

# MERTON AND THE CELTIC MONASTIC TRADITION: SEARCH FOR THE PROMISED LAND

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"One of the chief purposes of the autobiographer is the ordering of his experience into a shape that answers better than mere continuous sequence to his notion of what his life really means."<sup>1</sup> Merton achieved that ordering by his use of the theme of journey, a theme that was central to his own life and to his writings. The ordering of experience is not an easy task especially when it moves beyond purely autobiographical realms into the elusive realms of the author's "ongoing quest for God, his own identity, and for the meaning of his life in relation to others."<sup>2</sup> Moving into these areas it becomes necessary to use metaphors so as to see the like in the unlike, to "connect the known of ourselves to the unknown of the world" and make "available new relational patterns."<sup>3</sup> Merton found some potent metaphors which enabled him to express his self-development and his life at its various stages. To examine Merton's writing about journey, itself a metaphor for the Christian life, it is important to examine some of the metaphors that he used about himself because as a "Metaphor says very little about what the world is, or is like, but a great deal about what I am, or am like, and about what I am becoming;

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1. Anne O. Hawkins, *Archetypes of Conversion: The Spiritual Autobiographies of St. Augustine, John Bunyan, and Thomas Merton*, (London: Buckwell U.P., 1985), p. 23. Hereafter referred to as AC.

2. Patrick Hart, Ed., *The Legacy of Thomas Merton*, (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1992), p. 172. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Legacy*.

3. Elena Malits, C.S.C., *The Solitary Explorer: Thomas Merton's Transforming Journey*, (San Francisco, 1980), p. 52. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Solitary*.

and in the end it connects me more nearly with the deep reaches of myself than with an objective universe," (*Solitary*, p. 52) and so, in a way, good metaphors are sacramental as they are effective signs which "enable the autobiographer to take hold of himself and to move in certain directions" (*Legacy*, p. 173). They reveal the self enacting its story. This article will thus begin by looking at some of the metaphors that Merton used to describe various periods and aspects of his journey. It will then move on to the metaphor of Celtic pilgrimage, especially as seen in *The Voyage of St. Brendan*, and explore its usefulness as a new, and possibly, more encapsulating metaphor to describe journey in Merton's life and writings.

The titles that Merton gave his autobiographical and journal writings are all metaphors for his journey. From the image of *The Labyrinth* suggesting lostness and hopeless wandering we move to *The Seven Storey Mountain*, a metaphor which strongly suggests an upward journey of purification, a move from the earthly to the heavenly city, from Egypt to the Promised Land and from the inferno to paradise. Then in *The Sign of Jonas* Merton sees himself like "Jonas ... travelling toward my destiny in the belly of a paradox,"<sup>4</sup> the paradox being his struggle between being a writer and a contemplative and between his cenobitic and eremitic vocation. Paradox also features in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*: confronting twentieth century problems and questions in the light of a monastic commitment made him a bystander, but he was complicit in those problems and so he too was guilty. The Merton of *Conjectures* was a monk searching to understand his relationship, and that of the contemplative monk, to the modern world in which he was living. *A Vow of Conversation* with its play upon the vow of conversion of manners (*conversatio morum*) with its concern with the continuing conversion of the monk and Merton's own need for conversations and dialogue for his development touches on yet another paradox, that of Trappist silence and Merton's need to communicate. (These paradoxes are part of a dialectical movement which leads to the metaphor of a spiral which will be examined later.)

*Day of a Stranger* is the final such metaphor that Merton used for a piece of journal writing. (The journals published posthumously were given straightforward descriptive titles by their editors. For example, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*.) His use of the metaphor of stranger for himself is one that occurs a number of times

4. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, (London: Hollis and Carter, 1953), p. 9. Hereafter referred to in the text as *SJ*.

in different writings of the period. In *A Vow of Conversation*, he describes the monk as "a stranger and wanderer on the earth"<sup>5</sup> and in *Disputed Questions* he speaks of his role as a monk involving his acceptance of "the condition of a stranger and a wanderer on the face of the earth, who has been called out of what was familiar to him in order to seek strangely and painfully after he knows not what."<sup>6</sup>

Merton's description of himself as a stranger fits in well with his reasoning in giving the title *Day of a Stranger* to his short description of a day in his life at the hermitage. The title reflects his awareness that he was not typical, that like Thoreau in *Walden* he "went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life."<sup>7</sup> So when he is accused "of living in the woods like Thoreau instead of living in the desert like St. John the Baptist" he can answer that "I am not living 'like anybody'. Or 'unlike anybody'. We all live somehow or other, and that's that."<sup>8</sup> So he was a stranger because, as Robert E. Daggy points out, "his typical day failed to conform to modern United States society's conception of what a day should be. He is a stranger because he has withdrawn from society, or rather because he does almost nothing that society, as he sees it, considers respectable, acceptable and valuable" (*DS*, p. 11), or as Merton himself said in *Disputed Questions* "the hermit is nothing but a failure. He has to be a failure—we have absolutely no use for him, no place for him. He is outside all our projects, plans, assemblies, movements" (*DQ*, p. 199).

The image of Merton as a stranger is similar to that of a marginal person. His description of himself in *Day of a Stranger* is very much one of marginality: "I find myself in the primordial lostness of night, solitude, forest, peace, a mind awake in the dark" (*DS*, p. 43), with an obligation to "preserve the stillness, the silence, the poverty, the virginal point of pure nothingness which is at the centre of all other loves" (*DS*, p. 49). There are many connections between the desert and monastic life, and the symbol of the desert often stresses a life lived on the margins, a fragile existence where the basics of life are the very minimum required for

5. Thomas Merton, *A Vow of Conversation*, Ed. Naomi Burton Stone, (Basingstoke, 1988), p. 43. Hereafter referred to in the text as *VC*.

6. Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions*, (London: Hollis and Carter, 1961), p. 198. Hereafter referred to in the text as *DQ*.

7. *The Merton Annual*. Vol. I, (New York: AMS, 1988), p. 271.

8. Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith/A Peregrine Smith Book, 1981), pp. 31-33. Hereafter referred to in the text as *DS*.

existence. It was in the desert that monasticism was born and developed and Merton stressed that the windows of a monastery "are supposed to open upon the desert."<sup>9</sup> In a talk given in Calcutta in October 1968 Merton spoke of the monk as "a marginal person who withdraws deliberately to the margins of society with a view to deepening fundamental human experience,"<sup>10</sup> and he called himself "a representative of all marginal persons" (*AJ*, p. 305). As a monk, as a marginal person Merton saw his role as living with the fact of death so as to go beyond death even in this life, to go beyond the dichotomy of life and death and to be, therefore "a witness to life."

This life on the margins was also a prophetic vocation, a marginal person becomes the "modern desert's holy precursor,"<sup>11</sup> a modern day John the Baptist. By the solitude of his monastic life, similar to the solitude of the desert, Merton learnt to see the world from God's perspective, the perspective of the prophet. "The hermit remains in the world as a prophet to whom no one listens, as a voice crying in the desert, as a sign of contradiction" (*MJ*, p. 160). It was here in the desert, on the margins of society, that Merton's compassion began to grow, he saw compassion growing in proportion to the uselessness of the monk, so that, ultimately, as a prophetic voice and a man of compassion "the monk has all the more of a part to play in our world, because he has no proper place in it" (*DQ*, p. 200). As Bernardin Schellenberger has pointed out "the burden and the cross of the prophet's calling" is "not to lead a 'normal', satisfied, quiet life, but to be a wanderer, a fugitive, a pilgrim, a stranger,"<sup>12</sup> in other words a marginal person.

Another metaphor Merton used to describe himself was that of "the solitary explorer."<sup>13</sup> This metaphor is very useful as it contains both ideas about journey and about the solitariness, the marginality of that journey. The image of an explorer suggests a pioneering spirit,

9. Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey*, Ed. Patrick Hart, (London: Sheldon Press, 1977), p. 156. Hereafter referred to in the text as *MJ*.

10. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, Eds. Naomi Burton Stone, Patrick, and J. Jaughlin, (London: Sheldon Press, 1975), p. 305. Hereafter referred to in the text as *AJ*.

11. Michael Higgins, "Monasticism as Rebellion," *American Benedictine Review* 39, (1988), p. 187.

12. B. Schellerberger, *Nomad of the Spirit*, (London, 1981), Hereafter referred to in the text as *Nomad*.

13. Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence*, (Notre Dame, IND.: U. Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 213.

moving into new territories, pushing back the boundaries, the margins. To be a solitary explorer involved becoming "a man who, in one way or another, pushes to the very frontiers of human experience and strives to go beyond, to find out what transcends the ordinary level of existence."<sup>14</sup> John Albert has suggested that Merton as a solitary explorer was an archetype for the spiritual search so that "to think monk was to think Merton."<sup>15</sup> (This metaphor has been given a much more comprehensive treatment than it is possible, or necessary, to give here by Elena Malits in her book *The Solitary Explorer*.)

As well as the metaphors which have just been briefly examined there are a large number of other metaphors used by Merton or by those writing about him. But there is one final metaphor that I wish to examine in some depth as I think it contains within it many of the ideas touched upon in the other metaphors as well as bringing together Merton's understanding of journey, and, it is possibly in this metaphor that Merton's journey may be best seen as archetypal. It is the metaphor of a pilgrim and of pilgrimage.

In the *Asian Journal* Merton refers to himself as a pilgrim—"I have left my monastery to come here not just as a research scholar or even as an author. I come as a pilgrim who is anxious to obtain not just information, not just 'facts' about other monastic traditions, but to drink from ancient sources of monastic vision and experience" (*AJ*, pp. 312-313). Merton also speaks of monastic life, and Christian life in the terms of a pilgrimage, a sacred journey.

The idea of pilgrimage, of a sacred journey, seems to be almost instinctive to humankind. The search for a privileged or holy place, for a home or place of origin, is second nature in man. Pilgrimage can be found in all the great religious traditions and aims to take "the faithful back to the source and centre of the religion itself, the place of theophany, of cleansing, renewal, and salvation."<sup>16</sup> In the Christian tradition, for example, there are a wide range of pilgrimage—Jerusalem, Rome, sites of apparitions of Mary, and tombs, birth places and other such sites connected with countless saints. Each religion seems

14. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation*, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1971), p. 100. Hereafter referred to in the text as *CWA*.

15. M. Basil Pennington, Ed., *Towards an Integrated Humanity: Thomas Merton's Journey*, (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1988), p. 83.

16. Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1988), p. 91. Hereafter referred to in the text as *MZM*.

to have its sacred places for pilgrimage whether Mecca, Varanasi, Jerusalem or Sri Maha Bodhi.

In an article called "From Pilgrimage to Crusade" (*MZM*, pp. 91-112) Merton had spoken of this idea of pilgrimage as a geographical pilgrimage which was "the symbolic acting out of an inner journey" and he had contrasted to this an inner journey which was "the interpolation of the meanings and signs of the outer pilgrimage" and though it would be possible to have a geographical pilgrimage without an inner journey and vice versa it would be "best to have both" (*MZM*, p. 92). Merton's own journey consisted of twenty-six years of geographical wandering and pilgrimage followed by twenty-seven years of inner pilgrimage or Journey, until finally his inner journey was acted out in his pilgrimage to Asia. The move from external pilgrimage to internal seems to be part of an historical trend that happened in the early centuries of the church where the theme of pilgrimage is gradually interiorised until in monastic literature the pilgrimage of "the monk is entirely spiritual and is in fact synonymous with monastic stability" (*MZM*, p. 93). So, by the time of St. Benedict, wandering monks or "gyrovags" would be called the worst kind of monks and were given short shrift in his rule "it is better to keep silent than to speak of all these and their disgraceful way of life."<sup>17</sup> Benedict's need to regulate these wandering, homeless monks is evidence that by the early sixth century they were a problem in Italy and other parts of Europe.

In the Celtic monks of Ireland the geographical pilgrimage and inner journey were more closely linked than was often the case with other wandering monks on the continent. They saw three forms of pilgrimage. Firstly, a geographical pilgrimage in body only where the spirit remains unchanged. Secondly, an inner pilgrimage, where, though the spirit and soul journey towards God, the body remains physically stable. Thirdly, the perfect pilgrimage where a man leaves his country in both body and soul and journeys in search of the absolute, the very source of being. So the ideal for the Celtic monks was both the geographical pilgrimage and the inner journey. Their pilgrimage or *peregrinatio* was not a pilgrimage to a shrine and afterwards to return home, no, their ideal was the man who "for his soul's welfare abandoned his homeland for good or at least for many

17. Timothy Fry, Ed., *The Rule of St. Benedict*, (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1981), Chapter 1.

years."<sup>18</sup> The Celtic monk who withdrew "from home and kindred, even from the larger religious community, to pass one's life, or a period of one's life, in solitude"<sup>19</sup> became one of the most important aspects of Irish asceticism and one of its chief legacies to later ages.

All Christians are on a journey and for Merton, as for the Celtic monks, the fountainhead of this idea of journey as a pattern for the spiritual life was Abraham, his journey is the example for all pilgrimages. Chadwick expresses this most clearly by quoting the following commemorative sermon in an old Irish life of St. Columba:

God counselled Abraham to leave his own country and go in pilgrimage into the land which God had shown him, to wit, the 'Land of Promise'... Now the good counsel which God enjoined here on the father of the faithful is incumbent on all the faithful; that is to leave their country and their land, their wealth and their worldly delight for the sake of the Lord of the Elements, and go in perfect pilgrimage in imitation of Him (*AGE*, p. 82).

Merton also used the biblical story of the call of Abraham as an example of monastic life, like Abraham's journey from Ur of the Chaldeans monastic life also involved a journey, leaving home in search of God. He saw monastic life as a journey into the unknown, by becoming a monk "one becomes a stranger, an exile." "We go into the midst of the unknown, we live on earth as strangers"<sup>20</sup> so that the monk is not at home on earth, not even in the monastery. There is a feeling of exile:

We are exiles in the far end of solitude, living as listeners,  
With hearts attending to the skies we cannot understand:  
Waiting upon the first far drums of Christ the Conqueror,  
Planted like sentinels upon the world's frontier.<sup>21</sup>

18. J.P. Mackey, Ed., *An Introduction to Celtic Christianity*, (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1989), p. 103. Hereafter referred to in the text as *ICC*.

19. Nora Chadwick, *The Age of Saints in the Early Celtic Church*, (London: Oxford U.P., 1961), p. 82. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Age*.

20. Thomas Merton, *Life and Prayer: Journey in Christ*, (Chappaqua, NY: Electronic Paperbacks, 1972), Side A. Hereafter referred to in the text as *LP*.

21. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems*, (London: Sheldon Press, 1978). P. 201.

The radical, basic feeling of loneliness felt in the monastic life Merton attributed to this sense of exile. It was a loneliness essential to the vocation as "monks are supposed to be exiles," (*LP*) or as Schellenberger put it "we Christians live 'in exile,' we are pilgrims and strangers, on the road to perfection" (*Nomad*, p. 22), or again, "A Christian is essentially an exile in the world in which he has no lasting city."<sup>22</sup>

In Celtic monasticism exile was also an important theme, though for the Irish with their Celtic roots which emphasize friendship and family ties it would be an extreme ascetical choice. Sometimes pilgrimage or exile was a penitential exercise at other times it was an heroic asceticism "*peregrinari pro Dei amore*" (*MZM*, p. 96), going on pilgrimage for the love of, or in the name of God, a pilgrimage in search of solitude and exile, an "exercise in ascetic homelessness and wandering" (*MZM*, p. 94). When Celtic monks travelled to the continent of Europe they were faced by inhabitants who were different in race, language and custom, on such a pilgrimage there was little hope of seeing their family relations or native land again and this was an asceticism that they eagerly embraced for the love of God. A secondary motive for many of these pilgrim monks was evangelisation, bringing the gospel to some of the people that they met during the course of their journeying.

At this point it is necessary to explore a little further into the Celtic idea of pilgrimage, especially as it is seen in *The Voyage of St. Brendan*, so as to see its connection with Merton's understanding of journey in his life and theology and so to begin to understand its usefulness as a new metaphor for Merton's journey.

Pilgrimage or journeying for the Celtic monks, since Ireland is an island, almost inevitably involved some form of sea voyage. Often these monks floated off aimlessly into the sea, without rudder or sails, abandoning themselves to the wind and the currents in the belief that God would lead them to that particular place he had chosen for their exile, the place where they would find true solitude. The Saxon Chronicler tells of one such group of Irishmen who arrived at the Cornish coast in 891 having "stolen away because they wished for the love of God to be on pilgrimage, they cared not whither."<sup>23</sup> More often these *peregrini* would use their considerable skill in navigation and go off in search, not just for a suitable place in which to find solitude,

22. Thomas Merton, *No Man Is An Island*, (London: Hollis and Carter, 1955), p. 162.

23. K. Hughes, "The Changing Theory and Practice of Irish Pilgrimage," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 11 (1960), p. 143. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Hughes*.

but, following Abraham's example, search for the promised land which God "would show them."<sup>24</sup> A strong element in these Celtic voyages is this idea of the search for the promised land, paradise, Eden, the "Land Promised to the Saints."

The voyages of these monks was obviously influenced by similar literary tales from other nations, for example stories such as *The Odessey* and *The Aeniad*<sup>25</sup> and they are also found in the pre-Christian literature of Ireland, in *The Voyage of Bran* and *The Voyage of Mael Duin* (*ICC*, p. 89). One of the most famous of these voyages, even called "The Christian Odyssey of early Ireland" (*AGE*, p. 75) is *The Voyage of St. Brendan*. The "Promised Land of the Saints" (*Voyage*, p. 4) which Brendan seeks is equivalent to the myth of an earthly paradise in Judeo-Christian circles. It is impossible to know how much of *The Voyage of St. Brendan* is historical and how much is "spontaneous or derivative myth"<sup>26</sup> especially since most of the islands that he visits are as "strange and primordial as episodes in Homer or Apuleius" (*ICC*, p. 90). But, even though much time has been spent on speculating which geographical islands those in Brendan's voyage match and a similar voyage to America has been re-enacted to try and prove Brendan was the first explorer to discover America, *The Voyage of St. Brendan*, as O'Meara points out "merits attention above all in its own right" (*Voyage*, p. xv). *The Voyage* merits attention in two ways. Firstly, it contains many parallels and connections to the life and ministry of Jesus and his disciples in the New Testament. Often when *peregrini* left large monasteries in Ireland they travelled in groups of twelve with a leader in memory of Christ and the apostles. Though that is not the case with Brendan many of the "journeyings, miraculous meals, fears and wonders that happened around the Sea of Galilee are transferred to the Atlantic" instead (*Voyage*, p. xv). So, for example, when the monks are afraid after Jasconius begins to move when they light a fire on his back and they run to Brendan he instantly assures them saying "Do not be afraid" (*Voyage*, p. 19) like Christ in the gospel story of the calming of the sea. In one way, therefore, *The Voyage of St.*

24. *Genesis* 12:1

25. John J. O'Meara, Ed., *The Voyage of St. Brendan*, (Portlaoitje: Colin Smythe Ltd., 1981), p. xi. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Voyage*.

26. Brendan Leane, *The Quest of Three Abbots: Pioneers of Ireland's Golden Age*, (London: Murray, 1968), p. 73.

*Brendan*<sup>27</sup> merits attention as a "biblical allegory imaginatively transposed to the Irish Sea."<sup>28</sup>

Secondly, and more importantly for this study, *The Voyage of St. Brendan* merits attention because of its monastic character. The theme of pilgrimage and voyage in Celtic monasticism contained much that was of interest to Merton<sup>29</sup> and many ideas that relate to his own journey, but it is *The Voyage of Brendan* which, when seen as a "monastic archetype," can perhaps contribute most to an understanding of Merton's journey as archetypal and provide a fruitful metaphor.

*The Voyage of St. Brendan* is essentially monastic in its character and it is this monastic character which, I believe, throws light upon the usefulness of Celtic pilgrimage as a metaphor for Merton's journey. So, what is this monastic character in *The Voyage of St. Brendan*? Many scholars in approaching *The Voyage* look at its importance for geography and the history of exploration, while others examine it from a literary perspective. Both of these approaches tend to overlook the monastic nature of *The Voyage* which "is monastic to its core: it is a tale about monks, by monks, and at least in its original manuscript context, for monks" (MA, p. 111), as seen in a variety of ways: The chanting of the divine office, prolonged fasts and obedience to the abbot are all central to the narrative. The voyage lasts for seven years and each year of Brendan's journey begins and ends with the two major celebrations in the church's year, Easter and Christmas. Fasts and feasts alternate and "correspond to the daily and yearly round of the monastery."<sup>30</sup> The length of the fasts, caused by the deprivations of the sea voyages, are of either two, three, fifteen, twenty or forty days and "the completion of the significant number seems to take precedence, when approaching an island, over tide or wind" (*Voyage*, p. xvii), so that the narrative comes across as stylised, abstract and non-naturalistic. From these factors it is thus possible to say that the monasticism of *The Voyage* is not an additional extra but its "central organizational principle both thematically and structurally" (MA, p. 112), as it is as well to Merton's life and journey.

27. *The Gospel According to St. Mark* 4:40.

28. C. Bourgeault, "The Monastic Archetype in the *Navigatio* of St. Brendan," *Monastic Studies* 14, (1983), p. 110. Hereafter referred to in the text as MA.

29. For example: Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity*, Ed. Patrick Hart, (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1990), pp. 156, 217, 222, 228, 241 and MZM, pp. 91-112.

30. D. Bray, "A Note on the Life of St. Brendan," *Cistercian Studies* 20 (1985), p. 20.

Cynthia Bourgeault in her article "The Monastic Archetype in the *Navigatio* of St. Brendan" (MA, pp. 109-122) puts forward the view that *The Voyage* can best be understood by working with its monastic outlook rather than against it and that by doing this it might be possible to understand better the idea of a monastic archetype.

*The Voyage* seems to operate on two dimensions simultaneously. As some scholars have tried to prove the whole voyage is highly plausible. The "Promised Land of the Saints" is not an allegory for Heaven but a real place and this is supported by the plausibility of the land Brendan and his crew discover. Unlike some places he visits on his voyage it is to a normal scale, if not modest "the land is broad and vast, crossed by a wide river, and exceptionally (but hardly supernaturally) bountiful" and they spend their time ashore "reconnoitering" rather than in "beatific visions", and there are neither "celestial choirs" nor "divine epiphanies" (MA, p. 113). So the first dimension is highly plausible.

The second dimension of *The Voyage* though is that "there is a certain strangeness to the geographical layout which cannot easily be discounted" (MA, p. 113). Barrind and Mernoc, from whom Brendan learns of the "Promised Land of the Saints," reached land after only "about an hour" (*Voyage*, p. 4) of sailing whereas Brendan voyages for seven years "apparently circling the place all the time, before the proper *kairos* is reached and he is finally permitted a landfall" (MA, pp. 113-114). This second dimension is reinforced through a modern textual difficulty as to the direction in which Brendan sails—the manuscripts differ, some suggest 'East' and some 'West'. If it is 'West' then the geographical theories are feasible, but, if it is 'East' then the "geographical considerations must give way to thematic and typological ones" (MA, p. 114), and the impression that Brendan is circling the Promised Land all the time is reinforced and the symbolism of the 'East' referred to earlier comes into play.

When Bourgeault moves from the spatial axis to the temporal one the impression of circling "is not only prominent but fully articulate" (MA, p. 114) because Brendan's seven years of voyaging is within the liturgical calendar of the church. Despite tides, winds or storms Brendan and his crew keep scrupulously to the cycle of spending Easter in the locality of the Island of Sheep and Christmas with the monastic community of Ailbe. But though such stylization suggests the voyage is allegorical there is enough realism to make it plausible as well. Bourgeault suggests that the tension between realism and stylization is deliberate, an attempt to hold the two

dimensions together so that the voyage unfolds "simultaneously in both a geographical and a liturgical reality" (MA, p. 115).

This weaving together of the two different spatio-temporal realities can be viewed against the background of the nine canons or sutras that Panikkar uses to define his monastic archetype in *Blessed Simplicity*. Canon five, "overcoming spatio-temporal parameters," and canon six, "transhistorical consciousness above historical concerns"<sup>31</sup> are concerned with the monk's relationship to time and place. Panikkar sees temporality as a dimension of the eternal, like "concentric circles emanating out of the same centre" so that human time is "contained within and unfolds within the dimension of the eternal; the eternal, conversely, does not take away from the reality of human time, but floods through it, illuminating it while at the same time introducing a transcendent dimension" (MA, p. 116) and the monk is one who "deliberately places himself in the overlap zone" (MA, p. 116) of the concentricity of temporal and eternal. So Panikkar can say that "the crux of this experience lies in experiencing this other dimension in the midst of the very everyday realities which normally presents itself to us as spatio-temporal" (BS, p. 65). The Transfiguration is for Panikkar the Christian symbol of this par excellence. The Christ of the Transfiguration, who the apostles see and speak to in time and space, has "nonetheless transcended that sphere and past and future are made present" (BS, pp. 65-66). (I think that all nine of Panikkar's sutras have relevance to Merton's monastic life and to the Celtic tradition as well, but it is beyond the scope of this study to examine these parallels.)

Bourgeault believes that it is this insight of Panikkar's which is the key to the spatio-temporal tension of *The Voyage of St. Brendan*. This tension is a "hallmark of a characteristically monastic orientation towards life" (MA, p. 116) and it is in the overlapping zone between "the temporal and the eternal, between the times and places of the world and their larger infusing divine reality" that *The Voyage of St. Brendan*, and indeed, all archetypal monastic life unfolds. A specific example of this happening in *The Voyage* is when Brendan is on the Island of Sheep to celebrate Maundy Thursday and, in the spotless lamb they select from the numerous sheep on the island, Christ, the spotless victim, is vividly embodied—the liturgical cycle and their own voyage in space and time come together and infuse one another.

31. Raimundo Panikkar, *Blessed Simplicity: The Monk as Universal Archetype*, (New York: Harper, 1982), p. 39. Hereafter referred to as BS.

*The Voyage of St. Brendan* is neither strictly realistic nor strictly allegorical, it is somewhere in between. The same can be said of the "Promised Land of the Saints." It is found in "transfigured reality" (MA, p. 119). Bourgeault can conclude that *The Voyage* has a "characteristically monastic orientation towards life, which expresses itself both in the destination of the journey and in the process through which the journey unfolds" (MA, p. 119) and that it is "an exploration, not just of lands and places, but of the attempt to live, move and respond to the world out of a transfigured centre" (MA, p. 120). A centre that Merton would equate with the centre where both God and the true self are discovered. Brendan's voyage to the "Promised Land of the Saints" in holding together the two tensions between the temporal and the eternal also holds together the tension between the external, geographical pilgrimage and the inner pilgrimage or journey. As Kathleen Hughes points out, it is in the sixth and seventh centuries, the age of the historical figure Brendan, that there was "the closest union of ideal and practice" (Hughes, p. 150) concerning the Celtic idea of pilgrimage. In the following centuries both the ideal and the practice were modified and restricted. From this period onwards there is an interiorization of the pilgrimage theme especially in monastic literature so that the *peregrinatio*, the perfect pilgrimage of the monk becomes "entirely spiritual and is in fact synonymous with monastic stability" (MZM, p. 93), and the monk's imitation of Abraham involved him leaving "the world" for the monastery cloister and stability.

In the Celtic *peregrini* of the voyage literature such as *The Voyage of St. Brendan* it is possible to see all the metaphors that have been used by or about Thomas Merton, also this specific metaphor brings together the elements of journey in his writing. In his article 'From Pilgrimage to Crusade' Merton saw in the Celtic *peregrinatio* that "the external and geographical pilgrimage was ... something more than the acting out of psychic obsessions and instabilities. It was in profound relationship with an inner experience of continuity between the natural and the supernatural, between the sacred and the profane, between this world and the next: a continuity both in time and space" (MZM, p. 97). This insight is very similar to that reached by Bourgeault and is an insight which can be applied to Merton's life as well. He went from a physical journey which was a flight from "the world," to a spiritual journey where he rediscovered "the world" and his fellow brothers and sisters in finding God and compassion, arriving at a point where on his journey to Asia the two journeys, the two tensions came together, so that like Brendan discovering the

"Promised Land of the Saints" Merton could say at Polonnaruwa after having found "the great compassion" (AJ, p. 4) that "I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for. I don't know what else remains" (AJ, p. 236).

Through monastic asceticism Merton had learnt to live out of "a transfigured centre" (MA, 120), as a monk he experienced a life lived in that zone where the temporal and the eternal overlap. His sense of exploring, wandering, homelessness, questioning, strangeness, his continuing conversion, his sense of journeying kept him moving forward like St. Brendan, like Abraham in search of the Promised Land.

Merton's journey like Brendan's is cyclical. Reading *The Voyage* sometimes "gives us the feeling that he goes round in cycles in more ways than the liturgical. But he did have a sense of ending," (ICC, p. 91) so also with Merton. Monastic life and spirituality tend to be cyclical with their sense of rhythm and with their emphasis on the repetition of the psalms, the liturgical hours, the church's seasons and yet, by stability, they stand still, so that, in a paradoxical way, the monk stands still and goes round in circles, or a spiral may be a better image as the purpose of monastic life is to find God, it has an ending, a Promised Land, unlike a circle which goes on forever.

Anne Hawkins saw Merton's journey as a spiral. In an intellectual sense there was a "dialectical movement from one idea to its opposite to a higher unity" and also a physical movement of "encountering the same situation over and over, but at a higher level each time" (AC, p. 119). Also, on a spiritual level, the notion of *epektasis* suggests a linear physical movement, but, situated within the context of the absolute which does not change, the spiral is also a suitable image. So in looking at Merton's journey she could conclude that "it is this ethos of paradox, of contradictions, of open-ended questioning that turns the archetype of the quest into a spiral" (AC, p. 125).

Celtic pilgrimage, especially *The Voyage of St. Brendan*, as well as encapsulating the metaphors that relate to Merton's life as a journey and placing them within the context of a sacred journey also highlights two other important areas for our understanding of Merton. Firstly, his ability to journey in the zone where the temporal and the eternal overlap, thus bringing together the physical and spiritual journeys, and from that tension learning to live out of a transfigured centre, and, secondly, that the journey is circular, or more precisely a spiral, like the metaphor of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, spiralling upwards towards God.

Merton's journey was a lonely pilgrimage, a journey where it was necessary to go beyond and to "travel without maps" (CWA, p. 109), to try and to journey as a marginalised person in that zone where the eternal and the temporal overlap. This metaphor of pilgrimage leads to the discovery of both God and the true self, and in this discovery one learns to live out of a "transfigured centre" out of "the great compassion" and discover in that compassion all humanity. As Merton says:

Our task now is to learn that if we can voyage to the ends of the earth and there find ourselves in the aborigine who most differs from ourselves, we will have made a fruitful pilgrimage. That is why pilgrimage is necessary, in some shape or other. Mere sitting at home and meditating on the divine presence is not enough for our time. We have to come to the end of a long journey and see that the stranger we meet there is no other than ourselves which is the same as saying that we find Christ in him.

For if the Lord is risen as He said, He is actually or potentially alive in every man. Our pilgrimage to the Holy Sepulchre is our pilgrimage to the stranger who is Christ our fellow-pilgrim and our brother. There is no lost island merely for the individual. We are all pieces of the paradise island, and we can find our Brendan's island only when we all realize ourselves together as the paradise which is Christ and His Bride, God, man and Church (MZM, p. 112).