

# THOMAS MERTON: THE MONK AS A CRITIC OF CULTURE

by **Lawrence S. Cunningham**

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Long before his death in 1968, Thomas Merton exercised an enormous influence on the Catholic life of this country. As his letters, now in the process of publication, attest, that influence was also felt outside the American Catholic fold. When one begins to focus with precision on the character of that influence the clear lines of understanding begin to blur. He was a poet but his poetry is not decisive; he was a literary critic but one rarely finds his criticism anthologized today. His autobiographical writings from *The Seven Storey Mountain* down to the posthumous *Asian Journal* and other volumes still sell thousands of copies in a variety of languages. At least one of his books — *New Seeds of Contemplation* — has reached the status of a minor classic of the genre. He wrote on an enormous variety of topics but one is inclined to agree with the great monastic historian, Jean Leclercq, that he was a master of nothing. It is a judgment that Merton himself would not have resisted. In a 1967 letter to Rosemary Ruether, he said of himself: "I am not a pro at anything except writing. I am no theologian."<sup>1</sup> That such a sentiment was not false modesty is attested by the now famous chart in which he categorized his writings from "awful" to "good."<sup>2</sup>

Nonetheless, twenty years after his death, there is no diminution of interest in his writings and no stopping the writing about him. As I write I

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1. Thomas Merton. *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*; ed. by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985), p. 510.

2. See Thomas Merton, *Honorable Reader: Reflections on My Work*; ed. by Robert E. Daggy (New York: Crossroad, 1989), pp. 150-151.

\* This paper was delivered on 10 November 1988 at the conference, *Thomas Merton: Concerned Religious Writer for a Secular Society*, Oakhurst Baptist Church, Decatur, Georgia.

can hear in my inner ear the word processors clacking as graduate students, admirers, and professors spin out yet another volume which, inevitably, will end up on my already overloaded Merton bookshelf. Tellingly enough, I await those volumes with anticipation just as I look forward to the volumes of Merton's own writings which are, as it were, waiting in the wings to be launched out on a public life of their own.

My first acquaintance with Thomas Merton came in the early 1950s when I was barely in high school. A next door neighbor lent me a copy of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. I must have been about fourteen at the time but I can still recall — born and bred of a Catholic though I was — the somewhat ominous photographs of the Trappist monks with their shaved heads and peaked hoods. For my high school graduation I received a copy of *The Sign of Jonas*. By that time I was so hooked that I think I can now say of Thomas Merton what the great fifteenth century humanist Pico della Mirandola said of all books: that I have read everything Merton has written which has been published.

But let me go back to the question I have already raised: what is the character of Thomas Merton's influence? Not, surely, because of the sustained power of all that writing since, as Merton himself realized, there is a good deal of dross among the gold. Not, equally, for the judicious balance of his insights because, as Michael Mott shows in his acclaimed biography, he could be irritatingly apodictic in his enthusiasms or naive in his judgments. Nor, finally, because of the systematic beauty of his thought because his thought was not systematic and, in a sense, was not thought at all if one means by "thought" an organized body of reflection. He was not, in short, a Karl Barth (who, incidentally, died on the same day in the same year as Merton) about whom Merton cunningly dreamed in the opening pages of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.

Let me tell you how I came to understand how one might approach the mystery of Merton's influence.

A few years ago Trappist author Basil Pennington organized a series of papers on Thomas Merton to be read in conjunction with the annual meeting, The International Medieval Conference, which is held on the campus of Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, Michigan.<sup>3</sup> The Merton sessions attracted large numbers of people who ordinarily would not attend a conference on medieval studies. A dozen or so ordinary lay

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3. The papers were later published in the volume *Towards an Integrated Humanity: Thomas Merton's Journey*; ed. by M. Basil Pennington, O.C.S.O. (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1988).

folks drove down from Canada. I met a young woman, a recent graduate from Bryn Mawr of no particular religious persuasion, who worked with the homeless and the undocumented alien population of Milwaukee. She had read Thomas Merton in college and, to the despair of her parents, decided to do something, as she told me, to "make her life add up."

That young woman is not unlike other people I know: a painter who read Merton regularly because she thirsts to be something other than simply a painter; a Jewish woman who told me that reading Merton was an anchor in her desire to live an orthodox life and keep her family orthodox in its style of life. My suspicion is that every monastic guest master or gate keeper in this country can tell similar stories. The monks at Gethsemani tell me that there is a steady stream of people who come to their doors seeking simply to visit Merton's grave or to talk with monks who knew him. Almost any book on Merton will sell modestly well and good books on Merton as well as Merton's own books sell very well indeed. Merton, a theologian once said to me, expressed modern religious longing better, and more authentically, than any other writer in this century.

Once I began to take note of this phenomenon I began to see that it was Thomas Merton as a *person* — the person, to be sure, who spoke through his writings (and the vast bulk of his writing was autobiographical but often disguised under other genres) — who exercised such a profound influence on people. Thomas Merton, in short, strikes me as a paradigmatic person not in the sense that everyone could use him as a model to emulate but because, in his life, there are clues as to how we might live and how we might view the world even when we find ourselves in circumstances quite different from his own.

We might pause at this point to note quickly what a rather unlikely model Thomas Merton is for Americans, Catholic or not. While he attained American citizenship as an adult, he was born in France to an expatriate American mother and a father who was from New Zealand. His early education was garnered from both French schools (he was bilingual) and, to his chagrin, English ones. He travelled on the continent a good deal from his youth and, due to circumstances of his home life (or lack thereof) moved across the Atlantic more than once as a child.

His first sustained encounter with American educational culture came in the 1930s in the heady atmosphere of Columbia University. In 1941, when he was in his mid twenties, Merton entered a rural Trappist monastery in Kentucky and, rare forays aside, remained there until his death in 1968 which occurred, almost implausibly, in Thailand. His youth was spent

in restless moving but his adult years were firmly anchored in a place. From 1941 until 1968, he was a traveller of the mind with his most common mode of mental travel being the letter, the essay, the poem, and the journal. His letters reflect an enormous range of correspondents from Pope Paul VI and Nobel laureate Czeslaw Milosz to Henry Miller, Erich Fromm, and an ersatz hippie teenager in California.

Furthermore, Thomas Merton was a monk. He is inexplicable without constant reference to that fact. I have argued in print, and state once again here, that this is the key datum about him. Monasticism, a hallmark of the Catholic tradition, is not one of the primary things most Catholics think of when they consider what Catholicism means. In fact, most American Catholics probably go through life with little direct contact with monasticism. Even a comprehensive survey of American Catholic life like Jay Dolan's recent *The American Catholic Experience* spends little space on monasticism in this country. Despite that benign neglect, monasticism exercised an enormous influence on the very shape of Catholicism in everything from the liturgy and asceticism to our understanding of scriptures and the shape of our prayer. A good deal of that influence has been absorbed into Catholic life, and given the hidden style of monastic life, it is easy to overlook its influence.

It may well be — at least I will advance this argument — that it is the very marginality of the monk that provides a starting point for our reflections on the significance of Thomas Merton. It is a vantage point with which Merton himself would be sympathetic. Anyone who reads the posthumously published essays collected in his volume *Contemplation in a World of Action* will recall his repeated assertion that a monk is, by definition, a person on the margin. There is delicious irony in the fact that during the decade that made relevancy its war cry, Merton insisted repeatedly that it was irrelevancy that was central to the monk's life. He himself lived that marginality both in terms of the kind of life that he had chosen and the place where he lived out his monastic vow of stability. In fact, one can trace an arc of marginality in his own life as he moved from the energetic life of the campus of Columbia University in New York to a rural monastery in Kentucky and, from there, to the edge of the monastic enclosure and his hermitage in the woods. Each step in his maturity was, as it were, a step further away from the "center of things."

Merton was not being flatly ironic in his description of marginality. From its early beginnings in Christianity, monasticism always prized the practice of *fuga mundi* — flight from the world. This was as true of the early

desert fathers and mothers as it was of the medieval Cistercians who sought out the wilder parts of France for their foundations. There is, historically, a real tension in monasticism which can be called the dialectic of the desert and the city. The weight of the tension favors the desert because history tells us that monasteries are most successful when they are away from the energetic bustle of urban life. It is a tension that has its foundational roots in that same tension of the gospels where we see the almost sacred dance of Jesus as he enters and leaves cities to spend time in desert places or mountain tops alone with Abba in prayer.

Where the paradox arises is that when monks flee the world for authentically religious reasons, the world, in time flees to them, either for spiritual counsel or to find havens of peace and recollection. What happens, in brief, is that monks exemplify certain gospel values which may be under appreciated or undervalued but which have a power to attract if they are lived out. I would make my own, in this regard, some words of the noted Yale liturgical scholar, Aidan Kavanaugh:

Monasticism was not the creation of medieval bishops but of early Christian lay people. It flowed directly into Christian life out of Jewish prophetic asceticism which received new focus through the lens of Jesus' own teaching. One must therefore take the continuing fact of organized asceticism in Christian life as a given which provides access to whole dimensions of Christian perception and being. The existence, furthermore, of specifically monastic asceticism is a theological datum which lies close to the very nerve center of Christian origins and growth. One cannot study Christianity without taking monasticism into account. One cannot love as a Christian without practicing the gospel asceticism which monasticism is meant to exemplify and support. A Christian need not be a monk or nun, but every monk and nun is a crucial sort of Christian, and there have been too many of these people over the centuries for their witness not to have considerable theological importance.<sup>4</sup>

That same sentiment has been expressed more succinctly in a meditative essay recently published by the Trappist monk, Matthew Kelty:

There is no need to become a monk. It is not necessary. The reason: monastic life is not Christianity. It is rather one way of being a Christian. A very ancient way. A very good way. And a way that is of great appeal to some, even if of interest to many.<sup>5</sup>

How effectively monks provide this witness is not for me to judge. What does seem patent is that in every age, monks who live in the silence of their cloister and the prayerful quiet of their choir stalls suddenly "open their doors" (to use the wonderful phrase of the Russian monastic tradition)

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4. Aidan Kavanaugh, *On Liturgical Theology* (New York: Pueblo, 1985), pp. 6-7.

5. Matthew Kelty, "The Making of a Monk," *Cistercian Studies* 23 (1988), p. 262.

to speak to the world. Thus it was that a talented literary person, seized by Christian faith, entered a monastery in 1941 and, after some years of silence, “opened his doors” through the publication of his spiritual pilgrimage which he called, using a schema from Dante’s *Purgatorio*, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. With the publication of that book, the monk who fled the world discovered the world fleeing to him.

Why?

The reasons are most likely as various as the persons who came but, it does seem to me, that one can hazard some generalizations that would not count as being too far of the mark. In the bicentennial year of 1976 the novelist Walker Percy wrote a wonderful essay on bourbon for an issue of *Esquire* that was devoted to the celebration of Americana (e.g., baseball, mom, apple pie). In that piece Percy sums up middle American malaise: a man comes home late in the afternoon to the suburbs of anywhere. The kids look past him briefly before turning again to the cartoons. His wife gives him a distracted hello from the kitchen. He sits down, amid the smell of pot roast, to catch the evening news. He looks around and says quietly to himself: “Jesus, is this all there is?”

Percy’s vignette captures in essence a general complaint common to the post-Freudian age. It manifests itself in our culture in literally thousands of ways in everything from the thirst for immortality amid the fitness crazies to the incredible growth of the therapy industry and on to the wild blue yonder of sexual revolution. Let me not overly sermonize on the point but I do want to insist that an authentic monk — of whatever religious tradition — is one answer to the question that haunts every person who is not distracted by the primordial struggle for sheer existence: who am I? and where am I going? The monk is one who engages those questions, not as philosophical conundrums, but as naked existential facts.

The thesis I would urge is that Thomas Merton advanced an answer to that question both in his life and in his writing. His answer, roughly, was something like this: we are human beings who are neither the creatures of blind destiny or of absolute autonomy. We are people whose lives have meaning and that “meaning” somehow finds itself in a connectedness with an absolute center which is called, in our culture, God but who, as the Book of Exodus makes quite clear, is beyond name.

Thomas Merton, in short, was an authentically religious person (religion: from *religare* — to be bound) who could communicate what it meant to be religious. Such persons, despite the statistics, are in short supply. If we accept that description a number of things about Thomas

Merton become clear. In the first instance, it helps us to put into some kind of order the many facets of Merton's life.

Merton as monk. We tend to think of the monk as the participant in a highly regimented form of life devoid of personal choice and personal freedom. The monastic tradition, however, argues that the monastic life is a life of freedom. It is a freely chosen way of being that says, in essence, here is how I will organize my earthly pilgrimage: as a life which will have as its fundamental focus the absolute center which is God. Peter Brown, in a number of very elegant essays, has argued that early Christian asceticism, especially sexual asceticism, was not motivated by a gnostic hatred of the body, but by a desire to exercise the freedom to refuse the biological necessity imposed by late antique culture which demanded that women bear children and men sire and sustain them. Asceticism, in short, was an alternative way of living rooted in a concept of free choice that could nay say the expectations of culture as well as the imperatives of biological destiny. Obviously, people make such choices of freedom without being monks but the point is that being a monk is one way to choose to live a life that is examined and centered. Merton chose such a life.

If we keep that point in mind then we can see that there is a kind of unity to his writing that absolves him of the charge of mere intellectual dabbling or cerebral curiosity. In fact, his disparate writings only begin to make sense when we see them in the context of this freely chosen life and its fundamental assumptions.

His long essays on Albert Camus — that Algerian ascetic, as Merton once called him — dwell almost exclusively on Camus' affirmation of integrity, purity of purpose, constant struggle, thirst for freedom, and the desire for authentic meaning — all themes that recur like a fugue in monastic writings. His studies of the fiction of Boris Pasternak emphasize what Merton calls the "sophianic criticism" of Pasternak whose world was suffused with the mystical affirmation of the Russian Christ.<sup>6</sup> His essay on Shaker art is drawn to the Cistercian values of simplicity, sparseness, and purity just as passion for Blake centers on the white heat of Blake's imagination.<sup>7</sup> Again, both his longlived romance with Byzantine art (first encountered when he was still a teenager) as well as his appreciation for the gestural marks of calligraphy and the austere contentless painting of his

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6. For the essays on Camus and Pasternak, see *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*; ed. by Brother Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981).

7. See Thomas Merton, "Introduction," in Edward Deming Andrews & Faith Andrews, *Religion in Wood: A Book of Shaker Furniture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), pp. vii-xv.

friend Ad Reinhardt were not simply enthusiasms at either end of the artistic spectrum. He loved Byzantine painting because of its symbolic power just as he loved the flat black canvasses of Reinhardt because they were congenial to his own apophatic experiences of silent prayer.<sup>8</sup> What, at first glance, seem like contradictory experiences are, on closer examination, simply variations on a spirituality which was common to the monastic tradition. It was all part of what Merton called "monastic culture."

What I am groping to indicate goes something like this: Thomas Merton freely chose to live a kind of life that put a high value on certain values. He absorbed those values and was able, in turn, to highlight them in a culture that had under-appreciated them. Merton spoke to a Catholicism, for example, which highly prized doing. Merton came to monastic maturity at a time of heady expansionism for the American Church. It was a time when the "beau ideal" of the Catholic clergy was Bing Crosby of *Going My Way* and *The Bells of St. Mary's* — the not overly pious, but solidly faithful cleric, who could save a parish or a school, jolly it up with his Protestant and Jewish neighbors, and demonstrate a more than competent swing at home plate. That ideal found its lay expression in the post war period in the highly mythicized portrait of John F. Kennedy: cool, ironic, worldly, and Catholic.

To that culture Merton spoke a different language. It was the language of silence, interiority, asceticism, other worldliness, prophetic resistance, and transcendence. The numbers of Catholics who tried their vocations with the Trappists of the 1940s and 1950s are small tokens of just how receptive an audience there was for such a vocabulary and the life that it promised.

We might also note that it was not only the rather restricted culture of American middle class Catholicism that was ready for these words. In the post war period, there was an artistic *avant garde* that also had counter-culture aspirations. It was more than mere rhetoric that caused Merton in the 1960s to see the monk as pursuing a life trajectory not unlike that of the Beats and, later, the Hippies. Merton's own sympathies for Eastern religions, experimental poetry, abstract art, jazz, and social protest make a lot more sense when viewed against the background of that counter-culture. In that sense, Merton's interests coincided with a deep cultural current that was abroad in the land — a current which he had encountered

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8. See Donna Kristoff, O.S.U., "'Light That is not Light': A Consideration of Thomas Merton and the Icon," in *The Merton Annual III* (1989), pp. 85-108 and Lawrence S. Cunningham, "The Black Painting in the Hermit Hatch: A Note on Thomas Merton and Ad Reinhardt," *Merton Seasonal* 11: 3 (Autumn 1986), pp. 10-12.

in the 1930s at Columbia where, it should be remembered, Jack Kerouac tried his hand at higher education.

Wilfrid Sheed has recently made this point with reference to Thomas Merton and that literary hermit, J. D. Salinger. Let me simply cite, in a somewhat abridged fashion, some words he wrote while reviewing Ian Hamilton's biography of Salinger:

Merton makes an instructive parallel in several respects. *Seven Storey Mountain* came out in 1948 and *Catcher in the Rye* in 1951, and both of them took off like thunder, against all conventional expectations. The generation they spoke to would later be referred to derisively as "silent" to which it may well have answered, out of the din of promotion that followed the war, there was a lot to be silent about then; Salinger called it "phoniness" and Merton called it "worldliness," but for most young readers there was only one enemy.

... And both, significantly, turned to Zen Buddhism among other things to soothe this torment of awareness . . . .

Thomas Merton's very tone conveyed a spiritual and intellectual authority which made his divagations into orientalism sound rock solid; but Salinger in those days was still obliged to work with the cap and bells of his profession — by which I don't mean that he was funny about his Eastern discoveries, but that he was doomed to entertain whatever his subject . . . .<sup>9</sup>

One could argue that the counter-culture broadly conceived had strong, albeit eccentric, religious impulses. I would not wish to rehearse that argument here but I would point to the preoccupation of the Beats with the ecstatic; with the 1960s counter-culture's desire for self-transcendence; and the *avant garde's* preoccupation with erasure and simplicity as it is manifested in everything from the minimalism of a John Cage or Samuel Beckett to the apophatic abolition of form and content in abstract expressionist art. In an influential essay on the role of silence in the *avant garde*, Susan Sontag argued a generation ago that the role of silence had its ancestral roots in a tradition of apophatic mysticism whose wellsprings are in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius.

This is not to argue that the monastery and the counter-culture are two sides of the same coin. What the counter-culture lacked were the very elements that have kept monasticism alive over the millenia: discipline; a distrust of self-indulgence; and a positive appreciation of asceticism. During the heyday of the Flower Children I read a letter in the *Berkeley Barb* which told of a commune that dissolved because of a futile argument over who was to do the dishes after the evening meal. Who does the dishes

9. Wilfrid Sheed, "The Exile." Review of *In Search of J. D. Salinger*, by Ian Hamilton. *New York Review of Books* (27 October 1988), pp. 40-41.

is not a problem in monasteries. A monk does not do his thing; monasteries do *their* thing.

Merton could speak to these constituencies and, as his interest in the peace movement and the civil rights struggle intensified, increasingly did so. Anyone who has read *The Cold War Letters* — unpublished circular letters sent in mimeograph to a large number of people — cannot help but be struck by how Merton could write and talk of profoundly religious matters without relying on the explicit religious language of piety and devotion. By turns, light hearted, ironic, scathing, serious, and informative he, nonetheless, had a point of view; a place from which he wrote; and convictions that shaped what he had to say.

What he did say was not always on target. He got his news of the outside world in bits and pieces (he muses half ashamedly how he had to hide his copy of *Newsweek* lest the abbot should find it on a visit to the hermitage) and responded, at times, with instant analysis. Yet, he knew when to pull back. As a leading energizer of the 1960s peace movement, he was not slow to react when violence raised its head either as a gesture of suicide on the part of a young Catholic Worker or when he spoke to the Weathermen begging for non-violence. In the same way he could see rather quickly the ephemeral nature of much of the “Death of God” movement and was cool in his judgments about the 1960s romance with secularity. Likewise, he welcomed the renewal of the Second Vatican Council but he was not slow to criticize the more zealous activities of its less thoughtful cheerleaders.

If one were to categorize Merton in terms of his publications, we would have to say that he was a spiritual writer but we would have to understand that description in the broadest sense of the word. Pose this question to yourself: can you think of another religious writer in this century writing in English who commanded a greater and more diverse audience than Thomas Merton and whose writings and influence outlived his own life time?

To answer my question would produce a very short list, indeed. The only parallel that readily comes to mind is C. S. Lewis who, like Merton, has penned books which continue to sell in the millions; whose life is of intense interest to many people; and who has had a demonstrable influence on a whole range of people. Again, like Lewis, a whole industry ranging from the scholarly to the commercial rose up after his death to fill the insatiable need of people to identify somehow with their respective personae. When, some years ago, someone sent me a Thomas Merton desk calendar, I thought to

myself: "What next? Merton T-shirts and coffee mugs?" Such excesses should not scandalize; they are predictable enough given the kind of culture in which we live. Anyone who wishes to understand what Merton stood for needs to go beyond (or under) these epiphenomena to tease out the values that he represents which make him a lodestar for others to follow. Merton is hardly alone in being ill served by his most passionate admirers.

In his biography of Thomas Aquinas, the splendid English author G. K. Chesterton said that the saint is the person who exaggerates those values which the world has forgotten. Merton was not a saint in any conventional sense of the term but he certainly enfleshes the truth of Chesterton's aphorism. He brought to the three worlds he addressed — the worlds of monasticism, the church broadly conceived, and human culture outside the previous two — the truths which he had refined in nearly thirty years of ascetic discipline and deep prayer. He did that by harnessing both his omnivorous intellectual curiosity and his disciplined life into a drive for understanding at its most profoundly human level.

A concrete example might illustrate what I have in mind. In his journal, *A Vow of Conversation*, Merton writes on 2 February 1964:

The religious depth of Ammonas, the perspicacity of Merleau-Ponty, even the tedious subtlety of Sartre, and always the bible. Meetings of opposites, not carefully planned exclusions, not mere acceptance of the familiar. A life of clashes and discoveries, not a life of repetitions. Deep dread before God, and not trivial excitement.<sup>10</sup>

In those three crisp sentences Merton juxtaposes his readings in a primitive desert father, the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty, and the philosopher-atheist Jean Paul Sartre; to which he adds the sharp stop: "and always the bible." Readers with good antennae would also pick up other allusions: the "meeting of opposites" is a possible reference to the old mystical doctrine of the *coincidentia oppositorum* while the refusal of the life of repetition and the phrase "deep dread before God" may contain an echo of Soren Kierkegaard which saturated Walker Percy's novel *The Moviegoer*, a novel Merton had just read with relish.

I cite those sources and allusions not to prove that Merton read a good deal but to show how his reading was absorbed and channeled towards an end. He was "catholic" enough to take the French moderns and the ancient ascetics, not as an amalgam, but as a holding together of

10. Thomas Merton, *A Vow of Conversation: Journals, 1964-1965*; ed. by Naomi Burton Stone (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988), p. 20. Hereafter referred to in the text as VOW.

tensions and insights (“clashes and discoveries”) that help lift us from the trap of the accustomed to the state of being before the awe-ful otherness of God. The cluster of references in that short paragraph was not meant to express wide ranging erudition but to seek some sense of connectedness among writers who were, on the surface, quite diverse and seemingly at odds. In that sense, Merton is a truly *catholic* writer — catholic with a small “c.” Any careful reader of Merton soon realizes that his serious writing needs a good deal of “unpacking” both because Merton was a poet who understood the polyvalence of language and because he had absorbed so much reading in his contemplative years in the monastery.

A decade before the journal entry cited above, Merton wrote some words on reading that well describe what it means to be a contemplative reader:

Books can speak to us like God, like men, or like the noise of the city we live in. They speak to us like God when they bring us peace and light and fill us with silence. They speak to us like God when we desire never to leave them. They speak to us like men when we desire to hear them again. They speak to us like the noise of the city when they hold us captive by a weariness that tells us nothing, gives us no peace, and no support, nothing to remember, and yet will not let us escape.<sup>11</sup>

There is a further point. That drive for understanding to which I alluded above was a drive rooted in his Christian faith. Let us not forget that fact because Merton was at pains to affirm it clearly. Again, in *A Vow of Conversation*, he puts the matter bluntly:

Here in the hermitage returning necessarily to the beginnings. I know where my beginning was: hearing the name of God and of Christ preached in Corpus Christi Church in New York. I heard and I believed. And I believe that He has called me freely, out of pure mercy, to his love and salvation. (VOW, p. 116)

It is well to dwell on those words and ones similar to them. The facile judgment that Merton was a syncretist or a step removed from Catholic faith does an injustice both to him as a man and, more importantly, strays away from a full appreciation of his writing. I think both judgments derive from a failure to appreciate just how unique he was as a Christian writer. He didn't always sound “Christian” in the sense that his writings were not studded with those pieties that one often identifies with Christian writing. Nor did he always sound “theological” because he did not write in the style of the theologian nor did he use its technical vocabulary or jargon. He did

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Dell, 1961), pp. 75-76. Hereafter referred to in the text as *TS*.

very much sound like those cultural critics who range over issues political, social, and literary but his criticism always had a kind of shape and heft to it that derived both from his deep faith and from the twenty-seven years of disciplined asceticism and prayer that molded his persona.

As one goes through his writings there are those almost unexpected flashes of the mystic who sees whole. It is texts like those that stand as a deep background to all of his concerns for racial justice, purity of intention in writing, peace among nations and peoples, the necessary dialogue of all religious believers, and the drive to see meaning and love in all human artifacts.

Early in his monastic life Merton learned that the monastic life could be a vehicle for values which were anti-human. He had to rethink his excessive disdain for the world; his sharp demarcation of grace and nature; his austere notion of contemplation; and so on. All students of Merton point to those shifts in his thinking whether it be on the issue of poetry versus contemplation or on his slow awareness that to be a monk did not absolve him from being a member of the commonweal. I should like to close this essay with the positive side of that learning experience, to wit: Merton's increasing conviction that he would only be a good monk and a good Christian if he learned to be a full human being; that being fully human and fully monastic was no more a paradox than being fully a spouse or parent and being fully human. Here are some words that he wrote midway in his monastic life. They remained true at the end of his life as they remain true for us today. They will serve as a coda for this paper:

Christianity is not stoicism. The cross does not sanctify us by destroying human feeling. Detachment is not insensibility. Too many ascetics fail to become great saints precisely because their rules and ascetic practices merely deadened their humanity instead of setting it free to develop richly, in all its capacities, under the influence of grace . . . .

The ascetical life, therefore, must be begun and carried on with a supreme respect for temperament, character, and emotion, and for everything that makes us human. These too are integral elements in personality and therefore in sanctity — because a saint is one whom God's love has fully developed in the likeness of his creator. (*TS*, pp. 25-27)