

# The Solitude of Thomas Merton:

## An Asian Perspective

By Zakaria Ali

Thomas Merton writes in his *New Seeds of Contemplation*, “Some men have perhaps become hermits with the thought that sanctity could only be attained by escape from other men. But the only justification for a life of deliberate solitude is the conviction that it will help you to love not only God but also other men. If you go into the desert merely to get away from people you dislike, you will find neither peace nor solitude; you will only isolate yourself with a tribe of devils.”<sup>1</sup> He adds, “He who isolates himself in order to enjoy a kind of independence in his egotistic and external self does not find unity at all, for he disintegrates into a multiplicity of conflicting passions and finally ends in confusion and total unreality. Solitude is not and can never be a narcissistic dialogue of the ego with itself” (NSC 52). For Merton, there is a clear distinction between genuine and spurious solitude: “True solitude is the home of the person, false solitude the refuge of the individualist. Go into the desert not to escape other men but in order to find them in God” (NSC 53).

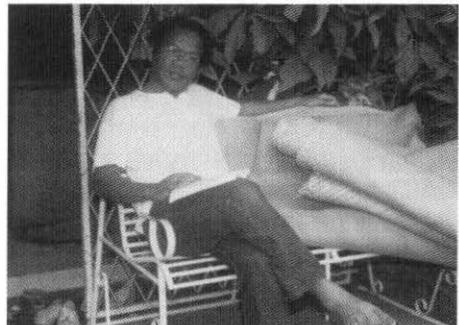
These statements, published in 1961, were written in the monastery of the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani, near Bardstown, Kentucky. They echo the same theme highlighted in his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, published in 1948. The autobiography traces his spiritual journey that begins with a consciousness of some vague divine power and ends up with him becoming a Trappist monk.

Hints of such surrender to God are infrequent in his early life, but he elaborates on those that do occur in great detail in his autobiography. He notes instances of church bells ringing, his father’s religious conversion during an illness, the ruins of the ancient shrine of St. Antonin in the French Pyrenees, his father telling the story of St. Peter’s betrayal of Christ. All suggest how he retains from his early memories images of things associated with religion. How significant they are is unclear to him at first. Only later, after having been converted to Catholicism, does he single them out as foreshadowings of his spiritual commitment to his vocation of monasticism.

On December 10, 1941 Merton enters the Monastery at Gethsemani as a postulant, to try if

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the rigidly structured life is right for him. It is. He remains in it for exactly twenty-seven years, dying on December 10, 1968. He steps into the monastery well prepared. He has read a massive amount of literature on the lives of the saints – St. Augustine, St. Joan of Arc, St. John Bosco, St. Benedict, St. John of the Cross and others. These saints influence him enormously in turning his back on the wicked world. His vow of poverty and silence is his answer to his own wickedness and selfishness. His inward journey begins with the hope that eventually he will be allowed to be a hermit. After twenty-four years as an ordinary monk, he is given the permission to live alone. Contemplation has a very special meaning for Thomas Merton. “What is called the contemplative life is really a life arranged in such a way that a person can more easily and more simply and more naturally live in an awareness of direct dependence on God – almost with the sense of realizing consciously, at every moment, how much we depend on Him, and receive from Him directly everything that comes to us as a pure gift, and experience, taste in our hearts the love of God in this gift, the delicacy and the personal attention of God to us in His merciful love.”<sup>2</sup>

The danger of contemplation is obvious: there is such a thing as the overdoing of interior prayer and overdoing of concentration and of recollection, if the journey within blocks out the wider world. This only deadens our capacity to listen and to attend to God (cf. *CWA*, 375). Thus the art of listening is for the contemplative the most effective discipline and a most purifying form of ascetic training. In this tranquil, empty, peaceful solitude a person receives a great deal of guidance from, and communion with, God. To be able to be guided by God is a form of grace or a form of reward received after having accepted numerous restrictions and sacrifices.

To sacrifice is hard. Giving without the thought of receiving is a habit that must be taught. And the best way is through self-training. As a novice master in the monastery for over a decade, Thomas Merton meets numerous types of people, each with his own reason for abandoning the world. One of the virtues he tries to inculcate is to sacrifice for the sake of God. Over the long and difficult years, Merton himself transcends his self-assertiveness by never ever losing sight of his vocation: to search for true solitude so as to know God through contemplation, which is the perfection of humility, love and knowledge.

Otherwise, the retreat to solitude is futile, a self-absorption characterized by Thomas Merton as Promethean. To Merton the Promethean mystic is one who is ultimately without faith and who at his deepest core believes neither in himself nor in God. He who needs fire from outside himself is condemned to live out his life in the hope of some impossible ecstasy. His withdrawal from the world is merely a defiance in the assertion of his despair – the inarticulate expression of a terror he will not admit himself: “terror at having to be himself, at having to be a person.”<sup>3</sup>

One of the ways Thomas Merton avoids egotistical despair is to share the suffering of the world. No issue is too distant for him to address: the Vietnam War, hunger, poverty, racial discrimination, riots, peace, Latin America, communism, Islam, Protestant mystics, freedom, imperialism, Zen Buddhism, and so on. True enough, monastic life can induce a we/they mentality, a distinction between we-the-righteous and they-the-sinners. But this dichotomy is real only in the most limited sense; from a wider perspective, the edges between the categories are blurred. Wherever one’s center happens to be, it should never be a source of pride, which can be found in the “we-circle” as easily as in the “they-circle.” Furthermore, even an eremite is not entirely cut off from other persons; he is in contact with

fellow eremites in his chosen community, where personal frictions are not uncommon. Thomas Merton seeks to minimize such frictions, after which, in relative calm, he discharges his duty as a writer who is monk, and a monk who writes: “As long as I imagine that the world is something to be ‘escaped’ in a monastery – that wearing a special costume and following a quaint observance takes me ‘out of this world,’ I am dedicating my life to an illusion” (CWA, 160).

His advantage is that he sees society and its problems from the margin, as a “guilty bystander” – guilty of never being able to do enough. The distance provides a unique view, one which is imbued with a sense of urgency. A remark has to be made or an essay has to be penned regarding pressing social issues, otherwise he becomes part of the problem, not a provider of a solution. The depth of his analysis comes from the belief that the world needs divine wisdom and grace. Thomas Merton never claims he possesses true wisdom; however, he would not have written a word if he did *not* believe he has at least a spark of it in his soul to transmit to others. His humility is expressed in never abandoning his position as man of God, who wants to help and not to judge. The apparent paradox of a contemplative engaging in the affairs of the world is a cross he bears without apology.

Sufferings in the world will not cease. While the cloistered existence may tend to shut out these sufferings, their reality remains as challenging as ever. It is in the light of wanting to ease the pain that he publishes *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, *Faith and Violence*, the essays later collected in *Contemplation in a World of Action*, and other books and pamphlets. They exemplify the commitment he has to the tradition of Catholic intellectualism whose one recurring feature is that the world has to be renewed with the word, in the material and spiritual senses.

The classic paradigm is that the monastery is a small circle outside the larger circle of the world. Thomas Merton’s life and writings prove that the separation of these two circles is illusory. It is futile to retreat from the larger circle into the safe haven of the smaller one because the two are linked by the bond of common humanity. Humility teaches the monk that his withdrawal is of no consequence to the outside world to which he may be tempted to return. Either way, hardly anybody cares enough to dissuade him from carrying out his decision. The human mind is never blank – it is always actively trying to figure out what has gone wrong. For Thomas Merton the two circles overlap in the same universe of human responsibilities, or rather the monastic circle exists within the wider human circle. Thomas Merton sees the sufferings of the world, its contradictions, violence and despair as happening within himself. Thus the redemptive quality of the word is for the world as much as it is for himself.

Reality for Thomas Merton is embodied in God and in humanity. Much of the violence modern man has inflicted upon himself is because he believes in the distorted reality of being the master of his own destiny. Modern man has lost his ability to recognize that all destinies are interlocked. Egotism has been exaggerated, becoming the norm rather than the exception. Modern man is blind to the needs of others. The ability to love his fellow man is a hollow slogan people pay lip-service to. Selfishness and greed characterize much of the attitude and activity of modern man, who no longer sees God is a living reality but rather as something remote, unrelated to his wants and uninvolved in his schemes. Perhaps much of this is the result of the secularization of modern society since the Renaissance, when the notion of the separation of church and state first emerged. The two have

coexisted but must never mix, as the first depends on God and the second on man. Secularized modern man is much admired for his resourcefulness but he has to pay the price for boastful independence in the various forms of despair he chronically suffers from.

In the solitude of his hermitage Thomas Merton studies other religious and monastic traditions. Zen Buddhism attracts him, and in a famous dialogue with D. T. Suzuki, the eminent Japanese thinker and mystic, Thomas Merton says, "Purity of heart is not the *ultimate end* of the monk's striving in the desert. It is only a step toward it. We have said that Paradise is not yet heaven. Paradise is not the final goal of the spiritual life. . . . Purity of heart establishes man in a state of unity and emptiness in which he is one with God."<sup>4</sup> Thus he sees similarities rather than differences in man's efforts to submit himself to God's will through the practice of secluded austerity. It is here that some hard thinking is being done, not where one indulges in staring into space in a trance. Like a Zen monk, the Trappist must act upon the credo that the more one gives, the less one apparently receives. In the end one gets nothing – but grace. Thus in expecting nothing one gets everything.

Both Zen Buddhism and Christian monasticism communicate an awareness of the ontological level of our existence. It is grounded in the here and now. Such an awareness is a metaphysical intuition of being, or *prajna*. However, habitual rationalizations often tend to falsify the experience of wisdom or *prajna*. Things and facts are seen in terms of the language we use, thus becoming a sort of substitute for the real thing. The logic of language and the logic of wisdom collide, and too often the logic of wisdom evaporates. The wisdom of Zen, in a sense, springs from the realm of non-language because it mistrusts language. It is a thing by itself, independent of words, grammar and constructions. As a word man, Thomas Merton is aware of this beautiful paradox of having to explain in words when words are clearly inadequate. In Zen, the "suchness" of things and facts contributes to man's understanding of himself and his relationship to the divine.

The sense of consciousness that Thomas Merton grasps in Zen is similar to the understanding of humanity in the Catholic tradition that he represents. First, man is conscious of himself as a lost being, second, as a seeker of truth, and finally, as free, spiritually and physically. In these stages, the purification of moral consciousness reaches the state superconsciousness, or metaconsciousness, when subject and object become one. "This realization or enlightenment is called *Nirvana*" (ZBA, 80).

Understanding "Nirvana" on the mystical, ethical and metaphysical levels would depend on the individual, who must be on guard against verbiage. And the one effective way is to keep clarifying and reclarifying his notions of void and grace within himself in his moments of solitude. Void is nothingness, a state of total annihilation, whereas grace implies a power or a divine presence that bestows it upon the privileged. It is in the perpetual tension between an absence and a presence that Nirvana is to be understood. Nirvana is on the side of what Thomas Merton calls "pure presence" (ZBA, 81). "Pure presence" is non-dualistic, beyond an awareness of self and non-self. The self is the flesh and blood reality of the body as a formal entity. The non-self, is the opposite, not the negation, of the self that is tied to passions and worldly possessions. Enslaved in such a state, the self longs for a liberation that only the non-self can provide. Thomas Merton associates the non-self with the soul, nourished in solitude and trained in the knowledge awarded by faith and piety.

From the Quran he quotes Surah 12:100: "God was indeed good to me when He took me out of prison and brought you (all here) out of the desert."<sup>5</sup> He comments, "It

moves me deeply, with its spirit of loneliness, independence of men, dependence on God, emptiness, trust . . . the spirit of the desert, which for Muslims, is not the prerogative of a few. It is for everyone” (*CGB*, 18). It is by such identification with the spirit of *tawhid* that he transcends the narrow sectarianism often associated with his and other monastic orders. His life seems meaningless if he fails to embody the spiritual unity of all faiths. There are so many paths to redemption and Thomas Merton recognizes his in the silence of his solitude.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 52; subsequent references to “NSC” will be incorporated parenthetically in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (1971; Garden City, NY: Doubleday Image, 1973) 386; subsequent reference to “CWA” will be incorporated parenthetically in the text.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Bantam, 1981) 13-14.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968) 131-32; subsequent references to “ZBA” will be incorporated parenthetically in the text.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966; Garden City, NY: Doubleday Image, 1968) 18; subsequent references to “CGB” will be incorporated parenthetically in the text. Merton quotes a French translation of the *Quran* that has this surah as XLII:31; I use the Yusuf Ali English translation.