
Anne E. Carr

*A SEARCH FOR WISDOM AND SPIRIT:
Thomas Merton's Theology of the Self*

Foreword by Brother Patrick Hart
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Reviewed by **Lawrence S. Cunningham**

Even those of us who love who Thomas Merton was and what he stood for pale at times at yet another study of his thought. Despite the streams of books, theses, monographs, and articles in print, we hear, in our mind, the clatter of printers as yet another study wends its way, inexorably, to our desks. On the other hand, a drying up of that torrent would disconfirm what we feel deep in our bones, to wit, that Merton is, in David Tracy's sense of the term, a classic. He tells us so much about our time in history, and, in the telling, provides clues and insights that we may take up to gain some heft on our own personal and collective search for significance. Not to be a classic, then, is to be a period piece.

In the above paragraph I spoke of Merton and not this or that book of his as a classic. The distinction is not a trivial one. It may be in time that this or that book of Merton will reach the status of a classic but it seems clear right now that it is the somewhat enigmatic person, so intensely autobiographical yet so hermetic, who fascinates people. Once one knows that Karl Rahner was a Jesuit with a profound debt to the *Spiritual Exercises* one knows enough to read him with profit. Only his silences give significance. One would never know from his writings that he lived through some of the worst traumas of the century. This is not true of Merton both because of the enormous amount of autobiographical writing he did and because his writings focused on his experiences as a contemplative at a particular moment in history.

Which brings me finally, to Anne Carr's book on Merton's theology of the self. It is slight in size but a fine one. Carr decided to concentrate, not on the total Merton corpus, but on eight works beginning with the original

Seeds of Contemplation (1949) and ending with two posthumously published works, *Contemplative Prayer* (1969) and *Contemplation in a World of Action* (1971). This is a strategically wise choice because it allows the author to read closely without the felt necessity of mentioning everything Merton wrote. More catholic surveys were necessary at an earlier stage of Merton scholarship but now seem, often, an exercise in redundancy.

That strategic decision — a decision of form, if you will — helps Carr sustain her thesis that Thomas Merton, *pace* many critics, can be understood as a theologian. This is a claim with which I have much sympathy if one understands, as Carr does, that Merton was not a systematic theologian in the contemporary sense of the term, but, in her words, “a monastic theologian whose works retrieve Christian traditions that may have been slighted, if not forgotten, in our contemporary understanding of theology as dialectical argument, rational clarity, and systematic thought” (p. 3). That judgment, coming as it does from someone who is a capable systematic theologian (at the University of Chicago) in her own right, carries with it a certain weight in her attempt to retrieve Merton from the somewhat pejorative pigeonhole of “spiritual writer.” Merton, in Carr’s estimation, is, radically, a monk who does theology in the fashion that the ancient monastic theologians have understood it: experiential discourse about the reality of God as disclosed in the life of prayer.

Carr’s trained theological eye also aids her (and us) in approaching Merton’s writing with a critical sense. Thus, for example, she notes that in *Seeds of Contemplation* Merton asserts the doctrine of the church as the Mystical Body of Christ but seems incapable of integrating that doctrine into his own spirituality. It reads, as she writes, as if it were “abstract dogma” (p. 21). Indeed, she notes his inability of linking this rich ecclesiological doctrine to his notion of monastic community with his constant lament that others are a source of trouble in the search for God in contemplation. At the root of the problem in his early writings, Carr points to his high theology of grace, his acceptance of a radical disjunction between nature and supernature, and his penchant for equating solitude with isolation. The deficiencies of the 1949 *Seeds* are mainly theological ones. They would find their correction in the 1961 *New Seeds of Contemplation* as Merton’s thought matured and refined after an encounter with Maritain’s personalism and a better understanding of grace in human life.

Merton’s search for an authentic understanding of the self, Carr argues, is not an exercise in facile self scrutiny. It is, rather, an exercise in the

re-discovery of that primordial center by which we become aware of an awe-ful paradox: in the fullness of our autonomy we experience our relatedness to the ground of our personhood which is God. In an analysis that bears striking resemblance to both Martin Buber and Karl Rahner, Merton argues (in *Mystics and Zen Masters*) that the Cartesian self (“a solipsistic bubble of awareness”) must make, of necessity, God an object—one among many. To do that, inevitably, leads to the death of God. Merton’s understanding of the self, Carr notes, is, albeit from a widely divergent beginning point, not dissimilar to those transcendental Thomists who have turned to the subject. What these systematic thinkers (Rahner, Lonergan, etc.) share with Merton is an understanding of the self as a subject which is “dimly aware of God as the horizon that is the source of its own subjectivity” (p. 91).

By noting these similarities one should not get the impression that Carr is simply trying to correlate Merton with other theological writers. At least part of Carr’s agenda is to show how Merton was *sui generis* in his attempt to retrieve a tradition of theology which devolves out of a deeply spiritual life reflected upon in an autobiographical manner. That process of retrieval did not happen simply because Merton was intelligent and diligent (although he was both) but because he was a monk who lived a highly disciplined spiritual life for a goodly number of years. That is an important point. His autobiography is not our autobiography. The lesson of Merton’s life is not that life is more superior if one sits *zazen* in a hermitage but that spiritual maturity comes at a cost. There is no cheap grace. The great lesson that Merton learned and taught (*contemplata aliis tradere*) was that doing the ordinary extraordinarily well is the foundation of authentic spirituality. Based on that foundation one gets a better sense of what Merton was trying to do when he wrote on everything from monastic dread or asceticism to his still little studied ideas on kenotic Christology. I say “little studied” because if there was one thing I would have liked Carr to have said more about it would have been on the subject of Merton’s Christology, a topic which, to my knowledge, has not yet been subjected to a thorough study.

In her analysis of the “later” Merton Carr makes an important point which can serve as a healthy corrective to much that is written about Merton. While charting his evident growth in maturity as a spiritual person she argues that we ought not to see that growth under the rubric of “progress.” She writes firmly that at the end of his life (at the end of every life) he was still a “beginner.” In his last writings he still explores the notion

of contemplative purgation even when he is searching for a new vocabulary to express it. Thus, Carr refuses to schematize neatly a Merton who has moved up the ladder to the putative "unitive way" despite his moments of mystical union. Merton's language matures, his vocabulary changes, his prayer takes new turns but there is nothing in his life or in his writings that "could wholly embody in any simple way the significance of his life or suggest any 'finished' character in his thought on the subject of the self" (p. 131).

In the epilogue to this work Carr goes back to Karl Rahner and that great theologian's judgment that there is a close proportion to the acquisition of the autonomy of the self and closeness or dependence on God. One could enlarge the point by arguing that to the degree that one acquires autonomy one depends not only on God but the self spills out in compassionate love for others. That is precisely why the disjunction between contemplation and action is an illusory one. Among the many merits of Merton's worldview was to show that one could be serious about the contemplative life without retreating from a concern for the world. By enriching our sense of the self, as Carr argues throughout this book, the self becomes engaged both horizontally (in community) and vertically (in God). Merton's self, in short, is an integrated one and it is that integration which attracts so many to his thought and his life.

There are, in sum, a number of reasons why this book is a successful one. First, it is the work of a professional theologian who sees clearly both the merits and deficiencies of Merton's contemplative enterprise. Secondly, it is a work with a tight focus that manages to avoid the sprawl of so many Merton studies. Her methodology allows her to do a close reading of Merton's work. Finally, she helps in that retrieval of the monastic voice in current theology by placing Merton in the theological arena. For those reasons I would recommend this work, not only to those who are interested in Merton, but to all who wish to see the theological enterprise enriched by the great contemplative tradition of Christianity.