

In the Company of Prophets? Merton's Engagement with the World

Francis Kline, OCSO

Introduction

It is generally assumed that Thomas Merton engaged the world as a contemplative monk from the time of the publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain* in 1948 until his death in Bangkok in 1968. Some maintain that Merton remains in contemplative dialogue with the world thanks to the posthumous publication of the *Asian Journal* (1973) and his selected letters and private journals. This essay suggests another reading of Merton's engagement with the world, an engagement based not on his commentary on particular issues, or on his personal spiritual development shared in his writings, but rather on his ability, shortlived as it may have been, to bring his readers to the awareness of the God who stands beyond all controversy. This God, and his peace, was the object of Merton's search throughout his life. But how long, how well, and in what manner did he teach his contemporaries as a contemplative monk and prophet?

We must first define the terms—the contemplative, an engagement, the world—as they may be in themselves, and in Merton's own history. The terms *in se* will help us form a tentative conclusion about Merton's call to be a contemplative prophet. Some reflection will follow on the presence, the manner and the expediency of contemplative prophecy in our time.

The Contemplative

A contemplative person, in a religious sense, always comes out of a tradition. People who are naturally contemplative may be articulate and poetic about their unitive experiences, but it takes a religious tradition, developed over time, to provide an individual with the

vocabulary for what is usually an experience of life that goes beyond words, and beyond the philosophical and theological categories on which it stands. In the context of this essay, I speak of the Christian contemplative tradition running from the desert monastics, beginning with Anthony, Evagrius and Cassian of the Patristic period, to the Spanish mystics of the sixteenth century. That line of tradition, broken in the Western Church from the breakdown of scholasticism in the sixteenth century until the early twentieth century, was strongly reconnected to the cultural fabric in the decades leading up to and following World War II.

Aided by the Romantic movement in Europe, the Transcendentalist movement in young America, and by the French Catholic Renaissance of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Christian contemplative tradition opened up once again the limitless horizons of personal transcendence. Vocabulary such as personal transformation of consciousness, mysticism, and union with God through purification, all helped readers and writers to approach the classic Christian texts of contemplation. This contemplative tradition, thanks to books like William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience*,¹ was present in the diet of many serious readers, but it was the very bread of the Catholic faithful, lay and religious alike, and notwithstanding the inherited breach between active religious and clergy and contemplatives. Some have thought that the Church in its French and American revival in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries carried the burdens of a medieval monasticism in its emphasis on penance, purification and control of the cultural environment, that is, the mentality of a city under siege by a hostile world.

Closer analysis of what occurred reveals that other, more powerful, because more immediate, currents than monasticism were at work, for example, the Sulpician spirituality of the French seminaries, and the French school more generally. But as the Church came into its own vigorous voice of self-identification with writers such as Jacques Maritain, Maurice Blondel, Paul Claudel, and especially Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, the contemplative experience became the goal of all informed Catholic people, and for many beyond the Church. That experience was often transmitted by its more famous exponents, St Augustine, St Gregory the Great, St Thomas Aquinas, and especially by St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross. One must not forget, too, the simple but powerful contemplative teaching of St Thérèse of

1. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1982).

Lisieux. But as the texts of the older, more classic tradition of monasticism became available toward the middle decades of the twentieth century, a new, compelling spirituality appeared. The Rule of St Benedict, as interpreted through the earlier teachings of Cassian, began to take on an urgent appeal. One cannot get more direct than the following simple, and lapidary statement of Cassian: *The goal of the monk is twofold: the immediate goal is purity of heart, the final goal is the reign of God.*² The message of this tradition is clear. Before there can be unity, harmony and order in human experience, there must be a purification that turns around the usual priorities, and puts first a radical conversion to God which penetrates the wounded will, hidden deep within, and frees the human person to act for God in purity of intention.

It is impossible to describe the route that Thomas Merton took to the knowledge of this tradition. His ability to assimilate texts is legendary. His 'jump-start' acceptance of the latest in European monastic research, especially as regards the recovery of the Cistercian tradition, became his hallmark at Gethsemani. He wrote extensively and with great penetration on St John of the Cross. However refined his knowledge of these early sources would become, his thirst for the contemplative experience was born very early during his formation at Gethsemani, and perhaps before. He became aware of it in whatever he read. And his insistence on it never abated, even as he sought it from the springs of other traditions later on. Whenever and however his entrance onto the world stage would be, it would have to be as a contemplative. For he saw all of his life, since his conversion, in these terms. It is no wonder, then, that his big, clumsy bestseller would tell the tale of his conversion to God and his entrance into contemplative, monastic life. And though he would later find out much more about the early Cistercian tradition, this first hugely successful book would bear the indelible marks of a contemplative monk, or be inexplicable, no matter how filmy the gaze of later eyes might be.

Engaging the World

When a contemplative engages the world, it must be as a contemplative, that is, one must touch the world from that further place where the Spirit of God has taken one. Therefore, one immediately

2. Jean Cassian (John Cassian), *Conférences (I–VIII)* (ed. E. Pictery, SC; Sources Chrétiennes, 42; Paris: Cerf, 1955), Conf. 1, ch. 4. The quotation is my paraphrase of the latin.

sees that this initiative is not subject to human will or desire. What is all the more obvious is that such an engagement is automatically a prophecy and a judgment, no matter how benign. For the contemplative must tell what he or she sees and such a message will hold the present world and its time to an account of its darkness.

In order not to be fuzzy or fatuous, I will use disciplines from the Rule of St Benedict to situate the place from where the contemplative engages the world. These disciplines are the latter 'Steps of Humility' in Chapter 7, a chapter that is a sort of *summa* of monastic living. As the contemplative approaches that unitive experience of God, one's life is characterized by silence. This silence admits of varying degrees.

The first of those degrees is the quietness of hospitality which opens a space for the other by inviting the other to speak first. It goes further by not speaking until there is a question, or, beyond first consideration, until there is something to say. This silence is in keeping with the perennial biblical tradition (see Jas 3), that it is better to control the tongue than to be controlled by it. But this control is rare indeed. There is a further development of this same silence in heart-breaking courtesy toward the other. It never presumes to laugh at another, or to raise the voice in silliness, because of the innate gravity due to the presence of another human being. Finally, this silence bespeaks a wisdom that permeates the whole of one's behavior. Silence of this type is not hard for the willing. It is the gift of God and it signifies a transformation of one's being from aggression into peace, from fear into love, from law into freedom. This new self will not be cowed into taking sides, will not accept the easy solution that overshoots the truth, and will not flinch when the blow comes. It is automatically unitive, seeking to reconcile both sides into one new being.

Examples of this kind of contemplation are not numerous in Christian history, but they are noteworthy. Consider St Anthony of the Desert, whose story is told theologically and in the hyperbole of archetype by St Athanasius. While we can know even less about the historical St Anthony than we can about the historical Jesus of Nazareth, we can take to heart the unforgettable lesson, so Christlike, that St Anthony gives. He lived long years in the desert, and he stayed there until a purification from God drove him to the city to strengthen the Church of Alexandria, then in the throes of theological controversy. His message was indelibly linked to his person, and his silent witness to the orthodox doctrine of the Incarnation matches the truth he learned in his own person about the ability of the flesh to receive God. When St Anthony's story was told, it became a best-seller. Notices about its perspicacity are legendary in the tradition: The friend of

Augustine happening on the two ascetics on the walls of Trier, reading the Life of St Anthony, and, from a distance, profoundly affecting Augustine in Milan; and the famous pronouncement of Harnack, who, while not agreeing, could not deny the overwhelming impact of the book.

If I may be permitted to use strong language, I should not hesitate to say that no book has had a more stultifying (*verdummender*) effect on Egypt, Western Asia, and Europe than the *Vita S. Antonii*.³

St Athanasius had touched on a chord of the culture beyond the considerable controversy of the time, whether or not later commentators would be so touched. St Anthony's prophetic witness would not descend into particulars enveloped in the passions so prone to defile the human person. Yet he was deeply human, and his gentleness attracted the knowing truth of countless persons, a truth not only in the mind, but in the body and in the heart. At the time of his appearance, his appeal was as universal as anything ever gets in the Christian Church.

St Francis of Assisi's engagement with the world was not as simplistic as many have viewed him, in his own time, to say nothing of those in our time who flock to animal blessings invoking his name. Francis' enduring contribution to Italian and world literature, *The Canticle of the Sun*, had far deeper theological significance than his poetic embrace of God's good creation. At the time of Francis' preaching, the Albigensian Crusade (1208–1229?) was still raging in Provence and in other regions sympathetic to the heresy. The Church's response, after repeated preaching missions, was to unleash political forces that would culminate in the abdication or military defeat of the powerful nobles supporting and protecting the heresy. St Francis, aware of the need for preaching against this popular and dangerous heresy, responded with, among other things, his great poem in the folk dialect (later, Italian). Without the hard edge of proof texts, the refutation, and the condemnation, he introduced the idea of the holiness of the earth, and its processes. St Francis was much too courteous to dispute with anyone. Sharp though he could be with his disciples, his preaching style was of the lilting troubadour. And its content was straight from the gospel of non-violence. It is difficult to imagine a more creative response to heresy than St Francis' poem.

Contemplation is not the preserve of those in cloistered or monastic

3. As quoted in Helen Waddell, *The Desert Fathers* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), p. 4.

religious life. Nor, as in the case of John Henry Newman, does one engage the world as a contemplative with every publication. Newman was nothing if not a controversialist. He remained in the thick of argument for most of his productive life, first as the leader and/or inspirer of the Oxford Movement (c. 1840), then as an apologist for the Roman Catholic Church. Newman's reputation and standing among his British contemporaries waxed and waned as he tackled various theological and moral problems throughout his long life spanning the nineteenth century. But the moment of his greatest engagement with the world of his time came not with the vindication of his ideas, but with the story of his own search for truth. Caught up in controversy with Charles Kingsley over the supposed sophistry of the Roman Catholic clergy, Newman withdrew and reconsidered his position. And from the margins where the respectable had exiled him, he found the voice of his own suffering for truth. And he knew his audience. For a moment, Newman laid aside the arguing pen. He laid bare his own heart, at once so English and so mystical. He dialogued in the open with the God who had laid upon him the tortured journey into theological debate. He became the modern Jeremiah, and, like the prophet, aroused the most inimical interest. His greatest book, although perhaps not the most influential for later theology, the *Apologia pro vita sua* (1864), arrested the country, and, without winning the approval of all, gained the ears of all in a moment of reconciliation. It was the high-water mark of his engagement with the world, and it bore the mark of contemplation.

A summary of the qualities of these examples might help bolster my argument. The contemplative speaks out of silence, but not just any silence. It is not a silence of omission or fear. The silence that the contemplative breaks is sapiential. There, the contemplative has learned about the deep rebellion of the human heart; has learned how powerless is the human will for good; how shortsighted and immature is accusation and judgment. In contemplative silence, one learns to embrace the wayward heart and the crippled will, and the exhausted flesh which is so often the victim of the mind's abuse. Argument for the sake of winning, struggle for the sake of convincing seem empty and impotent. And when the contemplative speaks, it is not with one's own voice. It is the voice of God's Spirit with whom one is united. And the Spirit, breathing where it wills, speaks the deep things of God as only the Spirit can do.

Since it is the Spirit who speaks, new ideas and fresh insights will characterize the discourse or the witness. For the contemplative witness shares in the new creation where old solutions are abandoned

and barriers, once thought insurmountable, are breached. All this results in a unitive experience on the part of those engaged. Here, the reunification of the basic alienation between mind and heart, head and feelings, is healing. This is why the contemplative engagement can run so deep and be so universally acknowledged, even without any personal approbation of the prophet. For the message, as the Word from beyond, that is, of God, is the most important element in this engagement.

Several corollaries accompany these qualities of silence, creativity and unity. The contemplative prophet does not engage the world in this theological way for the whole of one's life. For it is not in the nature of prophetic witness to equate the person of the prophet with the message. In the Christian tradition, this occurs only with Jesus Christ. With St John the Baptist, the Virgin Mary, and perhaps the Apostle Paul, one could see the unity of person and message, but not so with others. On the contrary, one is raised up to be the bearer of a special elucidation of the Revelation, so that for one brief moment, the deeper purpose of a life is made manifest. Such is the case with Julian of Norwich, St Catherine of Siena and others, who lived long lives, but whose engagements with the world as prophets were particular and focused moments of their lives. This is not to say that the rest of their biographies hold no interest, but it is to assert that distinctions must be made between a contemplative, even eschatological, message, and the vehicle that transmits it.

As we have seen, one need not be in a formal religious lifestyle to be the vehicle for this contemplative witness. No one holds the preserve of contemplative prophecy in the Church, just as no one group in the Church holds the right to contemplative holiness or experience. For we are called, by our baptism, to be holy, and, therefore, all of us may be called upon, at any one time, to bear contemplative witness to the world. This does nothing to denigrate the place of contemplative religious in the Church. The transmission of the precious gift of contemplative experience is kept fresh and available to the Church through them. At the same time, all religious, especially the so-called active religious, and, indeed, all the faithful, are called to make their own this contemplative goal of purity of heart and the Reign of God. For along the journey of this fidelity, they may meet the Spirit of God who asks something particular of them, not for themselves, but for the Church and the world.

When we approach the career of Thomas Merton, it is often evident that his engagement with the world as a contemplative, as we have defined it so far, was uneven at best. The later writings, especially

those dealing with his fascination with the Eastern contemplative traditions, left many in and out of the Church deeply divided. With these writings, Merton spoke to the few who were able to follow him in that Eastern journey. Positions taken on peace and war issues, likewise, caught many off guard, because of the strong political bias involved in those positions. Merton's own deep anguish over the impossible reconciliation between the just war theory and the use of nuclear power as a deterrent, mirrored his own confusion and lent to the confusion of some readers. In the cultural ferment in which he was writing, there was a strong proclivity to take sides. The appropriate response to social issues—for example, the civil rights movement—was far from clear for many persons, simply because the positions had become so politicized. Merton, aligned with the great names making history at the time, found himself far from the margins of prophetic witness and thrust into the maelstrom where he was not really a player, but easily could become a mouthpiece for those on one side of a deeply divisive issue. This is not to say that what he did in the 1960s by speaking out against injustice was wrong. That is not for me to judge. But it is to say that he no longer spoke from the place of contemplative prophecy which emanates from silence, flowers in creativity, reconciles opposites.

Religious books, sharing one's personal journey, have enormous appeal in our individualistic epoch. Merton has performed an invaluable service to countless of his readers who see themselves in his struggles and difficulties, as well as his insights. But these volumes on prayer, on the daily look at creation, on musings and considerations, belong to the realm of spirituality and literature. They do not necessarily emanate from the stance of contemplation and prophetic witness. They have a limited audience, or, even if they are read by many, they engage only part of the mind and the heart. Of course, they may and, most certainly have, moved some to conversion. But this is not the kind of engagement that shines an eschatological light on human experience.

I suggest that Merton's descent into the particulars of his own experience, that is, his publication of journals, his increasing involvement with highly politicized issues, no matter how altruistic, and his personal trajectories into religious traditions, East, Middle East and West, no matter how courageous, are not to be confused with contemplative prophecy. The question remains, did he engage the world as a contemplative prophet?

The World

The Gospel of John uses the term 'world' in as many as five different ways, ranging from enmity to God, all the way to those for whom God so loved and sent his Son. In this essay, the term is used in its most inclusive way, meaning all those for whom Christ died, that is, the world that is the object of God's saving will. At times, this world may oppose the Church and the contemplative, and, at times, it may support them. This world also represents a cross-section of persons: thinking people, manual laborers, artisans, and many others. Yet one thing unites them: the ability to listen to a message beyond their immediate concerns. To engage the world on this level, though, is a gargantuan task, for which the will and purpose of the ambitious megalomaniac is unequal. Only God can accomplish it.

From the 1930s to the 1960s, the world of the United States changed its concerns considerably. At first the world was still in the thick of an economic depression that tried all hearts and minds, and exerted pressure on all institutions, both religious and secular. As the 1940s approached, the threat of war in Europe further strained these institutions. A young, naïve people, relatively speaking, allowed itself to be moved toward the European war, without full compliance until the bombing at Pearl Harbor in 1941. The war that followed invited the populace to put aside personal considerations and to invest their life energies in ideas of freedom and military victory, no matter how ill-founded or wise that may have been. What emerged was a primitive, yet powerful generosity on the part of a young people emerging as a world power, which, for the moment, was blinded to the specter of cemeteries on foreign shores. And after the war, the generosity continued in the Marshall Plan, even as this same world agonized over the ideological battles of the Cold War. For the moment, during and shortly after the war, there was metaphysical agreement. There was the moment of apocalyptic waiting. Everyone and everything seemed to stand at the crossroads of a new world, which was the American world.

In the Church, too, many new energies had been released with the rise of neo-Thomism, the emerging liturgical renewal with its attendant scholarship, and the sudden appearance of a large, thinking middle class, which would very soon be dominated by Roman Catholics, cultural and actual. The Catholic universities, as well, were full of returning soldiers. The universities were providing the Church and

the society with that strange admixture of religious observance and social ascendancy.

This is the world of Thomas Merton as he made his Solemn Profession at Gethsemani in 1946. His earlier career as a writer had come to a halt when he entered the monastery in 1941. But he had discerned that writing was to be part of his vocation as a monk, no matter how many times he returned to the discernment in doubt. His energies, and the energies of his world met felicitously in 1947–48 during the writing and publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Many have commented on the fact that Merton would improve as a writer, as a theologian, as a Cistercian observer, as a journalist, and in every other way, humanly speaking. But there was some deeper reason why his autobiography is unique in his output, and in its universal acceptance by the world. For the book chronicles not just his daily life at the time of his conversion, but also his gigantic, metaphysical struggles with God, even more than with himself. In this book, personal as it is, the self disappears in the face of the overwhelming presence of the Other. It is the silence that speaks in Merton's book. The acting agent, in the course of the book, becomes the one acted upon, and, despite its author's struggles, the message of the Other is what gets chronicled.

Merton's autobiography also stands poised at this new and wider world which young America was just encountering. Merton was no provincial person. Here was the most sophisticated kind of world citizen being touched by God. Merton was not the normal pious Catholic. Yet the creativity he brought to bear upon his new found Catholicism was second only to the wholly novel idea of entering a Trappist monastery. This was the most unexpected thing that his reading public could have discovered. The freshness of the idea, especially at the end of the World War II, touched on deeper springs than the world could have imagined. And many in that world were finding their way to the same fresh idea.

Not all readers were familiar with Trappist monasteries, nor were all accepting of the Roman Catholic Church. But the response of the reading public to so unusual a solution to the question of God in one's life brought forth uncommon acceptance. Persons from many different sectors of the culture came together over the idea of personal conversion to God, and, more importantly, the demands God might make of one's personal freedom. For if the pre-monastic Merton was anything, he was free, in the world's sense.

Conclusion

The Seven Storey Mountain came from a deeper spring than Thomas Merton was consciously aware of, in that his personal story was more than just his, at that particular moment in American and global cultural and religious history. The world Merton addressed apprehended the silence of his own surrender from which he spoke. It rejoiced in the beauty and utter creativity of his embrace of God in the monastic life. For one brief moment, readers enjoyed a unitive experience of heart and mind in a general curiosity which took the publishing world by surprise as few publishing events have ever done since.

The world Merton addressed in 1947–48 did not last long. By the end of the 1950s, it was geared to splinter into political factions, tremendous social upheaval and metaphysical chaos, under which we, at the turn of the millennium, still live. His contemplative moment was that time when the public shared a broad consensus on a higher destiny based on democratic ideas, before the lapse into the individualism—moral, personal and national—that has characterized our world ever since. While he may have shouted later on in his writings, the world no longer listened.

The prophet had, in a sense, become domesticated. He was one of them now. In tackling particular issues, he sometimes lost the ability to reach readers at a deeper level than partisan thinking. By writing of himself, whom they now knew, he lost the voice of the margins from where the contemplative speaks in the night and in the desert. Yet his own personal development continued to bring him fresh insight and that occasional monastic peace that was his own to savor. He was always the monk. But the monk was no longer a prophet. And what can be said of a contemplative prophetic witness today?

The Contemplative Witness Today

No one can judge Merton on his choices to engage the world or not. For, ultimately, it was not his choice, but the Spirit's. We can rejoice in the momentous spiritual impact he had. And we would be wise not to make of him personally, and in all his writings, what he was not. We can be fascinated by the monastic tradition which he represented, but we can never predict it, or pretend that we can nod and that it will perform for us. Merton's engagement with the world by the publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain* was expedient because it spoke to the world with lucidity and consistency and challenged it to lay itself

open to an eschatological consideration. It was salutary, in that many drew consolation from its release. The Cold War era would be inexplicable without its appearance. But in the end, the world has refused its message. Could Merton change that?

Today, with so much moralism in public discourse, with the monstrous trivialization of religion in that same public discourse, and with fundamentalism at odds with more reflective traditions, we find ourselves in a contemplative vacuum of major proportions. We long for another prophet to appear. And the prophet is nowhere to be found. The prophet cannot appear on this or that side. Neither liberal nor conservative can claim the prophet. For there is no right side in these debates, no political correctness. Will the prophet publish a book, dance, or play the synthesizer? What media or presence will the prophet have? For the prophet has no audience in the parlance of our culture. Can the prophet come from East or West, North or South?

The world is coming together so painfully and fitfully, and with such violence, that it is hard to imagine the provenance of a prophetic voice. What would happen if the prophet has gone down into the silence? There, prophecy gestates until, when all seems lost in a bloody sunset, a still small voice will squeak out of nowhere, as an unexpected dawn breaks on the opposite horizon.