

The Virtuous Teacher: Thomas Merton's Contribution to a Spirituality of Higher Education

Roy D. Fuller

In perhaps what is his most extended statement on higher education, "Learning to Live," Thomas Merton draws a comparison between the university and the monastery. Merton declares that the university, "is at once a microcosm and a paradise."¹ Noting that throughout the Middle Ages speculation abounded concerning the location of the earthly paradise, Merton, ever following the example of the early Fathers, defines paradise as "simply the person, the self, but the radical self in its uninhibited freedom. The self no longer with an ego."² Having located paradise within, Merton further observes that only with the activation of that innermost "spark" or self may one realize the "fruit of education."³ And not infrequently is this work done outside of the classroom, even away from the campus, where Merton encountered "small bursts of light that pointed out my way in the dark of my own identity."⁴

1. Thomas Merton, "Learning to Live," *Love and Living*, eds. Naomi Burton Stone and Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979) 7. This essay was originally titled "Learning to Learn," as Lawrence Cunningham has noted in his introduction to this essay in *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master* (New York: Paulist, 1992) 357.

2. Merton, "Learning to Live," 8.

3. *Ibid.*, 9.

4. *Ibid.*, 13. See Thomas Del Prete, *Thomas Merton and the Education of the Whole Person* (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1990) 13. Concerning this essay by Merton, Del Prete observed, "Though unfortunately brief, his statement was the fruit of many years of written reflection and meditation on the meaning of the "self" and "person." It captured as well his own commitment and experience

Thomas Merton's writings specifically pertaining to education are limited, and this essay will restrict itself to these particular works.⁵ The structure of this examination is twofold. First, contemporary critics of higher education in America will be engaged in dialogue with Merton's reflections on education. The second part of the paper will focus on what insights Merton's writings hold for the current discussion of academic virtues.

Merton and Contemporary Higher Education

There would seem to be little debate concerning the existence of a "spiritual void" within much of what passes for higher education. Parker Palmer observes "a tremendous deep spiritual hunger" within the realms of higher education.⁶ One need look no further than the best-sellers list of the past few years to see the increasing number of authors/scholars who have critiqued and suggested improvements of the American system of higher education. E. D. Hirsch, Jr., in *Cultural Literacy*, submits that the cure for what ails education is the learning of "large amounts of specific information" which would equip humans to "thrive in the modern world," a phrase by which he means the advancement of one's vocation as well as the individual's level of

in personal growth." Del Prete's work stands as the only monograph exclusively devoted to Merton's views on education.

5. The limits of Merton's writings on education were observed by both Del Prete and William Shannon. In his review of Del Prete's work, Shannon observed that Merton, "wrote very little explicitly about education" (back cover, Del Prete). Del Prete himself explored Merton's ideas about how education should involve "the formation of the whole person." Del Prete did not deal with Merton's educational methodology by design, though research should be done in this area. The wealth of tapes (over 600) at the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine College would offer much for an analysis of Merton's educational methodology, as would further analysis of his letters. Both areas were outside the specific intent of this paper.

For a perspective from those who sat under Merton as students, see "Merton as Novice Master," *Up and Down Merton's Mountains: A Contemporary Spiritual Journey*, ed. Gerald Groves (St. Louis: CBP Press, 1988).

6. Parker Palmer, "The Violence of Our Knowledge: Toward a Spirituality of Higher Education," presented as the H. I. Hester Lecture given at the Association of Southern Baptist Colleges and Schools, Riverside, California, June 1993. Reprinted in *The Southern Baptist Educator*, vol. 57, no. 9 (August 1993) 7.

self-actualization.⁷ Merton maintains that one of the goals of education is to prepare persons "to lead a productive and happy life," and this must include knowledge of "the ultimate spiritual values that men have to live by."⁸ Merton would certainly have agreed with Hirsch in regard to the necessity of education to impart a love of reading.⁹

Whereas Hirsch analyzes the failure of education at the primary levels, Allan Bloom in his book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, reveals a world of higher education where the character of students is so deformed as to defy all efforts to instill new habits and values within them.¹⁰ The popularity of Bloom's book seemed to be found in his tendency to blame the impoverished student for the problems of higher education. While primarily writing to those interested in monastic education, Merton makes a similar point:

The monastic life as it exists today often presupposes too much in the young postulant who seeks admission. It presupposes that he knows his own mind, that he is capable of making a mature decision, that he has grown up, that he has received a liberal education. It is often discovered too late that such things cannot be taken for granted. Before the average youth of today is ready for monastic life, his senses, feelings and imagination need to be reformed and educated along normal natural lines.¹¹

7. E. D. Hirsch, Jr. *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1987) xiii, xv.

8. *Witness to Freedom: The Letters of Thomas Merton in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994) 155.

9. Conference Tape #43, "Liberal Arts: Good or Bad?" January 14, 1962 (Thomas Merton Studies Center collection, Bellarmine College). Merton's observation is as follows: "The major shortcoming of seminary is the inability to impart a love of reading."

10. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987) Part One. "Students," 47-137.

11. "The Inner Experience," 269. In this same article, Merton fretted over the influence of the university model upon the monastic environment, especially as he noted: "Yet inevitably the monastic library tends to imitate the library of a university, and some of the monks become graduate students doing research. . . . The Bible is read, but it is full of mysteries which remain to be unveiled by an expert with a degree and he, too often, is interested only in details of archeology and linguistics" 274. Merton was always concerned with education which produced specialists who had lost the ability to find wholeness.

If one substitutes "higher education" for "monastic life" here, Merton may be seen as an early prophet of what ails contemporary education.

While Hirsch and Bloom raise questions worthy of continued discussion within academia (and society at large), their analyses and solutions proffered seem reductionistic. In both cases, students are improved by enhancing their curriculum (i.e., more classics and other knowledge which amounts to "cultural literacy"). Thus, when we have better students, higher education will, seemingly automatically, be improved and able to complete its task. A more accurate description of what ails higher education is the analysis offered by Page Smith in *Killing the Spirit*. Smith identifies several maladies of higher education: "presentism," a tireless lust for the new; specialization, at the loss of capacity for generalization or any awareness of unity; knowledge for its own sake; relativism, which denies any moral structure in the world; and "academic fundamentalism," which omits half or more of the human experience.¹² Thomas Merton offers a similar critique, in the form of describing the "products" of the modern education process:

Those who claim to be educated are in reality not formed: they are formless bundles of unrelated factual knowledge, disoriented and passive, superficially acquainted with names, dates, facts and with the "how" of various material processes. But they have no way of using what they "know." Consequently, since their "knowledge" is not integrated into their lives, they cannot really be said to possess it. It has not entered their being. It has not really become a part of them. . . . He may be in some sense educated, but his education has little to do with real life, since real life is not something with which modern man is really concerned at all.¹³

Smith's most significant contribution to the debate centers on the vocation of teaching. While the importance of teaching students to think clearly should not be diminished, Smith quotes Sir Richard Livingstone, who stated, "to teach people to see and feel is more important still."¹⁴ Smith also quotes William Lyon Phelps, who wrote, "If a teacher wishes success with pupils, he must inflame their imagi-

12. Page Smith, *Killing the Spirit: Higher Education In America* (New York: Viking, 1990) 294.

13. "The Inner Experience: Problems of the Contemplative Life (VII)" *Cistercian Studies* 19 (1984) 270, 271.

14. *Ibid.*, 200.

nation."¹⁵ This is similar to Merton's comment concerning "the activation of that innermost spark." Smith observed that "true education, one designed to produce a true person, must include instruction in courage."¹⁶ Talk of courage implies taking positions, subjective emotions, and trust, three ingredients which currently seem in short supply within the halls of academia.

While *Killing the Spirit* deals with the history of higher education in America in an effort to understand how it has sunk so low, Smith's emphasis upon the crucial function of the teacher brings us to an area where another critic of higher education has raised significant questions concerning the vocation of teaching in America. Parker Palmer asserts that the transformation of teaching must begin with the transforming of teachers.¹⁷ He further states:

Only in the heart searched and transformed by truth will new teaching techniques and strategies for institutional change find sure grounding. Only in such a heart will teachers find the courage to resist the conditions of academic life while we work and wait for institutional transformation.¹⁸

Palmer goes on to demonstrate how classical spiritual virtues can contribute to the transformation of both teachers and learners. Specifically, he identified the following virtues or "fruits of spiritual practice" as necessary for the practice of teaching: humility and faith, reverence without idolatry, love and openness to grace.¹⁹

Such virtues have been pushed aside at many American colleges and universities, as has been clearly shown by George Marsden's analysis in *The Soul of the American University*. Marsden documents the move away from the religious values and virtues which long stood as the

15. William Lyon Phelps, quoted by Smith, 213.

16. *Ibid.*, 204. Such courage must not only be talked about but "demonstrated." This requires what Smith identified as "the essence of teaching—taking chances," 216.

17. Parker Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983) 107.

18. *Ibid.*, 107-108.

19. *Ibid.*, 108. Palmer holds that in addition to being spiritual virtues, these fruits are epistemological virtues as well, "the degree to which they are present in us has much to do with our capacity to know and be known in truth," 108.

foundational principles of American educational philosophy.²⁰ This paradigm shift has tremendous significance, as Marsden observes:

While American universities today allow individuals free exercise of religion in parts of their lives that do not touch the heart of the university, they tend to exclude or discriminate against relating explicit religious perspectives to intellectual life. In other words, the free exercise of religion does not extend to the dominant intellectual centers of our culture.²¹

If this is the reality of a university education, how can such institutions be expected to fulfill Merton's purpose of education, that being "the formation of the whole person." Consistent with this focus, Merton claims that "The function of a university is, then, first of all to help the student to discover himself: to recognize himself, and to identify who it is that chooses."²² Whether universities will recover this perspective remains an open question.

In *Exiles From Eden*, Mark R. Schwehn offers a trenchant analysis of what ails higher education in America. Schwehn goes beyond the obvious (and often only symptomatic) maladies which plague education, and focuses on why teaching has come to view itself as it does, and how this flawed vision might be corrected. Like Palmer, Schwehn pursues the connection between spiritual virtues and the practice of teaching and it is in this area where Schwehn makes his most valuable contribution. He suggests that "every teacher is teaching at least two things in every classroom: his or her subject and the manners of learning."²³ Schwehn defines "manners" as embodying both methods and virtues. The question of the virtues necessary for both learning and teaching is one which provides an opening for Thomas Merton's contribution to a spirituality for higher education.

20. George Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University, 1994). While Marsden focused on colleges and universities that are Protestant in origin, his framework would hold true for Catholic institutions as well.

21. *Ibid.*, 6.

22. "Learning to Live," 4.

23. Mark R. Schwehn, *Exiles From Eden: Religion and the Academic Vocation in America* (Oxford University, 1993) 34.

Merton's "Ethos of Inquiry"

Schwehn offers four "spiritual virtues" which he suggests are indispensable to learning and teaching: faith, humility, self-denial, and charity.²⁴ Why the virtues? As Schwehn observes:

Academies, if they are to flourish over the long run, must therefore cultivate and sustain in their members those virtues that are required for the kind of learning they hope to promote. Taken together, these virtues constitute the ethos of inquiry.²⁵

Does Thomas Merton speak to us on this question of the virtues necessary for teaching and learning? Using Schwehn's virtues as a guideline, we will proceed with an investigation of Merton's "ethos of inquiry."

Thomas Merton did not devote much writing to the specific issue of higher education. (One may be tempted to say "secular" higher education, but as has already been suggested, the idea itself may be a misnomer.) In his essay "Learning to Live," Merton defines the purpose of education as being "to show a person how to define himself authentically and spontaneously in relation to his world."²⁶ In a letter to Mary Declan Martin, who had written him concerning his views of education, Merton responds, "I believe education means more than just imparting 'knowledge.' It means the formation of the whole person."²⁷ Merton seems to echo Bernard of Clairvaux who wrote:

Some seek knowledge for the sake of knowledge; that is curiosity. Others seek knowledge that they may themselves be known; that is vanity. But there are some who seek knowledge in order to serve and edify others. And that is charity.²⁸

24. *Ibid.*, 48-57. Schwehn mentions additional virtues, namely loyalty and hospitality, but these were not developed as were the aforementioned virtues.

25. *Ibid.*, 44.

26. "Learning to Live," 3.

27. *The Road To Joy: Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 364. See also Del Prete, *Thomas Merton and the Education of the Whole Person*, chapter 2.

28. Bernard of Clairvaux, quoted by Josef Pieper, *Scholasticism* (New York: Pantheon, 1960) 155.

This seems to be precisely Merton's view of the function of knowledge in education, "to serve and edify others."

Whereas modern higher educational institutions have made the production and distribution of knowledge as their ongoing goal, Merton maintains that this is the very danger of education, it "confuses means with ends."²⁹ Rather than an "end," Merton suggests that the purpose of education may be seen in the etymology of the word itself. In his introductory essay on the letters of Adam of Perseigne, Merton observes that to educate a monk (in monastic terms, to "form"), one must "draw out" or "bring out" the true self.³⁰ To educate, whether in the context of monastery or university, is an activity of "leading out." Too often the task is viewed as one of "putting in" as in pouring knowledge into students. Endless debates on curriculum reform and what constitutes the "core" would take on a different tone if institutions became more concerned about "leading out" than "putting in."

When education is viewed in its original intent as a leading or bringing out of the inner or true spiritual self, the role of the educator is likewise restored. Merton has much to say concerning the role and characteristics of the educator. His role as educator consumed a large portion of his efforts, having been Master of Scholastics for four years (1951-1955) and Master of Novices for ten years (1955-1965). In most of his work on education, Merton is naturally discussing the education or formation of monks. In this context the educator may be understood as spiritual director. Here I would begin to make the case for understanding Merton as "guru" or "virtuous teacher." But first, a brief overview of the meaning and function of "guru" as the term is used in its Eastern context.

In Sanskrit, the word "guru" literally means heavy or weighty. In popular Eastern usage, a guru is a person who is acknowledged to be in close communion with deity.³¹ Huston Smith notes that the Sikh tradition regards the guru as (1) a dispeller of ignorance or darkness (*gu*) and (2) a bringer of enlightenment (*ru*).³² The idea of enlighten-

29. "Learning to Live," 11.

30. "The Feast of Freedom," in *The Letters of Adam of Perseigne* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1976) 9.

31. C.S.J. White, "Guru," *Abingdon Dictionary of Living Religions*, ed. Keith Crim (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981) 287.

32. Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991) 75.

ment is captured by Merton in "The Feast of Freedom," where in discussing monastic formation he observes that as part of this formation the desire is "to encourage the growth of life and the radiation of light within his soul."³³ Within the context of Hinduism the meaning of guru is not different, only expanded. As Swami Prabhavananda defines the term, guru is "an illumined teacher" and "one who is competent and holy, who has demonstrated the truths of religion in his own life."³⁴ Speaking about the infinite variety of methods between masters and students, Prabhavananda remarks:

The guru has perhaps no more important duty than to study carefully the personality and temperament of the pupils committed to his charge, and to prescribe to each, according to his nature, an appropriate method of meditation.³⁵

Merton's own thoughts on the characteristics of a spiritual director reveal a similar understanding. Merton notes that the director must be a "master who teaches the spiritual life both by *discipline* and by *instruction*."³⁶ Merton understands the spiritual director as "a *guide* and a *friend* even more than a teacher . . . he must be adept at *listening*."³⁷ As M. Basil Pennington explains, "The listening of the spiritual father is not a passive thing, it is very active."³⁸ In Merton's own words, "I have looked into their hearts . . ."³⁹ Pennington's comment in the footnote is worth repeating: "One of the monk-priests who was a scholastic at that time attests that he (Merton) was certainly highly gifted for active listening and made one feel listened to."⁴⁰ Merton possessed the necessary skills to function within the community as a director or master.

33. "The Feast of Freedom," 9.

34. Swami Prabhavananda, *The Spiritual Heritage of India* (Hollywood: Vedanta, 1973) 20, 147.

35. *Ibid.*, 67.

36. "Spiritual Direction," *Merton: Collected Essays*, vol. 13, 206. (The Thomas Merton Study Center, Bellarmine College). Though never published, this essay was apparently written for the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*.

37. *Ibid.*

38. M. Basil Pennington, "The Spiritual Father: Father Louis' Theory and Practice," *Toward An Integrated Humanity: Thomas Merton's Journey*, ed. M. Basil Pennington (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1988) 34.

39. *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1953) 330.

40. Pennington, "The Spiritual Father," 50.

The natural inclination to attribute "guruness" to Merton is understandable, and perhaps accurate. Would Merton have agreed? In *The Ascent To Truth*, in the context of discussing the necessity of submission to a teaching authority, Merton turned to the guru/disciple relationship for purposes of comparison. The comparison is not favorable to Hinduism and in context should be seen as representative of an apologetic Merton, advocating Catholicism as less severe in its demands than other religious traditions. Merton points out that the Hindu aspirant is expected to see the guru as not only a representative of God, "he must see the Divinity itself living and acting in him."⁴¹ To demonstrate his point Merton quotes Ramakrishna who stated that as the Hindu disciple progresses "the disciple will realize that the Guru and God are one and the same."⁴² Certainly Merton would have rejected this incarnational aspect of the guru. However, Merton would agree with the title of spiritual father, even while admitting that in his own role as spiritual father "on many days we have gone around in circles and fallen into ditches because the blind was leading the blind."⁴³ Perhaps the most applicable correlation of Merton with the concept of guru would be the popular definition of someone who is in close communion with deity. This, after all is said and done, was Merton's own goal.

Merton's "Manners" of Learning

To further elucidate Thomas Merton's "ethos of inquiry" we must look at what Schwehn identifies as the "manners" of learning. Schwehn distinguishes four virtues essential for teaching and learning: humility, faith, self-denial, and charity. By examining Merton's understanding of these virtues, and how he exemplified them in his own work as educator and author, light will be shed not only on him, but upon the institution of teaching as it could exist within higher education.

Humility. Schwehn defines humility in the context of learning as "the presumption of wisdom and authority in the author."⁴⁴ Merton understood and embodied this understanding of humility. In "The

41. *The Ascent To Truth* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1951) 147.

42. *Ibid.*, 148.

43. *The Sign of Jonas*, 333.

44. Schwehn, *Exiles From Eden*, 48.

Feast of Freedom," in a commentary on Adam of Perseigne's eighteenth letter, Merton writes: "Humility is indeed the close friend of wisdom and of all the virtues . . . if we do not have humility, we cannot learn any of them."⁴⁵ In both learning and teaching, humility is to be our constant companion, for without it, errors are unavoidable. In an unpublished essay on spiritual direction Merton wrote: "A humble person is protected by his humility itself from many delusions and mistakes."⁴⁶ All learners (students and teachers) benefit when we begin by examining our own intentions whenever the subject seems obscure or inconsistent. As Schwehn points out, "this does not mean uncritical acceptance" but rather that the problem could very well be within ourselves.⁴⁷ Thus the "presumption" that the author has both wisdom and authority is a fruit of humility.

A further benefit of humility for the academic is the attitude it fosters concerning the role of knowledge in our lives. The debate in education which centers around knowledge as either means or ends is misguided. In one of his final addresses, while in Thailand, Merton spoke of his hopes for his Asian journey. He writes:

I have left my monastery to come here not just as a research scholar or even as an author (which I also happen to be). 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. I seek not only to learn more (quantitatively) about religion and about monastic life, but to become a better and more enlightened monk (qualitatively) myself.⁴⁸

This passage touches on several themes related to the virtue of humility. First, the recognition of one's own position. Merton identifies himself, in spite all other accomplishments, as a pilgrim. This is humility in its popular usage as a modest sense of one's own importance. Merton also indicates his purpose as "to drink" from the other religious traditions. This is humility as a virtue, essential to establishing

45. "The Feast of Freedom," 26.

46. "Spiritual Direction," *Merton: Collected Essays*, vol. 13, 206. For Merton's thoughts on the concept of "Mertonism," see *The School of Charity: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990) 186.

47. Schwehn, *Exiles From Eden*, 48.

48. *The Asian Journal* (New York: New Directions, 1973) 312-313.

a context for learning. Finally, this passage reveals a Merton seeking knowledge not only as an end (to learn more facts) but also knowledge as a means (to become a better human being). The dichotomy of knowledge as either an end or a means is false. On this final journey Merton's focus was on both the quantitative and qualitative.

Faith. Schwehn quotes James Gustafson who observed "that all our knowing involves 'faith,' human confidence in what we have received."⁴⁹ As a virtue for learning and teaching, this faith is not so much synonymous with "belief" but rather should be viewed as "trust." We all rely and build on the work and thoughts of others. Merton understood this in terms of his relationship with tradition, specifically the Catholic tradition. This relationship has best been traced by William H. Shannon in *Silent Lamp*, particularly chapter 9, "Gethsemani: The Gift of Faith." Shannon's work will not be rehearsed here, except to point out two passages where Merton's comments reveal the virtue of faith as necessary for an "ethos of inquiry." In a discussion of monastic tradition in *No Man Is an Island*, Shannon quotes Merton, who writes:

Tradition is living and active . . . [It] does not form us automatically: we have to work to understand it . . . [It] teaches us how to live and shows us how to take responsibility for our own lives. Tradition, which is always old, is at the same time ever new because it is always reviving—born again in each generation, to be lived and applied in a new and particular way . . . Tradition is creative. Always original, it always opens out new horizons for an old journey . . . Tradition teaches us how to live, because it develops and expands our powers and shows us how to give ourselves completely to the world in which we live.⁵⁰

Such a statement cannot be made without a faith or trust in what one has received. As was the case with humility, faith is not an uncritical acceptance, rather it seeks to return continually to that knowledge (revelation) which must be applied anew by each generation. Or as Merton put it as he was identifying himself as "a progressive," faith seeks "continuity with the past" and yet is "completely open to the

49. James Gustafson, "Human Confidence and Rational Activity," in *Crescent* (September 1988) 17. Quoted by Schwehn, *Exiles from Eden*, 49.

50. *No Man Is An Island*, 150-151, as quoted by William Shannon in *Silent Lamp* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 166.

modern world."⁵¹ The ethos of inquiry can only be improved with the addition of a virtue so described.

Self-Denial. As defined by Schwehn, this virtue includes "the capacity first to risk and then to give ourselves up if necessary for the sake of the truth."⁵² For Schwehn, this involves not only a process of testing our opinions but awareness that while so doing, we literally "risk ourselves."⁵³ Merton would seemingly be paradigmatic with regard to this virtue. Monastic discipline itself is this process of "risking" oneself, in this case for the sake of the gospel. Ultimately, monastic formation "means the transformation of the monk himself."⁵⁴ In the academic setting, such "risking" would be characterized by a willingness to give up what we think we know for what we find to be true.

The search for truth increasingly led Merton to the Eastern religious traditions, a step which was seen as controversial, especially in the days prior to Vatican II. Since Merton's encounter with Asian traditions has been covered in other places, I wish to make only one or two observations.⁵⁵ The idea of risking oneself for the sake of truth seems best captured in the following observation by Merton in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*:

If I affirm myself as a Catholic merely by denying all that is Muslim, Jewish, Protestant, Hindu, Buddhist, etc., in the end I will find that there is not much left for me to affirm as a Catholic; and certainly no breath of the Spirit with which to affirm it.⁵⁶

Such risking of our self in the pursuit of truth must go beyond any sort of detached objectivism. Merton warns of this possibility in an article for *The Catholic World*:

51. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 312.

52. Schwehn, *Exiles From Eden*, 49.

53. *Ibid.*

54. "The Feast of Freedom," 10.

55. See Alexander Lipski, *Thomas Merton and Asia: His Quest for Utopia* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1983); Lawrence S. Cunningham, "Crossing Over in the Late Writings of Thomas Merton," *Toward An Integrated Humanity: Thomas Merton's Journey*, ed. Basil Pennington (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1988) 192-201; and Deba P. Patnaik, "Syllables of the Great Song: Merton and Asian Religious Thought," *The Message of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1981) 72-90.

56. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 129.

Can we be content to leave the rich Asian heritage of wisdom at the level of "comparative religion," and subject it to superficial and passing consideration, checking off concepts like 'Tao' and 'Dharma' and 'Dhyana' as a bored tourist might saunter through the Louvre vaguely registering the famous masterpieces as he walked by them?⁵⁷

The academic virtue of self-denial or risking oneself would seem to be the necessary corrective to the "bored tourist" syndrome endemic within contemporary higher education. Parker Palmer claims that the discipline of studying outside of one's field involves a "risking oneself."⁵⁸ Thomas Merton's wide-ranging interests contributed in no small part to his teaching ability and serve as an example to academics on the dangers of overspecialization.⁵⁹

Charity. Schwehn identified charity or love as the greatest of the virtues, and sought to define it through examples. As a historian Schwehn wondered if the exercise of charity (tempered with justice) toward historical subjects increased the quality of his thinking. He declares that such an exercise

is bound to make me a better historian: more cautious in appraisal, more sympathetic with human failings, less prone to stereotype and caricature. And insofar as this is so, the manner of teaching others to think historically ought to cultivate, at least through force of example, the virtue of charity.⁶⁰

Many examples of this in Merton's writings offer themselves as evidence of this understanding of charity as an academic virtue.

In his essay on "Vocation and Modern Thought," Merton offers a charitable (though brief) rereading of many of the great thinkers who had been dismissed on ideological grounds. Why charity towards Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, Lenin, and others? Merton answers the question:

57. "Christian Culture Needs Oriental Wisdom," *The Catholic World* (May 1962) 182.

58. Parker Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known*, 114.

59. See Lawrence S. Cunningham, "The Life of Thomas Merton as Paradigm: The View of Academe," *The Message of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1981) 154-165.

60. Schwehn, *Exiles from Eden*, 51.

But we must frankly recognize the importance of these thinkers: they have all in one way or another concerned themselves very deeply with the predicament of modern man; with his special needs, his peculiar hopes, his chances of attaining these hopes. This concern in itself is by no means incompatible with a Christian outlook.⁶¹

Merton is able to find much of value in these very different thinkers, though he certainly is not blind to their faults.⁶² In this passage, Merton embodies an observation made by Schwehn, who noted: "A reviewer who tempers justice with charity just will be to that extent a better reviewer than one who is uncharitable or unjust."⁶³

When we turn from major post-enlightenment thinkers to the study of monasticism, the expectation of Merton's charity would seem obvious and hardly worthy of note. Yet, in these works we see the other side of "academic" charity, one which must be tempered with justice. In the introductory essay to *The Wisdom of the Desert*, Merton again strikes what seems to be the appropriate balance between charity and justice. While noting the "strange reputation," "lack of conventionality," and "fanaticism" of the Desert Fathers, Merton sets them in their context, continually finding ongoing relevance for their message and method.⁶⁴ The same may be said of Merton's essay, "Heraclitos: A Study," which details the life and work of a philosopher of the fifth century B.C.⁶⁵ An examination of the literary essays would find the same charity much in evidence.⁶⁶

Humility, faith, self-denial, and charity. Spiritual virtues which are found in some form in many, if not all, religious traditions. Merton saw them embodied in his own mentors and they are embodied

61. *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 51.

62. *Ibid.*, 53-57. Here Merton evaluates Marx, Freud, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre, Heidegger, T. S. Eliot, Darwin, and de Chardin. Only de Chardin was singled out by Merton as being immensely popular within Catholic seminaries of the period.

63. Schwehn, *Exiles From Eden*, 69.

64. "The Wisdom of the Desert," *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master*, ed. Lawrence Cunningham (New York: Paulist, 1992) 265-279.

65. "Heraclitos the Obscure" first appeared in *Jubilee* magazine in September 1960. Reprinted in *The Behavior of Titans* (1961). It also appears in Lawrence Cunningham's *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master* (New York: Paulist, 1992) 280-293.

66. *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981).

in Thomas Merton, along with many others of importance in education: loyalty, hospitality, and friendship.⁶⁷ These virtues offer more than a moral challenge, they have cognitive dimensions.⁶⁸ Their place in our lives will not only improve our character, but will improve our learning and teaching. As Thomas Del Prete notes, perhaps Merton's description of scholar Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, can serve as a tribute to Merton himself:

[He] was a voice bearing witness to the truth, and he wanted nothing but for others to receive that truth in their own way, in agreement with their own mental and spiritual context. As if there was any other way of accepting it.⁶⁹

Only by embodying these types of academic virtues can teachers hope to transform themselves and their students. It begins (and ends) with the teacher. Again Merton: "Merely reading books and following the written instructions of past masters is no substitute for direct contact with a living teacher."⁷⁰

67. For an analysis of Merton's mentors and models, see Thomas Del Prete, *Thomas Merton and the Education of the Whole Person*, 148-155. Most prominent among Merton's mentors was Mark Van Doren, who both embodied many of the academic virtues and who elicited them from his students.

68. Schwehn, *Exiles From Eden*, 50.

69. *The Hidden Ground of Love*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 129.

70. *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 299. Additional research could compare the idea of the wisdom teacher within Western monasticism to that of the Eastern wisdom traditions, particularly the master/disciple relationship. Merton's life and work would appear to provide a framework for such a project.