

THOMAS MERTON  
AND THE LIVING TRADITION  
OF FAITH

by **William H. Shannon**

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To talk about a "living tradition of faith" is to talk about a particular way of the old meeting the new and the present confronting the past in the faith-experience of a community of believers. There are at least three ways of dealing with this conjunction of the old and the new, the past and the present. The first is to give one's total loyalty to the past and ignore the demands of the present, with the hope that somehow they will go away. When a faith-tradition becomes a desperate clinging to the past at all costs, it comes dangerously close to an antiquarianism that makes faith a museum piece. A faith that will not let itself be challenged by the needs and questions of the present is in process of becoming a dead tradition, with little relationship to the lives people are actually living.

A second way of dealing with the coincidence of the past and the present is to become so completely absorbed in the needs and questions posed by the present situation that one closes the book on the past and refuses to allow that the accumulated wisdom of the past has anything to say to the problems of the present. This approach becomes the process of

inventing the wheel all over again. It is to lock oneself in the present with no way out. For it is one thing to say that the past cannot answer all our questions, quite another thing to believe that it has nothing to say to us.

The difficulty with these two approaches to the meeting of the past and the present is that they tend to absolutize the one or the other. Yet neither the past nor the present can make absolute claim to our allegiance. To absolutize the past is to have answers, but answers that often do not fit the actual questions we may have in the present. On the other hand, to absolutize the present is to have the right questions perhaps, but with little hint of the direction in which we need to move to locate viable answers that will enable us to adapt to the new without losing our identity.

There is, however, a third way of handling the conflux of the past and the present; and that is to let them meet in creative tension. In such creative tension the old meets the new in a decisive encounter so that what is dead in the old and simply ephemeral in the new are both put aside. In such a process the truth in the old meets the truth in the new: they strengthen one another and the total truth shines the more brightly.

This, of course, is to express an ideal. Seldom do past and present meet in such congenial fashion. Oftentimes the new questions which the present generates, especially in cataclysmic times like our own, admit of no easy or readily discoverable answers, either from the past experience of the faith-community or from what it is experiencing in the present. Such times call for a ruthless honesty and an adamant refusal to be content with inadequate answers, whether inherited from the past or generated in the present. We may have to live a long time with certain questions before we come up with answers that are truly adequate and meet the honest demands of those questions. But it is surely possible to live as authentic persons without having all the answers to the questions that trouble us. Such authenticity is not possible, however, if -- for the sake of security -- we are willing to settle for answers that are less than adequate.

There are, then, I suggest, three possible ways of dealing with the meeting of the past with the present: the first lets the past suffocate the present; the second drowns the past in the present. The third lets the two meet in a tension that ultimately is creative: for allowing the present freely to challenge the past and the past to scrutinize the present, with equal freedom, makes possible the emergence of truth that is at once vibrant and alive, in living continuity with our past and at the same time reflecting the productive initiatives and the hitherto unseen visions of our own times. This last is what I mean by a "living tradition of faith." It means connecting past

and present, new and old, in what Thomas Merton -- writing in 1967 -- calls a "current of uninterrupted vitality." "Tradition," he writes, "is not passive submission to the obsessions of former generations."

It is a living spirit marked by freedom and by a certain *originality*. Fidelity to tradition does not mean the renunciation of all initiative, but a new initiative that is faithful to a certain spirit of freedom and of vision which demands to be incarnated in a new and unique situation.<sup>1</sup>

It took Merton a good while to arrive at this understanding of tradition. It is the intent of this essay to show that Thomas Merton experienced, at different times in his life, all three of these approaches to the meeting of the old and the new (and, indeed, in his later years went beyond all of them). In his younger years (at least into his early twenties) he drifted on a sea of aimlessness, a-morality and lack of faith. There were no moorings to tie his ship to and no rudder to direct it on the open sea. He was locked into a present that offered him little light and a lot of uncertainties.

In 1938 he entered the Catholic Church and found the certainties he had unwittingly been searching for. Indeed, he found them with a vengeance! The Church he was initiated into in 1938 was a Church that clung to its past with great tenacity. It was a Church of *imposition* which showed little inclination to *accommodate* itself to the questions and needs of the times. It had something of the character of a medieval walled city, with moats around it to protect it from whatever was outside. It was a self-contained structure with a rigid discipline, especially in matters of faith and morals, that brooked no opposition. Orthodoxy was clearly defined. Plurality of theological expression was not just frowned upon; it was simply not allowed. The only thinking allowed in the Roman Catholic Church of the first half of the twentieth century was "thinking with the Church" (*sentire cum ecclesia*). Thinking with the Church meant accepting what Rome taught. "Faith" was like a blank check which believers signed, leaving Rome -- or rather Roman theologians -- to fill in the correct sum. Roman Catholic Theology had become, at least since the 17th century, increasingly a prepackaged retailing of answers to any and all questions. It was theology become ideology: more a propaganda machine than a creative effort to express the faith experience that was going on in the Christian community. It was a theology that had been trivialized by reducing it to a question of authority and obedience. Its aim was unbendingly apologetic and polemical: it needed to prove that Catholics were right and all others were wrong.

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1. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971), pp. 41-42.

There is a Brendan Behan story that aptly captures the mentality of this pre-Vatican II theology. The story is about the Catholic bishop of Cork in Ireland. One morning as he was having his breakfast, his secretary entered the episcopal dining room and said: "Your Lordship, I have unexpected news for you. Last night the Church of England bishop of Cork died in his sleep." The Catholic bishop of Cork took a sip of his Irish breakfast tea and then said, rather matter-of-factly, to his secretary: "Now he knows who is the real bishop of Cork." His lordship was at once a product and a bearer of that early 20th century Roman Catholic theology. It was a theology that forgot nothing old and learned nothing new. It brought the past into the present; and it was the past that dictated Catholic reaction to and understanding of the present. There was little inclination to allow the present to react to or to interact with the past. Oblivious of history, living in fact in a world of absolutes that transcended history, the Church enjoyed the security of an impregnable fortress, with nothing inside or outside allowed to challenge that security.

Thomas Merton, like many converts who found their way into the Church after years of aimless drifting, initially welcomed that security as an attractive alternative to the undisciplined life he had lived prior to his conversion. The unquestioned and unquestioning certitude that went along with being a Roman Catholic in the 1940s replaced the doubts and uncertainties of his former way of life. Basking in the sunlight of ecclesial certainty, he worked hard -- after he had entered the monastery -- to master the official theology of the day, studying the appropriate theological manuals (Tanqueray, Noldin and the rest), which were standard fare for those preparing for the priesthood. By the time he came to write *The Seven Storey Mountain* (probably begun in 1944, though there is some question as to when he actually did begin it), his theological outlook had all the narrowness and rigidity that defined the thinking of the vast majority of his fellow Catholics.

Reading *Seven Storey Mountain* in the late 1980s is like taking a trip back to the Roman Catholic Church of four decades ago: a Church that today exists only in the nostalgic intransigence of a relatively small number of Catholics who remain convinced that nothing of significance has happened in the Church since the Council of Trent. If *Seven Storey Mountain* continues to appeal to readers (as it surely does), this is not because of its theology but in spite of it. The magnanimity of the writer somehow transcends the narrowness of his theology. The narrowness of Merton's early Catholicism is all there. There is the smugness of belonging to the "right"

church, the frequent "put-downs" of other Christian churches, the brushing aside of Eastern religions as worthless. Catholics were a breed apart from other Christians. They went to church on Sunday to praise God; most Protestants went to show off their new clothes. *Seven Storey Mountain* draws a sharp cleavage between the supernatural and the natural. Sermons and feverinos, not unlike those Catholics were hearing from the pulpit, are scattered through the text: like the one scolding Catholic parents who were derelict in their responsibility of sending their children to Catholic schools. Protestants who read the book (and many did) experienced its power, but were somewhat bewildered by its obvious bias. Naomi Burton Stone's step-child summed up their feeling as well as anyone when she wrote: "I wish he wasn't so vituperous about Protestants. Are they *that* misled?"

*Seven Storey Mountain*, which marked the beginning of Merton's career as a famous author, also marked the beginning of the end of his literary flirtation with 20th century scholastic theology. He did have one more affair with it, however. This was the book which he first called *The Cloud and the Fire*, then *The School of the Spirit*, and finally published as *The Ascent to Truth*. It was a book he agonized over and found difficult to complete.

In *Seven Storey Mountain* the scholastic theology is there, but it is subordinated to the odyssey of the author. In *The Ascent to Truth*, the methodology of scholastic theology, as it had become since the 17th century, is all too evident. It was a deductive approach to theological reasoning that began with a thesis. The thesis itself is accepted as true and not open to questioning. The task of the theologian is simply to defend the thesis with proofs from the Scriptures, the Fathers of the Church and reason, while at the same time refuting the "errors of adversaries." *The Ascent to Truth* is not so baldly scholastic in its methodology as were the manuals; but the "thesis-mentality" is very much apparent throughout the book.

Merton considered *The Ascent to Truth* his "worst book, except for two early ones."<sup>2</sup> There are a number of reasons for Merton's dissatisfaction with this book and specifically with the methodology of the thesis. One of these reasons is that he had discovered, within the Roman Catholic tradition, another way of doing theology that was more congenial to his temperament. This was monastic theology and, closely akin to it, the theology of the mystics. The Fathers and the mystics were not abstract thinkers who speculated about God and things divine. They were more inductive in their

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2. Letter to Etta Gullick, 5 March 1961 (*The Hidden Ground of Love* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985), p. 341). The two early ones were *Exile Ends in Glory* and *What Are These Wounds?*

methodology. They wrote about their experience in reading the scriptures and, even more importantly, their experience of encountering God.

### *The Sign of Jonas:*

#### Initial Signs of a Shift in Methodology

The shift in Merton's methodology, from speculation to experience, is well articulated in the important Prologue to *The Sign of Jonas*, published in 1953.

I have attempted to convey something of a monk's spiritual life and of his thoughts, not in the language of speculation but in terms of personal experience. This is always a little hazardous, because it means leaving the sure plain path of an accepted terminology and traveling in byways of poetry and intuition. I found in writing *The Ascent to Truth* that technical language, though it is universal and certain and accepted by theologians, does not reach the average man and does not convey what is most personal and most vital in religious experience. Since my focus is not upon dogmas as such, but only on their repercussions in the life of a soul in which they begin to find a concrete realization, I may be pardoned for using my own words to talk about my own soul.<sup>3</sup>

These clear choices (though not without a sense that they were "hazardous!" [Or was this remark inserted for the sake of the censors?]) of "experience" over "speculation," of "poetry and intuition" over "accepted terminology" are a forecast of what we are to expect increasingly in the writings of Thomas Merton.

*The Sign of Jonas* was indeed for Merton a courageous step in a new direction. It was a step prepared for, though somewhat timidly, by an earlier work *Seeds of Contemplation* (published in 1949 -- four years earlier than *Jonas*) and definitively established as his approach in a book published two years after *Jonas*, namely, *No Man is an Island* (1955). *Seeds* and *No Man* are similar in format to one another: both are cast in the literary genre, made popular by Pascal, of *pensees*.

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3. *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1953), pp. 8-9. Hereafter referred to in the text as *SJ*.

*Seeds of Contemplation:*

## Timid Steps toward a New Methodology

*Seeds*, which Merton describes as a "collection of notes and personal reflections" about the interior life, is a kind of "half-way house," in which Merton shows himself cautiously poised on the brink of moving from a strict adherence to dogmatic formulas handed down from the past toward a kind of writing that will give greater play to experience. I say "cautiously" because he feels constrained in the introduction to the book to say: "We sincerely hope it does not contain a line that is new to Catholic tradition or a single word that would perplex an orthodox theologian."<sup>4</sup>

Yet popular though this book was (and it became a kind of latter day *Imitation of Christ* for many sincerely seeking a deeper spirituality), there is evidence that Merton was not satisfied with it. On July 9, 1949, he confided to Jacques Maritain: "I am revising the *Seeds of Contemplation*, in which many statements are hasty and do not express my true meaning."<sup>5</sup> A couple of weeks later (on July 15) he wrote, in the same vein, to Sr. Therese Lentfoehr: "I am preparing a second edition of *Seeds* with a few emendations, hoping to tie up the loose ends and make things less likely to lead people astray."<sup>6</sup>

The edition with these "emendations" was published in December of 1949. It is not to be confused with the large-scale rewriting of *Seeds* that appeared in 1962 under the title of *New Seeds of Contemplation*. The December 1949 edition of *Seeds* does not eliminate or modify any of the contents of the earlier printings of the book. What makes it a "revised edition" is the addition at the beginning of four important pages which are entitled, "Preface to the Revised Edition." In this new preface the author, after warning his readers not to look for a systematic study of the spiritual life, goes on to say: "The author is talking about spiritual things from the point of view of experience rather than in the concise terms of dogmatic theology or metaphysics."<sup>7</sup>

This statement of December 1949 represents a hesitant crossing of the theological Rubicon. Though firm as ever in his desire to be faithful to the faith-formulations of the past, Merton is inching his way toward an

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4. *Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1949), p. 14.

5. Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College, Louisville, Kentucky.

6. Merton Center, Columbia University, New York.

7. *Seeds of Contemplation* (revised ed.), p. xii.

understanding of Catholic tradition that will more and more submit that tradition to the test of actual experience. Another way of putting this is to say that Merton is beginning more and more to trust his own experience and leaning in a direction in which he will gradually become more comfortable using, what (as we have already seen) he will later call (in *Jonas*), "the byways of poetry and intuition" to articulate that experience. His understanding of the tradition of faith will more and more begin to take on a dynamic and dialogic character in which age-old formulas must be tested in the crucible of experience.

### *No Man is an Island:*

#### Definitive Move to a New Methodology

*No Man is an Island*, published in 1955, represents a clear breakthrough to a definitive position in understanding tradition from which there will be no departure or turning back. This work, which Merton saw as a sequel to *Seeds* is, he says, a sharing with his readers of his own reflections on the spiritual life. It is intended, he tells us, "to be simpler, more fundamental and more detailed than *Seeds*."<sup>8</sup>

The phrase "more detailed" is worth noting. Several years later in 1959 (January 13) he wrote to Sr. Therese Lentfoehr and suggested that "long-winded" might be a more appropriate description of *No Man is an Island*. At the time he was sending her the typescript of an unpublished work called *Sentences*. Telling her that it is the rudiments of what eventually became *No Man is an Island*, he remarks: "I think these short phrases [in *Sentences*] are better than the long-winded finished book."<sup>9</sup> He mused that he might some day publish the *Sentences*.

*Sentences*, which is dated on the concluding page of the typescript: "Feast of the Sacred Heart, 1952," does not speak of tradition as such. It does have a number of references to "experience." In Sentence # 79, Merton speaks of the capacity we have for "vision and for disinterested love." This capacity, which Merton calls "the summit of the spirit" in us, is

8. *No Man is an Island* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1955), p. x. Hereafter referred to as *No Man*.

9. Merton Center, Columbia University, New York.

brought to perfection in us only through experience. It is impossible to reach this summit by "retiring from experience." In Sentence # 80 he identifies that "summit" with the image of God. To become conscious of that summit is to experience myself as the "image of God." To quote Merton directly: "When the summit of my being lies open to consciousness, I know by experience that I am the image of God." I quote this passage from *Sentences* to show how in 1952 Merton was remaining true to the commitment of December 1949 to talk "about spiritual things from the point of view of experience."

*No Man is an Island*, published three years after the completion of this earlier and much shorter draft, speaks explicitly about "tradition." In Section # 8, which deals with the general topic of "Vocation," Merton speaks of "the transforming and life-giving effect" of tradition. His remarks are about the "monastic tradition," which he says "is rooted in the wisdom of the distant past, and yet is living and young, with something peculiarly new and original to say to [people] of our own time." But what he says about monastic tradition can easily be applied to the notion of tradition in general and to the tradition of Christian faith. He 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 full 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 to the world in which we live. . . . (Italics added) (*No Man*, pp. 150-151).

This passage shows dramatically how far Merton has moved from the rigidity of *Seven Storey Mountain* to an understanding of tradition that involves a vital and creative meeting of the old and the new. And the meeting place is experience.

Yet, as I have pointed out earlier, this meeting of the old and the new in the reality of concrete experience is not always a congenial meeting. Quite the contrary, it may be jarring at times: questions, hitherto unasked, may come to the fore and, more often than not perhaps, admit of no immediately evident answers. That is why Merton's growing affinity for a methodology of experience (one that is more inductive than deductive) inevitably moved him toward a kindred methodology: the methodology of the question. It would be going too far afield in this article to discuss how his acceptance of the methodology of the question was actually a revisit to the tradition of the golden age of scholasticism, when it was the *quaestio*

rather than the *thesis* that was at the center of theological reflection. After all, St. Thomas Aquinas begins his reflections on God, not with the *thesis*: "God exists," but with the *quaestio*: "Does God exist?"<sup>10</sup> It was not really till the later part of the 17th century that the *thesis* replaced the *quaestio* in theological discourse.

Bernard Lonergan, the brilliant Canadian theologian, who spent a lifetime studying methodology has helped us to see the crucial importance of the question in theological enterprise. In clarifying the function of the question, Lonergan has made it clear that it is not just the answer to our question that enlightens us: the steps we take to get to the answer may be as enlightening as the answer itself.

As far as I know, Merton was not well acquainted with the writings of Lonergan; but in his own way and in the more unsystematic kind of theology he wrote, he did discover, as Lonergan had, the critical importance and the vital function of the question. This discovery is clearly set forth in the Prologue to the book we have been talking about (*No Man is an Island*), where he writes about "spiritual insecurity," which, he says, is "the fruit of unanswered questions." He continues:

But questions cannot go unanswered unless they first be asked. And there is a far worse anxiety, a far worse insecurity, which comes from being afraid to ask the right questions -- because they might turn out to have no answer. One of the moral diseases we communicate to one another in society [and also in the Church?] comes from huddling together in the pale light of an insufficient answer to a question we are afraid to ask.

(*No Man*, p. xiii).

*No Man* stands, then, as a kind of centerpiece in the Merton corpus: a key that opens the door to his more mature appreciation of the meaning of "the living tradition of faith." The writings which precede this book ready the way for this definitive commitment to "experience" and "the question" as his chosen methodology. The writings that follow emerge from the context of this commitment.

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10. In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Merton remarks about the structure of the articles of St. Thomas's *Summa Theologica*: "In the usual structure of his articles, St. Thomas first lines up the arguments he finds not fully satisfactory, then gives his own view, and finally discusses the arguments he first set forth. Note the way I have expressed this -- one is usually inclined (by the bad habit acquired in seminaries) to say that 'he first lines up the *wrong opinions*, then gives the *right answer*, then *demolishes the wrong answers*.' Very often St. Thomas has better insight into . . . the opinion which he does not fully accept than the ones who themselves hold it. Very often, too, his answer, is not a refutation but a placing in perspective, or a qualified acceptance, fitting the seemingly adverse opinion into the broader context of his own view."

### The Case of *The Inner Experience*

One of his books which lavishly displays the use of this methodology is *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. Before discussing *Conjectures*, however, I want to digress for a moment to discuss a book that Merton worked on four years after the publication of *No Man is an Island*. During the summer of 1959 he did an extensive reworking of some earlier materials. The very title he gave to the book that emerged from this rewriting seems to highlight the growing experiential thrust of his writings: he called it *The Inner Experience*. Yet it is a puzzling book. In a letter of September 22, 1959, to Sr. Therese Lentfoehr, he makes reference to this new book: "I finished a book this summer called 'The Inner Experience' which started out to be a simple revision of *What is Contemplation* but turned into something new, and just about full length. It has to be revised and has been sitting here on the desk waiting for revision for some time. . ." (Italics added).<sup>11</sup>

This enigma of a book which is "finished" and yet still "has to be revised" is a problem that continues to vex Merton scholars. Equally puzzling is the question: why did Merton say in his Trust Agreement that *The Inner Experience* was not to be published "as a book?" Was it because he wanted to do the revision that was needed? Yet one cannot help but ask: if the book was in need of revision, why did he refer to it as a book that he had "finished?" Further, it must be said that a large portion of this work has closer affinities with *The Ascent to Truth* and *Seeds of Contemplation* than with *No Man is an Island*. Much of it, in its approach and basic content, antedates the spirit of *No Man is an Island*, even though it was put together four years later. I do not wish to delay on something that is outside the main thrust of this article. Yet I think that, in the context of that thrust, it is worth pointing out two possible ways of understanding the problem that *The Inner Experience* poses. First, it may well be said that what we have here is an indication that Merton was not always consistent in his thought: it was quite possible for him at times (as I presume it is for any writer) to retreat, perhaps without even realizing he was doing so, from the advances he had made in his thinking. A second possibility is that, as a writer, he was reluctant to put aside some of the materials he had given so much time and energy to in the past, even though he realized that, in terms of where his thought had progressed since he had first dealt with those materials, much of what was there was in fact "old hat." Surely such nostalgia is quite understandable. Many people like to cling to old hats!

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11. Merton Center, Columbia University, New York.

*Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander:*  
The "Triumph" of a Methodology

Whatever we say about this work -- that it represents inconsistency or "over-attachment" -- it is clear that one must look beyond it to see the growth of Merton's thought.<sup>12</sup> And *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* is a good place to look. This work might well be described as the "triumph" of the methodology of the question in Merton's writing. *Conjectures* is a difficult work to identify in terms of literary genre. Published in 1966, it represents Merton's thought over a fairly long and especially productive period. It is not a journal, though it is made up of materials taken from journals which Merton kept from 1956 on (unfortunately, the items are undated; hence without the journals, whose use is still restricted, it is not usually possible to know exactly when Merton wrote a particular item). The items are generally too long to be classified, like *Seeds*, as *pensees*, yet too short and unfinished to be designated as essays. One might say that these reflections, which grew out of his reading, his correspondence and his prayer, resemble somewhat the parables of the Gospels: not in the form they take (they are not stories like the parables), but in their invitation to involvement in the question. Like the parables of Jesus, they are a challenge to dialogue: what do you think or how do you feel about this issue?

"Conjectures" in the title is intended, it seems clear, to mean more than guesses, but much less than definitive stands. "Bystander" suggests that Merton sees himself as one who, for all too long a time, has stood aloof from the demands of the times. Further, he wants to say that this aloofness begets a kind of existential guilt. Since this book is surely an entrance into the human fray (if only a literary entrance), it may perhaps be said that "guilty bystander" is less a designation of where Merton is than it is of where he has come from.

Whatever one might be inclined to say about the genre or the title, the book's methodology and general contents are quite clear. In his *Preface* the author tells us that these pages are not "pure soliloquy." This is an important and significant methodological statement. Not a few of Merton's earlier works could be described as "soliloquy"; in them he speaks with a certitude that neither asks for a reply nor expects one. *Conjectures* clearly adopts a different approach: it is billed as "an implicit dialogue with other

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12. This is not in any way to deny that there is valuable material in *The Inner Experience*. See my book *Thomas Merton's Dark Path* and also the serialization of *The Inner Experience* in recent issues of *Cistercian Studies*.

minds." More than that: it is a dialogue "in which questions are raised." Merton hastens to add, however, that his intent is not to give the readers "his answers." For, he says, "I do not have clear answers to current questions." At the same time he is committed to the methodology of the question. "I do have questions," he states, "and, as a matter of fact, I think a person is known better by his/her questions than by his/her answers."<sup>13</sup> Nor is he willing to be satisfied with glib answers that fail to come to grips with real questions.

In a later passage in *Conjectures*, he expresses his distress that some people, who ask him for articles on all sorts of different topics, seem to take it for granted that he can simply reach into the back of his mind "for a dish of ready-to-serve Catholic answers about everything under the sun" (CGB, p. 49). While willing to accept his share of blame for anything he has done that might seem to have encouraged such an attitude, he suggests that people who make these kinds of requests have not really read his works. If they had, they would realize that he never intended to pose as one who had "all the answers."

It seems to me that one of the reasons why my writing appeals to many people is precisely that I am not so sure of myself and do not claim to have all the answers . . . . In fact, I often wonder quite openly about these "answers," and about the habit of always having them ready. The best I can do is to look for some of the questions. (CGB, p. 49)

It should be obvious that when Merton talks about questions, his reference is not to queries that admit rather readily of a "yes" or "no" answer. He is referring -- and this constitutes the general content of his book -- to issues, problems, attitudes that concern the way we live and order our lives in terms of faith-commitment. He is talking about life-and-death matters that impinge on our understanding of human dignity, equality and freedom as well as the meaning we give to Christian faith and the demands that that faith makes upon us in the context of contemporary life. Describing his theological position in what are perhaps overworked political terms, he writes:

For my part I consider myself neither conservative nor an extreme progressive. I would like to think that I am what Pope John was -- a progressive with a deep respect and love for tradition -- in other words a progressive who wants to preserve a very clear *continuity* with the past and not make silly and idealistic compromises with the present -- yet to be *completely open* to the modern world while retaining the clearly defined, traditionally Catholic position. (CGB, p. 312)

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13. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City: Doubleday Image, 1968), p. 5. Hereafter referred to in the text as CGB.

"Continuity with the past" yet *completely open* to the modern world" seems to say well what Merton means by "a living tradition of faith." Yet one has to deal with what I can only call the perplexing conclusion of that statement. What does he mean by "retaining the clearly defined, traditionally Catholic position"? Does not this phrase say the same thing as "continuity with the past"? If it does, then why is it repeated? If it does not, then it seems to cancel out "completely open to the modern world." The least that can be said about this phrase is that it is either tautological or ambiguous. Yet perhaps we should not be too demanding of Merton in expecting him to express his position clearly and unambiguously. If he is over-cautious, as he certainly appears to be here, it is perhaps helpful in understanding him to note the time at which he was writing. And this happens to be one of the texts from *Conjectures* for which we can suggest a likely date. Clearly the text was written after Pope John XXIII's death --which would place its writing in 1963 or later. Now, as everyone knows, these were unsettling times in the Roman Catholic Church: times when "openness to the world" meant for some people accommodation to whatever happened to be the whim, opinion or idiosyncrasy of the current moment. A lot of absurd and stupid things were done in the name of "contemporaneity."

Perhaps in fairness to Merton, it would be correct to say that he was trying to strike a balance. In seeking to reach such a position, one does perhaps have to take note of whatever extreme attitude or mood may be seeking at the moment to tip the scales in its favor. That Merton did feel, rightly or not, the need to defend the authentic heritage of the past against what he saw as obviously aberrant accommodations to modernity must not in any way move us to question Merton's genuine belief in a living tradition that embodied continuity and openness. This understanding of tradition is evidenced in countless examples that are easily discoverable in the pages of *Conjectures*.

Merton's conscious effort to achieve a proper balance of the claims of the past and the present is well expressed in a statement that comes fairly late in the book: "What is new in modern theology is not the essential message, but our rethinking of it, our rediscovery in it of insights we had lost" (CGB, p. 322). In this statement, Merton is saying three things, I believe, about theology and the tradition which theology attempts to embody: (1) the essential message is not new; (2) what is new is our rediscovery in that message of insights we had lost; and (3) what is also new is our discovery of insights we had never had before. It is fair, I think, to say

that this third point is implicit in Merton's careful wording: "our rethinking of [the essential message]." Rethinking is a step beyond "rediscovery."

There is not the time nor is there the need to discuss in detail the many questions dealt with in this book (such matters as technology, racism, nuclear war, non-violence, the role of the church in the modern world, the place of monastic life in contemporary society, attitudes toward death, the abuse of language, solitude, prayer, Zen and a host of other issues). A look at the brief index of the book will give ample indication of the kinds of issues about which the author wishes to dialogue with his readers.

Thus far I have discussed how tradition is shaped by past and present meeting in creative tension in a faith-community of believers. What we have been discussing is what happens to form tradition in a particular household of faith. But tradition can be shaped not only from within the community of faith but also from without. By this I mean that a tradition may be shaped by a community of faith entering into dialogue with other communities of faith as well as with other purveyors of religious experience that are outside one's own faith-tradition. Thus there can be *inter-faith* dialogue of Christians, institutionally separated, but professing faith in one Lord, one Spirit, one Baptism. There can also be *inter-religious* dialogue.

### Enriching Tradition by Going Beyond It

In the beginning of this article I spoke of three ways in which tradition can be shaped in the life of a faith community. Each had to do with a particular way in which the old and the new, the past and the present, were brought into configuration with one another. I suggested that at different stages of his life Merton experienced all three. I suggested, further, that in his later years he went beyond all three. What I mean is that in the 1960s (and to some degree even earlier) Merton had reached a point of personal growth when he could no longer limit the shaping of his understanding of tradition to what was happening within the Roman Catholic Church. He was, in other words, no longer content to explore his faith-tradition simply *from within*; he needed to enrich that tradition by contact with *outside* traditions; not only those outside the Roman Catholic tradition (but still within the context of Christian Faith) but even those that were outside the pale of Christian Faith. His own growth

coincided with, and in a sense received a mandate from, what was happening in his own Church. Thus he writes in *Conjectures*:

If the Catholic Church is turning to the modern world and to the other Christian Churches, and if she is perhaps for the first time seriously taking note of the non-Christian religions in their own terms, then it becomes necessary for at least a few contemplative and monastic theologians to contribute something of their own to the discussion. (CGB, p. 7)

## Openness to the World and to Other Christian Churches

These three movements (opening to the world, opening to other Christian Churches and opening to non-Christian religions *in their own terms*), which Merton sees as important agenda for the Roman Catholic Church, also help to define his life and activities in the 1960s. He was open to the world: "the world of the bomb, the world of race hatred, the world of technology, the world of mass media, big business, revolution and all the rest" (CGB, p. 157).

He was also in much closer contact with other Christian communities. He met regularly with groups of Protestants from Vanderbilt University, Lexington Theological Seminary (then the College of the Bible), and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville. He corresponded extensively with Anglicans. Thus, he wrote to Canon A. M. Allchin of his admiration for Anglicanism (what a change from the attitude expressed in *Seven Storey Mountain!*) and his feeling that Roman Catholics, in their transition to the vernacular, had much to learn from Anglicanism.

It seems to me that the best of Anglicanism is unexcelled . . . For my part I will try to cling to the best and be as English a Catholic as one in my position can be. I think it is terribly important for Roman Catholics now plunging into the vernacular to have some sense of the Anglican tradition.<sup>14</sup>

In response to another Anglican friend, the late Etta Gullick, who asked him whether his faith commitment obligated him to consider her a heretic, he replied:

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<sup>14</sup> *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*; ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985), p. 26. Hereafter referred to in the text as *HGL*.

I suppose in some theoretical sense you may be so to one on my side of the fence, but personally I have long since given up attaching importance to that sort of thing, because I have no idea what you may be in the eyes of God, and that is what counts . . . I do think, though, that you and I are one in Christ, and hence the presence of some material heresy (according to my side of the fence) does not make that much difference. (*HGL*, p. 358)

And when Etta wrote of her anguish over the fact that there was dim hope, in the foreseeable future, of any kind of union between Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism that would allow for inter-communion and recognition of one another's institutional structure, Merton said:

I can understand your being a bit anguished about the obvious fact that there can be little hope of institutional or sacramental union between Anglicans and Romans. Perhaps on the other hand I am too stoical about it all, but I frankly am not terribly anguished. I am not able to get too involved in the institutional side of any of the efforts now being made. . . . This kind of thing is for others who know more about it. To me it is enough to be united with people in love and in the Holy Spirit, as I am sure I am and they are, in spite of the sometimes momentous institutional and doctrinal differences. (*HGL*, pp. 377-378)

This is an important statement for understanding Merton's "ecumenical" stance. He makes clear in *Conjectures* that he is not writing "professional ecumenism." What he intends to do in his book is to share what he has learned from his readings and from other contacts he had with people who, while they may have differed from him in the religious traditions which they embraced, were nonetheless not far from him in the religious experiences going on in their lives. Merton was convinced that doctrinal differences did not necessarily mean differences in religious experience. And his concern was much more with the latter than the former. It is this approach that enables him to read with profit and to identify in many ways with people whose doctrinal positions differed from his own. *Conjectures*, as Merton himself put it, is simply about one Catholic "sharing the Protestant experience -- and other religious experiences as well." This sharing of religious experience was something Merton felt was very important, not just for the good of religion, but for the peace of the world. To Ananda Coomaraswamy's widow, Dona Luisa, he wrote (January 13, 1961) of his admiration for Ananda as a man who was able to unite in himself the spiritual traditions of East and West. One of the needs in preparing the way for peace, he told her, was the formation of people who would be able "to unite in themselves and experience in their own lives all that is best and most true in the various great spiritual traditions" (*HGL*, p. 126). Such people would be "sacraments of peace" in a so often alienated world. This was not a new idea to him. There is the oft quoted passage from

*Conjectures* (which in its original form comes quite early, April 28, 1957) in which he says much the same thing:<sup>15</sup> "If I can unite *in myself* the thought and the devotion of Eastern and Western Christendom, the Greek and the Latin Fathers, the Russians with the Spanish mystics, I can prepare in myself the reunion of divided Christians" (CGB, p. 21).

Wherever he looked in the fields of religious thought and experience, he sought areas of common affirmation rather than points of disagreement. He would be a better Catholic, he thought, not if he was able to refute Protestant positions, but rather if he affirmed the truth of Protestantism wherever he could. This he felt not only about other Christian faiths, but also about other religions such as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and all the rest. This does not mean that Merton favored a kind of vapid indifferentism or a syncretism that somehow made everything one. No, he realized well the rules of dialogue. One must be faithful to one's own tradition. This fidelity will mean that there will be things in other religious traditions which as a Catholic he could not affirm and accept. But, first, he says, one needs to say "yes" to all the things that he/she can.

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. (CGB, p. 144)

## Openness to Non-Christian Religions on Their Terms

If Merton's "ecumenical" concerns in the 1960s meant openness to the world, to other Christian Churches and to non-Christian religions listened to "on their own terms," it may perhaps be said that the last of these became for him a special preoccupation. Thus, Merton felt a special kinship with that religious tradition out of which Christianity first emerged: Judaism. It was with genuine joy that he read Abraham Joshua Heschel's books and welcomed him on his visit to Gethsemani on July 13, 1964. One of the subjects they discussed was the Vatican Declaration on Jewish-Christian Relations. Merton anguished with Heschel over a Declaration that, in its second draft, had been notably weakened, apparently for political reasons.

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15. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), p. 306.

This turn of events prompted a long letter from Merton to Cardinal Augustine Bea of the Secretariat for Christian Unity. Merton wrote with strong feeling:

I am personally convinced that the grace to truly see the Church as she is in her humility and in her splendor may perhaps not be granted to the Council Fathers, if they fail to take account of her relation to the anguished synagogue . . . . The deepest truths are in question. The very words themselves should suggest that the *ekklesia* is not altogether alien from the *synagogue* and that she should be able to see herself to some extent, though darkly, in this antitypal mirror. (HGL, p. 433)

Even stronger (possibly because less official) are his words in a letter of February 15, 1962, to Rabbi Zalman Schachter, who was at the time teaching at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, Canada:

The Jews have been the greatest eschatological sign of the twentieth century . . . a sign from God. Telling us what? Among other things, telling Christians that if they don't look out, they are going to miss the boat or fall out if it, because the antinomy they have unconsciously and complacently supposed between the Jews and Christ is not even a very good figment of the imagination. The Suffering Servant is one: Christ, Israel. There is one wedding and one wedding feast . . . . There is one bride. There is one mystery, and the mystery of Israel and of the Church is ultimately to be revealed as One. (HGL, p. 535)

Merton's interest in other religions extended, with a growing enthusiasm, to religious traditions far removed geographically and doctrinally from Christian Faith. His interest in Sufism, the mystical strain in Islam, came rather late in his life. Though in somewhat superficial contact with Islam for some years through Louis Massignon, it was in 1967 and 1968 that he began reading steadily in Islamic literature and giving lectures to the monks at Gethsemani on Sufism.

His interest in Zen was long standing and deeply earnest. In 1961, *New Directions* published a dialogue between him and D. T. Suzuki, which was later to appear in a 1968 *New Directions* Merton publication, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*. Merton and Suzuki were in agreement that meaningful parallels could be found between some of the Christian mystics, like Eckhart for instance, and the Zen Masters. On June 20, 1964, Merton received permission to fly to New York City, where he had two treasured visits with the 94-year old Suzuki. In Suzuki Merton felt that he had met "the true man of no title," of which the Zen Masters speak. It was an important experience for him: the discovery of so deep an understanding between himself and this extraordinary and simple man whose books he had been reading for many years.

Merton was taken, too, with Chinese religious thought: he wrote about it and, with the help of Dr. John C. H. Wu, managed to make his own "translation" of the Taoist philosopher, Chuang Tzu, in what turned out to be without doubt one of his most delightful books, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*. Dr. Wu, to whom the book was dedicated, was ecstatic in his praise: "This is exactly what Chuang Tzu would have written had he known English. You have made Chuang Tzu relive in these beautiful poems."<sup>16</sup> Merton was especially happy with *The Way of Chuang Tzu*. He wrote to Sister Emmanuel de Souza e Silva in Brazil: "The Chuang Tzu book is one of my favorites" (*HGL*, p. 195).

In May of 1964 he welcomed at Gethsemani a group of Hibakusha people (those who had survived the bombing of Hiroshima) and he continued to correspond with their leader, Hiromu Morishita. In June of 1966 the Vietnamese monk-poet, Thich Nhat Hanh, in company with John Heidbrink, paid a brief visit to Gethsemani. In an article that appeared in the August issue of *Jubilee*, Merton spoke of the close ties he felt with this monk from the East. In this brief tribute, called "Nhat Hanh is My Brother," he wrote:

We are both monks and we have lived the monastic life about the same number of years. We are both poets, both existentialists. I have far more in common with Nhat Hanh than I have with many Americans and I do not hesitate to say it. It is vitally important that such bonds be admitted. They are the bonds of a new solidarity and a new brotherhood which is beginning to be evident on all the five continents and which cut across all political, religious and cultural lines to unite young men and women in every country in something that is more concrete than an ideal and more alive than a program.<sup>17</sup>

And finally, of course, there was the great adventure: the face to face meeting with the Asia he had visited so many times in word, thought and imagination: the journey that began so ecstatically in San Francisco and ended so tragically in Bangkok. As his plane left San Francisco on October 15, 1968, Merton wrote: "I am going home to the home where I have never been in this body."<sup>18</sup> The story of this direct meeting with Asia, after so many meetings mediated through books or personalities, is told in *The Asian Journal*: a book at once fascinating and disconcerting -- fascinating, because one is swept up into his enthusiasms for the places he visited and

16. Merton Center, Bellarmine College, Louisville, Kentucky.

17. Thomas Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative*; ed. Gordon C. Zahn (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1981), p. 264.

18. *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*; ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Patrick Hart, James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973), p. 5. Hereafter referred to in the text as *AJ*.

the Hindu and Buddhist scholars he met; disconcerting, because one looks almost in vain for some prophetic judgment on the grim poverty, the over-population, the starvation, the disease that are so strikingly evident in modern-day India. Yet the Thomas Merton who was so sharply critical of social injustices at home seems curiously detached when he sees the same things -- and perhaps worse -- in India. It seems almost as if Merton is determined to project on Asia the image of it he had brought with him. There is something defensive in his statement of November 18: "Now suppose some loon comes up to me and says: Have you found the *real* Asia? I am at a loss to know what one means by the 'real Asia'. It is *all* real, as far as I can see. Though certainly a lot of it has been corrupted by the West" (*AJ*, pp. 149-150). As one puts down *The Asian Journal*, it is with the strong feeling that sooner or later "some loon" does have to put that question.

Still, in all fairness to Merton, it must be remembered that he, of course, never got to edit *The Asian Journal*. It was put together by Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin from the notebook jottings that Merton kept so meticulously. The journal evidences the care and skill with which these editors managed to decipher what were often-times little more than scribblings and put the contents of two different notebooks into a comprehensible whole. Yet grateful though we may be to them, it does not detract from their good work to say that the journal would have been a better book had Merton edited it himself -- after he had put time and distance between himself and his Asian experience. One suspects that from such a perspective, he might himself have been the "loon" who would have asked: "Did I find the *real* Asia?" Indeed, his intent to revise these hastily written notes is implicit in a notation recorded, curiously, on November 18 (the same day he made the "loon statement" quoted above) in which he reflects that there must be "a reassessment of this whole Indian experience *in more critical terms*" (italics added) (*AJ*, p. 148). But such was not to be: on December 10, 1968, the designs of an inscrutable Providence called him to a reassessment, not of his Asian journey, but of his whole life, as a mysterious and fatal accident joined him to the company of the "burnt men."

What happened at that Grand Assize is hidden from us so long as we remain on this side of the Great Divide. Yet there is nothing to prevent us from being a bit "loon-like," projecting our fancies beyond the eschatological curtain, and imagining what Thomas Merton, who wrote so well from the base of that seven storey mountain, might say to us from above its summit. Our fancy would expect to see it in writing. After all, he had said:

"Perhaps I shall continue writing on my death bed and even take some asbestos paper with me in order to go on writing in purgatory" (*SJ*, p. 233). No need to consign him to purgatory, surely; but the writing: that is a different matter. We would expect to be able to peer at the heavenly scroll:

"My sisters and brothers, I have struck too many typewriter keys, writing about God and what it means to be aware of His Presence. I would have been better occupied, had I been content simply with the experience without feeling the need to verbalize it. But, as you well know, writing was the "sting of the flesh" which I asked God to deliver from me, only to be told -- as Paul was -- 'my grace is sufficient for you.'

"And I have known that grace: Mercy within Mercy within Mercy. The Mercy that created me and brought me on the outward journey 'from Prades to Bermuda to St. Antonin to Oakham to New York to Cambridge to Rome to New York to Columbia to Corpus Christi to St. Bonaventure to the Cistercian Abbey of the poor men who labor in Gethsemani.'<sup>19</sup> That Mercy has also led me on the inner journey, which is 'a matter of growth, deepening, and an ever greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts' (*AJ*, p. 296). In that interior journey I have moved from the aimlessness of youth to the security of the monastery and finally to the wide-open plains of religious experience that Mercy has spread out for me to see. As time passed, I became more and more convinced, as I said in *Conjectures*, that my task was 'to clarify something of the tradition that lives in me and in which I live: the tradition of wisdom and spirit. . . ' (*CGB*, p. 194). And I have been able, much more precisely as time went on, to locate the various places where that tradition is to be located. It 'is found not only in Western Christendom but in Orthodoxy, and also, at least analogously, in Asia and in Islam' (*CGB*, p. 194).

"All this is to say that, as my inner journey continued, the Divine Mercy, which in 1938 brought me to a Roman Catholicism that I embraced irrevocably, led me, besides,

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19. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948), pp. 422-423.

into a World Catholicism. I discovered I was more, not less, a Catholic, when I was willing to recognize all the things that God was doing outside the parameters of the institutional structure of which I was a part. I could not be Catholic by holding God captive in a single religious tradition, but only by realizing that He was above all religious traditions as Saviour and Judge of all. What I know now that I only obscurely understood before, is that our God is not a Christian God, in the sense of belonging only to Christian people; He is a Catholic God, that is, a God of all peoples and places, who lives in all and acts in all and leaves traces of His Presence in everything that is authentic and genuine in religious rituals, stories and symbols in whatever part of the world they may be found.

"My sisters and brothers, dialogue with other religions will not (or at least need not) obscure or compromise your own faith-commitment; on the contrary, it can increase that commitment. I once wrote to James Baldwin: 'I am . . . not completely human until I have found myself in my African and Asian and Indonesian brother [and sister], because he [she] has the part of humanity that I lack.'<sup>20</sup>

"Now I would want to add: I am not completely Catholic until I have found myself in my Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist brother and sister; for they have a part of the totality that being Catholic means -- which I lack without them. This insight may not be a grace that comes to all; but those who receive it, receive a great grace indeed.

"You are a community of believers. If your faith is to be alive, it must bring together the past and the present, the new and the old, in a creative tension that is a fruitful meeting. But that meeting will achieve its full potential and be truly Catholic, only if it pushes the frontiers of that creative tension to the very ends of the earth and is willing to listen to the voice of our God speaking -- sometimes in different, or even muted tones, but still speaking -- in the religious experiences of a total humanity."

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20. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux), 1964, p. 305.