and simply drops the ball? It is telling that Islam and Judaism each tend to regard the language of their scriptures to be as canonical as the writings themselves. As a result, their religious writing tends to be constituted by extended commentary on those works, and has seldom been forced to the kind of speculative reflection we know as Christian theology.

I would like to focus here on the tactic Paul employs to grapple with both issues at once, in his celebrated passage in the opening chapters of the first letter to the Corinthians. He takes his stand here firmly between his own people whom he can only dismay, and the Greeks who cannot help but mock him — for he is preaching “a crucified Christ” (I Corinthians 1:23). Such a one must be “to the Jews an obstacle that they cannot get over, to the pagans madness” (1:23). Since it is in the language and the forms of thought of the Greeks, however, that he must express himself — writing to the fledgling communities in Corinth — he chooses directly to confront their impasse, insisting that he was sent “to preach the Good News, [yet] not sent to preach that in terms of philosophy in which the crucifixion of Christ cannot be expressed” (1:17).

Thus begins that notoriously polemical passage which has been invoked time and time again to create a chasm between Jerusalem and Athens: if “the language of the cross may be illogical to those who are not on the way to salvation” (1:18), that is “because God wanted to save those

who have faith through the foolishness of the message that we preach" (1:21), so that "faith should not depend on human philosophy but on the power of God" (2:5). Yet foolishness cannot be the last word, nor is it, as Paul asserts this "Christ [to be] the power and the wisdom of God" (1:24).

Foolishness cannot be the last word, for the power of God is not coercive. Even if Paul was thrown off his mount onto his hindquarters, it was not with these that he himself believed, cast in his lot with Jesus and proclaimed him to be the Lord. Part of that movement must involve perceiving, as it did for Paul, how "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness stronger than human strength" (1:25). Yet that very movement must be a genuine one and not a mere rhetorical flourish — as palpable as Paul's crash from his horse. So foolishness has to be the first word. If we sense nothing at all incongruous about "a crucified Christ," we understand neither word and have missed the entire point. And in that case, we can hardly be said to be believers at all, for we would have no need to experience the active "power of God."

There is only one conclusion to be drawn from all this: that we Gentiles must in some fashion become Jews if we are to call ourselves believers. This is, of course, what Paul asserted as well — in that other letter to the Romans — where he spoke of our being grafted onto the "natural wild olive" tree that is Israel (11:24). But natural images are so much less confrontative than the language of this letter that we could easily have missed the conjunction — as the history of interpretation of this polemic so tragically displays. How often has it been employed as one more argument for the superiority of Christians over the Jews who cannot get over this obstacle — of a crucified Christ. Yet how superior would we deem those Christians to be when it turned out that they could not even be called believers, for they had felt no obstacle at all, and hence no need for the power of God.

In such a situation, indeed, they would not quite know in what they believed, for the very notion of a *Christ* would be opaque to them. Why not then a *crucified* one? It's all very sad, of course, but what real difference does it make? What is so compelling about the very notion of a crucified Christ that it can pose, for those who understand the language best, a formidable obstacle, as well as comprise for Paul a terse summary of all that makes this news good: pregnant shorthand for the wisdom and the power of God? He does not directly address this question in the passage I have chosen as a paradigm instance of the theological effort endemic to

Christian faith, yet he supplies us with sufficient clues to allow one to show clearly how his treatment is not merely polemical but — as Kierkegaard would put it — thoroughly dialectical. For the wisdom from whose vantage point this Christ is foolishness is that prized by “influential people [who] come from noble families” (1:26). Secure people of this sort can make a show of their knowledge, parading it as a philosophy attuned to the wisdom “of the masters of our age” (2:6). That picture suggests that we would find it easier to recognize the power and wisdom of God in a crucified Christ the less we were attached to being in step with the wise and influential of our world. Difficulties could no doubt remain, but that particular attachment apparently creates the greatest obstacle of all.

Now what is significant about identifying the source of resistance is that it is indifferent to being Jew or Greek. It does, however, indicate something powerfully accurate about being human. For what is more natural to each of us than to reach spontaneously for approval, and to work tirelessly to assure that for ourselves when no one else will. As Kierkegaard put it [writing as Joannes de Silentio]: “We are each of us engaged in editing an elegant version of ourselves.” One can but add: full time. If the very notion, and even more the fact, of a crucified Christ were some way to upset that pattern, we should have to resist it — manfully.

Yet that is precisely what the crucifixion of Jesus does, and why the narrative accounts of the various gospels are so arresting. The rubrics of the Holy Week liturgy drive this point home by assigning the response of the crowd to the entire congregation (in unison): “Crucify him!” For as Paul puts it, if “the masters of this age” would have been privy to the wisdom of God in this event, “they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory” (2:8). Yet if they so misperceived the hand of the Lord, can we presume that we would have been possessed of both courage and insight sufficient to resist their stand? And if we remain external enough to the passion narratives to imagine that we could have resisted effectively, is that what the record reads in our own case? If we continue to think so, then we would imagine ourselves more faithful than Peter and more courageous than all the rest, and so show that we had *really* missed the point of the narratives. We should in fact have simply displayed our foolishness!

This is the catch in Paul’s carefully constructed wisdom passage with which he opens his first letter to the Corinthians. It is anything but a polemic against human reason; its own elegant structure belies so crude a reading as that. It offers rather a theological scheme for appreciating the

power present in the accounts of the passion as they are transmitted to us by the hands of each of the evangelists. What Paul has seen is how the very act of crucifying Jesus at once shows up the foolishness of our ingrained purposes, and to one so shown up, can reveal not only the “power and wisdom of God” but “even the depths of God” (2:10). For to recognize the foolishness of our own inbuilt endeavors to be attuned with “the masters of our age” is to see through “the spirit of the world” enough to open ourselves to “receive the Spirit that comes from God [who can] teach us to understand the gifts that he has given us” (2:12). That is, we can be led to let go of the life we hang onto so desperately enough to begin to apprehend it — to see it and to receive it — as a gift!

It is hardly natural to think of our life as a gift; it makes much more sense to begin with it simply as a *given*. For we were not around, after all, to receive it. Nothing can bring us to such an appreciation of what we customarily take for granted, unless it be a dramatization of the inevitable trajectory open to one who would take so much for granted. Namely, that such a one could not, in good conscience, tolerate being informed that what he had so effectively taken for granted should rather be appreciated as a gift. For he would see — dimly at first, but more acutely as the consequences were borne in on him — that such a premise would upset all his schemes. Anything so intolerable to sustain as that would have to be rejected, or if possible, simply avoided — avoidance being the underside of valor.

And if it were but a contrary premise, we could easily crowd it out of our consciousness, as we normally do with proposals that construe our lives in an unwelcome or uncomfortable fashion. But what if that premise will not remain a mere construal but takes on an individual human voice, and even more, effectively shapes the life of the one proclaiming it to the point where we cannot avoid taking notice? And furthermore what if one cannot help but be arrested by that voice and attracted by that person, who manages to touch in each of us that hidden place where we would, if only we could, make over our own selves as a gift — to the one who bestowed that self? When things take such a turn as this, something within us has to give. For one part of us would forcibly banish an interloper so devastating to our personal and corporate investments, and another part of us would drop everything on the spot to run after him.

And when we read those passion narratives, mindful of his subsequent resurrection, we are led to remark how strikingly parallel is the way the crowd treats Jesus with the way the offended part of me deals with that

more spontaneous side. In fact, I may not have recognized before just how at odds these two sides are, how one dare not leave the other room — until I am confronted with the part we all play in having “crucified the Lord of Glory.” For that is what the raising from the dead confirms — who this one really is; while being then constrained to acknowledge my part in the drama confirms who I am: sinner, yet now open to a change of heart.

That change of heart is, in the Greek parlance already assimilated by a post-exilic Judaism, true wisdom. Yet such wisdom cannot be anyone’s “boast” (1:29), for, as Paul recounts it, it remained effectively hidden until the “Lord of Glory” undertook in his son Jesus to play out unto death a drama which would entrap our hearts enough to challenge the sufficiency of our wisest schemes — showing how they led us inescapably to conspire to rid the world of *him*! Nothing short of that could have shown up our wisdom for the foolishness it is; yet no god had ever shown himself so foolish as to care *that much* for humankind — though the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had veered very close to it. One is caught, as many an erstwhile spectator of the tragedies of Greece had been caught, and carried sympathetically to an unwelcome insight into one’s very self.

Yet this time the drama really took place, and the enlightenment attained encompasses more than a fact about oneself, but lays bare in clearest outline the very conflict that *is* oneself. That is how this “crucified Christ . . . is the power and the wisdom of God” (1:24). And why we can avow that “by God’s doing he has become our wisdom, and our virtue, and our holiness, and our freedom” (1:30). For it is all God’s doing: “How rich are the depths of God — how deep his wisdom and knowledge!” as the letter to the Romans puts it so ecstatically (11:33). For it all turns, as Corinthians makes so clear, on so foolish a divine initiative that its ending could not avoid disaster — were the “crucified Christ” not also the master key to our salvation, revealing the saving power of God in the very moment when we are brought to recognize ourselves to be sinners.

That moment of double-recognition, that instant when we are made to acknowledge two truths at once, is what Paul would capture in the paradoxical transition from wisdom to wisdom through foolishness — ours and God’s. I offer this stumbling commentary as a modest contribution to a work which Merton saw himself continuing and passing on: one of reclaiming the intellect to the service of Christ. On his way to distinguishing himself, Thomas Merton became distinguished, but only by deliberately immersing himself in a life hardly considered intellectually illustrious. Yet

the twin miracle remains that he discovered therein a wisdom that continued to confound his schemes — even his early ways of construing the life itself, and yet at each step spoke to contemporaries as well, in accents they could not disclaim.



One dimension of Merton remains, however, which also crops up regularly in Paul. It is a disconcerting side, yet inevitable: the polemicist, and most often directed against erstwhile believers. For no one would be able to follow this Jesus, certainly, were there not others — apostles — in whose footsteps one might walk. We would not dare to look upon our lives as a gift unless we had tasted, somewhere, the quality of exchange that so radical a proposal could open to us human beings. A community of believers forms the indispensable vehicle for faith, as the liturgical rendition of the passion narratives both embraces us and shows us the fatal part we play. Nevertheless, that same *ecclesia* will commence at once to fabricate its own brand of wisdom, will interpose its own authority in place of the mysterious double recognition we have traced, and will soon bedevil the very one who there heard so closely the call to follow him.

Historians have come to conclude that the Gospel pharisees offer a stereotype of the religious leaders who were affiliated with that party, and knowledge of that sort is invaluable to help us close off one more way in which the Christian Scriptures have been used to foster anti-Semitism. Yet a simple shift of literary focus — one the Gospels themselves demand — will accomplish the same goal, and do so even more effectively. If we read the stories of Jesus' encounter with the reigning religious authorities more as prophecy than as history, how readily the character of the pharisee adapts itself, and how accurate a portrait it offers. The simple fact that Christian churches so seldom try that shoe on to notice how well it fits is one more evidence of the collective blindness to which religious establishments are prone. And that is, after all, just what the figure — the stereotype, if you will — of the pharisee is designed to call to our attention, is it not?

This curious capacity apparently endemic to churches — to conceal even more than to reveal — doubtless accounts as well for Jesus' uncompromising harshness with "anyone who is an obstacle to bring down one of these little ones who have faith" (Mark 9:42). No pain is more acute than

that felt by one called to pastor in the face of would-be pastors — witness the virulence of Jesus' resentment of the pharisees. And in the rest of us, a salutary pain, for we know how easily we ourselves can betray the call and the mission. To anyone familiar with Merton's writings, this theme — this love / hate relationship with church, with Trappists, with himself — runs through everything. Its presence is certainly part of his attraction, for to mask that conflict, to suppress the pain, *is* to become an establishment mouthpiece. It is noteworthy that these opening chapters of Paul's letter to the Corinthians were themselves inspired by a conflict of just this sort — an emerging party-spirit among the fledgling community: "All these slogans that you have, like 'I am for Paul,' 'I am for Apollos,' 'I am for Cephas [Peter],' 'I am for Christ.' Has Christ been parcelled out? Was it Paul that was crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul?" (1:12-13).

Paul's response to the foolishness, then, is to recur to the fact and to the image of "a crucified Christ . . . who is the power and the wisdom of God." Nothing less will counter our inertial tendency to fabricate our own account of what we call faith, to revert to the security of our own wisdom, reducing the facts and symbols of God's revelation in Jesus to another set of slogans — Christian ones. Yet we have at least unmasked the propensity, and remarked how Paul, as well as Merton, fingered it from the outset. Since it lodges itself within each of us, we cannot be too harsh in rooting it out — yet will never succeed, unless we learn to rely on that paradoxical movement from wisdom to wisdom through foolishness that Paul has identified as our salvation.