

“A SOFT VOICE AWAKENS ME”:

## Merton's Spirituality of Human Communication

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It never fails to amuse me that the man described by Evelyn Waugh as one who *Elected Silence*<sup>1</sup> is one whose volume of words fills bookshelves and sound waves today in printed and recorded media — Thomas Merton. And yet, on further thought, this apparent contradiction between Merton's *Vow of Conversation*<sup>2</sup> as lived out in *The Silent Life*<sup>3</sup> is not just another of those inconsistencies in his way of saying and doing things that Merton friends and scholars often point out about him. Rather, I believe there is a connection between his efforts at communication and his deep desire to remain in wordless silence. The poet knows very well that artistry is manifest as much in what is not said as in what is expressed. The fullest meaning often

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1. This is the title Waugh gave to his abridged version of Merton's autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, published in Great Britain as *Elected Silence* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1949). The U. S. text was finally published in London under the title *The Seven Storey Mountain* by Sheldon Press in 1975.

2. Thomas Merton, *A Vow of Conversation: Journals, 1964-1965*; edited by Naomi Burton Stone (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988).

3. Thomas Merton, *The Silent Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1957). This book is on Benedictine forms of monastic life.

is contained in the spare image. That image points beyond itself to what is more than it can say. And Merton was a poet.

There are words and there are words. Some words are meaningless sounds only, though they have dictionary definitions; but when they are used to cover over some truth they say nothing. And some words express more than they say because they issue from a depth of spirit and point to the unutterable. Some words are like boomerangs. They are thrown out into the air only to return to the speaker, having never been caught by another because they were spoken to defend one's position, to explain oneself, to cover-up the real truth. And others are like the baton that relay racers pass to one another. These are words which are meant to engage another in the pursuit of a truth both are already possessing in some partial way. These baton words are relation-building. These are words which expose the self, explore the unknown, ask the question, and in offering one opinion, invite another. Some words come from a self turned in upon itself. Others come from one whose center is an Other, a center shared by all other selves.

To use Merton's categories, some speech is from the ego-self or the false self and some speech is from the new man or true self. From the false self comes only the babble of empty words. From the true self comes authentic communication because it is speech whose source is Holy Wisdom, *Hagia Sophia*. Merton expressed himself in a number of his writings and talks on human communication, its failures, its source, the occasions which call especially for authentic conversion today. Although he was not prone to writing treatises, something of a "spirituality of human communication" can be pieced together from his works. That is what this essay will attempt to do.

#### HAGIA SOPHIA — A KEY

In Merton's important poem, *Hagia Sophia*, a set of images and expressions are found which open a way to approach the various insights Merton had on human communication.<sup>4</sup> Because the poem is lengthy, I will quote at the outset from the section I regard as pertinent to our topic. In the poem's opening lines, Merton described Holy Wisdom in words remi-

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4. *Hagia Sophia* was published in a limited edition of 69 copies by Merton's friend, artist Victor Hammer, at his Stamperia del Santuccio in Lexington, Kentucky, in 1962. Hammer's widow, Carolyn, issued a second limited edition of 50 copies in 1978. The quotations here are taken from *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), pp. 363-371.

niscient of Biblical sapiential literature:

There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness. This mysterious Unity and Integrity is Wisdom, the Mother of all, *Natura naturans*. There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence that is a fount of action and joy. It rises up in wordless gentleness and flows out to me from the unseen roots of all created being, welcoming me tenderly, saluting me with indescribable humility. This is at once my own being, my own nature . . .

I am awakened, I am born again at the voice of this my Sister, sent to me from the depths of the divine fecundity.

The context in which Merton set this poem struck me at first as unusual, but its strangeness led me to see a deeper significance as the meaning of the poem became clearer. This Wisdom comes to the poet as he lies asleep in a hospital bed, dreaming. She comes as a nurse:

Let us suppose I am a man lying asleep in a hospital. I am indeed this man lying asleep. It is July the second, the Feast of Our Lady's Visitation. A Feast of Wisdom.<sup>5</sup>

At five-thirty in the morning I am dreaming in a very quiet room when a soft voice awakens me from my dream. I am like all mankind awakening from all the dreams that ever were dreamed in all the nights of the world. It is like the One Christ awakening in all the separate selves that ever were separate and isolated and alone in all the lands of the earth. It is like all minds coming back together into awareness from all distractions, cross-purposes and confusions, into unity of love.

And the poem progresses. Wisdom, the nurse, bends over the sick man (here presuming it is a kind of sickness which hospitalizes him) and "in the cool hand of the nurse there is the touch of all life, the touch of the Spirit." The poem continues:

Thus Wisdom cries out to all who will hear (*Sapientia clamitat in plateis*) and she cries out particularly to the little, to the ignorant and the helpless . . .

Love takes him by the hand, and opens him to the doors of another life, another day.

(But he who has defended himself, fought for himself in sickness, planned for himself, guarded himself, loved himself alone and watched over his own life all night, is killed at last by exhaustion.

For him there is no newness.  
Everything is stale and old.)

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5. Merton actually was in the hospital on 2 July 1960. This poem was completed in the spring of 1961.

When the helpless one awakens strong at the voice of mercy, it is as if Life his Sister . . . were to stand over him and invite him with unutterable sweetness to be awake and to live. This is what it means to recognize Hagia Sophia.

From the imagery of this poem I would like to construct an outline of what I will present as Merton's thoughts, if not full-blown theory, on the spirituality or theological grounding of human communication.

First of all, if Holy Wisdom comes to us in the hospital and awakens us to our true nature from which we can reach out to all else in a "unity of love," there is an initial consideration to be made of the nature of the sickness we bear before we are awakened. The poem speaks of a sickness unto death for those who choose to fight for themselves in their sickness. They continue to live in their dream world and end up ignorant and alone. But for those who lie asleep in a quiet room of silence "without awareness and without defense" there is an awakening, "a coming forth from primordial nothingness," beckoned by a soft voice of silence, "of worldless gentleness." In silence and emptiness the one sick from the dream of illusion encounters Nurse Wisdom. This encounter is an experience of being reborn or of being put back together again. The patient is healed of all that has torn him or her apart and made it impossible to say anything that made sense. Wisdom shows herself as "mysterious Unity and Integrity." At this point the child of Wisdom realizes "Wisdom . . . is at once my own being." Bearing the features of Mother Sophia, the child can therefore speak with integrity and invite dialogue and communicate with the "candor of God's light."

Such is a summary of the spiritual underpinnings of human communication which can be detected in *Hagia Sophia*. In unpacking this imagery, let us first look at the sickness we as humans bear which prevents us from communicating effectively.

### THE SICKNESS

*"I am a man lying asleep in a hospital."*

What is this sickness which Sophia nurses away? What is the dream from which the sick man awakens? In the poem it is called the "separate self," the defended self, the guarded self, the self distracted and confused and at cross-purposes with everything and everyone else. It is the false self, to use Merton's more common terminology.



There are many evidences of the sickness which Merton describes throughout his works: violence, racism, destructive manipulation of the earth, and an inability to communicate, one person to another. It is this latter condition of false-self-sickness that we pursue here.

There is so much which passes for communication which is nothing more than noise. This is speech with boomerang words. There are the superficial comments of empty-headed persons. But there are also words that can be spoken by persons who have had something to say and have communicated to others but somehow, when communication has ceased, the words keep coming. Merton, for example, often berated himself for talking too much, of spoiling truth by a volume of words. In a letter to Jim Forest, peace activist friend of his, he wrote:

You are fed up with words, and I don't blame you. I am nauseated by them sometimes . . . . It is so easy to get engrossed with ideas and slogans and myths that in the end one is left holding the bag, empty, with no trace of meaning left in it. And then the temptation is to yell louder than ever in order to make the meaning be there again by magic . . . . Your system is complaining of too much verbalizing, and it is right.<sup>6</sup>

Merton continues in the letter to label the condition of the United States at that time as "sick" because "people are fed on myths, they are stuffed up to the eyes with illusions. They CAN'T think straight."

This inability to "think straight" is due in part, Merton seemed to believe, to the dehumanizing effects of technology on individuals and society at large. He viewed technological society as one which takes shape around a system designed to objectify and reduce to a statistic almost anything it meets so as to put that thing to some use for "better living." In such a society, however, power over things quickly extends to power over persons and, for that reason, Merton took a dim view of technology. He had many harsh words to speak about its dehumanizing effect and its spawning of "mass man" who cannot think and therefore speak with any depth of meaning.

Since Merton's evaluation of the technological world touches directly on word-sickness, we will explore what he had to say about it. His judgments are terribly negative according to some commentators. Perhaps they are, or perhaps he simply called it as he saw it and as he saw through it.

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6. Thomas Merton to James H. Forest, 21 February 1966, in *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*; edited by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985), pp. 294f.

It seems to me that what Merton had to say about the sickness of our society — and it is a technological one — related directly to the sickness individuals suffer (is one a projection of the other?), and in particular to the sickness of not being able to communicate. For this reason, a rather lengthy examination of Merton's thought on the dehumanizing effects of technology follows.

## THE DEHUMANIZING EFFECTS OF TECHNOLOGY

It is an incontrovertible fact that the technological revolution has generated in today's world a totally new way of living. But, according to Merton, the benefit to human life from technology is debatable. Begun as an attempt to master efficiently natural power and materials and subject them to our own needs and comfort, technology has bit by bit made us slaves of the very system invented to put us in control of our universe. At least this is Merton's opinion and he wrote:

Thus we live in a culture which, while proclaiming its humanism and pretending indeed to glorify man as never before, is really a systematic and almost cynical affront to man's humanity. Man is a consumer who exists in order to keep business going by consuming its products whether he wants them or not, likes them or not. But in order to fulfill his role he must come to believe in it. Hence his role as consumer takes the place of his identity (if any). He is then reduced to a state of permanent nonentity and tutelage in which his more or less abstract presence in society is tolerated only if he conforms, remains a smoothly functioning automaton, an uncomplaining and anonymous element in the great reality of the market.<sup>7</sup>

And so a society which is dedicated in theory to human betterment is, in practice, a society which dehumanizes us by turning its projects diametrically against professed humanistic aims. Uncritical belief in the maxim that mechanized progress means human improvement has destroyed the reality of human personhood (CWA, p. 153).<sup>8</sup> This age of technology has left us bewildered and disoriented by the fabulous versatility of machines we have created and has forced us to live outside ourselves. Both the natural environment and human beings themselves have been changed into something artificial, made part of the machines built to enrich

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7. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1973), pp. 29-30. Hereafter referred to in the text as CWA.

8. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1968), p. 222. Hereafter referred to in the text as CGB.

human life. Obsessed with doing and producing, this civilization has ended up with a completely servile concept of a human being. "As a result," Merton wrote, "men are valued not for what they are but for what they do or what they have — for their usefulness. When a man is reduced to his function he is placed in a servile, alienated condition. He exists for someone else or even worse for some *thing* else" (CGB, p. 308).<sup>9</sup>

Thus, for Merton at least, dehumanization has become in this "most inhuman of ages" the "critical challenge of the hour."<sup>10</sup> Particularly is the dehumanization of this age serious because it comes from a system of production which has been formative of the entire structure of contemporary society. Today's society is a mass society, a collectivity, an aggregate of individuals separated and alienated from each other and from themselves in the service of technology, and the economy which supports technology. Merton in the introduction to *Disputed Questions* regards the fact of mass society to be perhaps *the* basic issue of today because the "huge antagonistic totalitarian machine" that is mass society threatens the very existence of the human person.<sup>11</sup>

Mass society systematically deprives a person of dignity and causes that person to exist purely and simply for someone else's profit. "Mass-man" quickly acquires a mentality of being an object for sale, dissolved in the public which only uses, degrades, disintegrates and ruthlessly manipulates him or her. Merton graphically outlined the consequences of technology's reign over the human person:

If technology really represented the rule of reason, there would be much less to regret about our present situation. Actually, technology represents the rule of *quantity*, not the rule of reason (quality = value = relation of means to authentic human ends). It is by means of technology that man the person, subject of qualified and perfectible freedom, becomes qualified, that is, becomes part of a mass — mass man — whose only function is to enter anonymously into the process of production and consumption. He becomes on one side an implement, a "hand," or better, a "biophysical link" between machines: on the other side he is a mouth, a digestive system and an anus, something through which pass the products of his technological world, leaving a transient and meaningless sense of enjoyment.

(CGB, pp. 76f; see also DQ, pp. xi, 52).

9. The artificiality of technological society is a theme developed allegorically by Merton in "Atlas and the Fatman" in *The Behavior of Titans* (New York: New Directions, 1961), especially pp. 31-44.

10. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), pp. 3, 6. Hereafter referred to in the text as RU.

11. Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1960), p. ix. Hereafter referred to in the text as DQ.

In a mass society only the "public" is acknowledged as human, worthy of having its needs fulfilled. The private sphere is not allowed and insofar as an individual must confront other individuals "it" may do so only if "it" meets them as strangers and objects. Unique personhood is lost in the mass society. Relying heavily on the existential philosophers of this century, Merton described the alienating effect of mass society in this way:

Mass society is individualistic in the sense that it isolates each individual subject from his immediate neighbor, reducing him to a state of impersonal, purely formal, and abstract relationship with other objectified individuals. In dissolving the more intimate and personal bonds of life in the family and of the small sub-group (the farm, the shop of the artisan, the village, the town, the small business), mass society segregates the individual from the concrete human "other" and leaves him alone and unaided in the presence of the Faceless, the collective void, the public. Thus, . . . mass-man finds himself related not to flesh and blood human beings with the same freedom, responsibility, and conflicts as himself, but with idealized typological images: the Fuhrer, the president, the sports star, the teen singer, the space man.<sup>12</sup>

The possibility of the formation of any community is nullified in a society which is dehumanizing, which prevents human relationships. Collectivity, then, destroys the solidarity of the human race by setting one individual alongside another, one against the other. Merton described the long-range effects of a dehumanizing atmosphere in society:

The world is . . . a multiplicity of conflicting and limited beings, all enclosed in the prisons of their own individuality, all therefore complete in a permanent and vulnerable incompleteness, all seeking to find a certain completeness by asserting themselves at the expense of others, dominating and using others . . . . Thus there arises a spurious, inconclusive unity: the unity of the massive aggregate, the unity of those thrown together without love and without understanding by the accidents of the power struggle. Seen from the point of view of "the way" [of wisdom] this unity is nothing but a collective monstrosity because it has no real reason for existing and is not a unity at all. . . . Finally the collective mass becomes a vast aggregate of organized hatred, a huge and organized death-wish, threatening its own existence and that of the entire human race.<sup>13</sup>

These are the "separated selves" Merton mentions in *Hagia Sophia*. With the substitution of the unique person with the faceless individual, mass society makes the human being a unit, a "bit" of information — without aim, value, meaning, love. As far as anyone can tell, the human

12. Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967), p. 274. Hereafter referred to in the text as *MZM*.

13. Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), pp. 220f. Hereafter referred to in the text as *FV*.

person sees no reason for himself or herself to exist at all. An impersonal mask is simply put on, a mask of resigned and monotonous sameness which listens to what the system tells him or her to eat and wear and think. The stupefying and exhausting and unrewarding world of the factory (and now of the computer terminal?) has become a way of life for an entire society of people. Life, like work, has become drudgery. In the language of Soren Kierkegaard to whom Merton often refers, the modern individual is caught up in the process of "leveling" in which a person is lost in the vast emptiness of the "public mind," which of course is a pure abstraction, a mythical being created by the masses who have abdicated their own conscience, personal desires, choice, responsibility. It is an abdication of identity which permits the individual to act by the will of the collective self, whose will is the will of nobody, whose mind is the mind of nobody, which can contradict itself and remain consistent with itself. Hypnotized, paralyzed, passive, controlled, mass-man is unable to protest against the power which sucks his humanity because he no longer sees himself apart from the technological structure.

The psychology of mass-man is a psychology of evasion and escape. By a constant round of activities, this kind of person seeks to alleviate the boredom, futility, and madness bred in the passive role into which technology has cast this one. Mass-man has relinquished the human powers to judge and think and decide. Mass-man is an "irresponsible monstrosity" whose amorality is the greatest danger of our time, for this one is "blindly passive in [his or her] submission to a determination which, in effect, leaves men completely irresponsible. Therefore moral obligations and decisions tend to become practically meaningless."<sup>14</sup> The only question asked in a technological society is "Will it work and pay well?" not "Is this right? What does this mean?"<sup>15</sup>

Mass technology is not under human control. Its truth lies in statistics, its values are arbitrary, maintained in existence by the collective dream that goes on without interruption in the mass media. (Is this the dream from which the sick man is awakened in the hospital?) It has developed beyond the psychic capacities of the members of the mass society that it has spawned. It is not so much that mass society follows a logic of contradiction.

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14. Thomas Merton on Peace; edited by Gordon C. Zahn (New York: McCall Publishing Company, 1971), p. 117. Hereafter referred to in the text as *TMP*.

15. Thomas Merton, "Life and Work," *The Merton Tapes* (Chappaqua, New York: Electronic Paperbacks, 1973), tape TM-10B.

It follows no logic at all:

What passes for "thinking" is mass-produced, passively accepted, or not even accepted. We simply submit to the process of being informed, without anything actually registering on our mind at all. We are content to turn on a switch and be comforted by the vapid, but self-assured slogans of the speaker who, we fondly hope, is thinking for the whole nation. (*DQ*, p. ix)

And now we come explicitly to how all this fallout from technology debilitates our language and ability to communicate. It is in the nature of the human person to articulate the relationship found between himself or herself and the realities encountered in the world by means of certain symbols, be they language or gesture or art. These symbols represent a synthesis of the human person's response to the cosmos. However, in technological society persons find themselves in an already existing, artificial, prefabricated synthesis which prevents them not only from dealing with the world, but from being themselves. As Merton pointed out, technology and the scientific methodology behind it work against the kind of symbolizing which is ultimately connected with someone's own process of becoming human:

... technological man finds himself in another artificial synthesis in which he has no longer any knowledge of anything except himself, his machines and his knowledge of reality, but a knowledge of knowledge. This is to say — man no longer is "in contact with nature" but is only well-situated in the context of his own experiments. He can say with certainty how an experiment will turn out, but he cannot find any ultimate meaning for this. Man is therefore cut off from any reality except that of his own processes — that is to say, in fact, of his own inner chaos — and that of the extraordinary world of his machines.<sup>16</sup>

In Merton's opinion, if technology is allowed to continue to develop out of control, it will ultimately disintegrate society. Not that technology in itself is programmed to destroy, but, as Merton commented: "Taken by themselves, they [technological achievements] are magnificent. But taken in the context of *unbalance* with the other aspects of human existence in the world, the very splendor and rapidity of technological development is a factor of disintegration" (*CGB*, p. 72). Technology can never solve our deepest human problems. Indeed, it creates a situation which prevents us from responding to the world in a balanced way, the way of the spiritual life. The top-heavy rush into technological mastery has left us rigid, artificial, and spiritually void, nearly incapable of withstanding the tranquilizer-

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16. Thomas Merton, "Symbolism: Communication or Communion?" in *Love and Living*; edited by Naomi Burton Stone & Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979), p. 60. Hereafter referred to in the text as "Symbolism."

effect of mass society.

## OUT OF TOUCH WITH THE SPIRIT

The exploitation of human beings in a technological society soon crushes them in a system of overcontrol. But overcontrol is not the outcome of technology alone. It is also, according to Merton, a consort of materialism and godlessness, the two faces of an unspiritual world. A person's absorption into a technological mass society is a short step from his or her adaptation of a completely materialistic view of reality. Once life is directed to "progress through better products," soon reality is equated with what is of commercial value, what is useful and money-making. The real is reduced to what meets the eye, an eye which assesses and trades. Belief is placed in money and the power or enjoyment which comes from the possession of it. It is a new, irresistible religion, this idolatry of the mass society with its accompanying perpetual devotions to a cult of possession and status.<sup>17</sup>

In the United States particularly is this religion strong. Prosperity has become a sign of the goodness of the individual, for, according to the doctrine of this new religion, in building an earthly paradise in the New World, the workers recover their original goodness. But, Merton observed, this prosperity has also been used as a *carte blanche* to continue the "good life" in whatever way is profitable. What this in effect has meant in the history of the American people has been the support of a war economy and an artificial way of life for the sake of the continued profit of the already prosperous. Indeed, Americans have preferred financial stability based on the support of a dehumanized society to "peace and justice for all."

But even short of this perverted attachment to making war for the sake of material gain, contemporary society devotes itself to the acquisition of material goods and spends its time on what is fleeting and useful for the moment. Merton, commenting on the materialistic pragmatism of the Western world, wrote:

We are concerned only with "practicality" — "efficiency": that is, with means, not with ends. And therefore we are more and more concerned only with *immediate consequences*. We are the prisoners of every urgency. In this

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17. See Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964), pp. 24-25. Hereafter referred to in the text as *SD*.



way we so completely lose all perspective and sense of values that we are no longer able to estimate correctly what even the most immediate consequences of our actions may turn out to be. We know well enough that if we do certain things, certain definite reactions will follow: but we lose all capacity to grasp the significance of those reactions, and hence we cannot see further than the next automatic response. (CGB, pp. 117-118)

Another way of saying that someone no longer sees the ultimate meaning in what he or she does is to say that that person has lost a religious view of reality. And in the judgment of Merton, contemporary society, rooted as it is in a materialistic view of life, is spiritually starved. While it is true that modern science has unlocked many of the secrets of the material world and, in that sense, has conquered it, it is equally the case that the beneficiaries of scientific discoveries have also yielded to the material world, finding satisfaction for their needs, not from any kind of spiritual center, but exclusively from things outside themselves. They have surrounded themselves with things that are fake, illusory, and therefore live in a dream world. Materialism has left us hollow, has stifled our spirit, and has generated a death wish in an entire culture. We have forsaken a vision of spiritual values, such as love and respect, wisdom and truth, in pursuit of the satisfaction of immediate needs, assertion and domination, expediency and self-sufficiency (DQ, pp. 11-12; CGB, p. 117).

A marketing mentality destroys all that is non-marketable. Commerce, Merton showed, overtakes communion between persons because loving, personal relationships are possible only where the spirit, which cannot be bought or sold, is recognized and respected as a basic reality. Technology, with its implicitly materialistic bias, has not only destroyed the solidarity of the human race, but it has made love impossible. The only kinds of love a materialistic society admits is love-as-a-deal, love as a need-fulfiller.<sup>18</sup>

It comes to this. Where communion cannot be presupposed, meaningful communication is also impossible. Because modern technology has been constructed and used in such a way that it, in fact, has been largely responsible for a dehumanizing of society — at least in the opinion of Merton — it can be pinpointed as a cause of the breakdown of human communication. Technology has produced, or at least advocated, mass-man and mass-man is wrested from his or her spiritual depths from which comes the capacity to love. Devoid of intersubjective relationships, mass-

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18. Thomas Merton, "A Buyer's Market for Love?" *Ave Maria* 104 (24 December 1966), pp. 9-10.



man can only exchange statistics and facts, not share life. Merton described the futile efforts at communication of someone who lives in the impersonal crowd of today's society.

Where men live huddled together without true communication, there seems to be greater sharing, and a more genuine communion. But this is not communion, only immersion in the general meaninglessness of countless slogans and clichés repeated over and over again so that in the end one listens without hearing and responds without thinking. The constant din of empty words and machine noises, the endless booming of loudspeakers end by making true communication and true communion almost impossible. Each individual in the mass is insulated by thick layers of insensibility. He doesn't care, he doesn't hear, he doesn't think. He does not act, he is pushed. He does not talk, he produces conventional sounds when stimulated by the appropriate noises. He does not think, he secretes clichés.<sup>19</sup>

The logical positivists have recognized the inability of the individual in today's world to communicate. They say that we are immersed in meaninglessness and hence have nothing to communicate, except to discuss the way we say nothing. (At least, Merton wryly observed, the logical positivists try to organize such futility!) (CGB, p. 17). But such doubletalk discusses reality while denying it. It is "officialese" which is really "the celebration of boredom, of routine, of deadness, of organized futility" (TMP, pp. 155f).<sup>20</sup>

The meaninglessness of the symbols of language applies to religious language *a fortiori*. Words about the "spirit" are dead in a society which confesses only the reality of the material world in its activities, even though it may speak passionately about God and the gospel. But, according to Merton, the degradation of language and the inability to speak of God is only an indication of spiritual decay, of a lack of spiritual depth.<sup>21</sup> Even the Scriptures designate the confusion of tongues to be the result of an individual's despiritualizing his or her relationship to God by the construction of a tower. Merton wrote:

... the true significance of the statement "God is dead" is really that "MAN is dead." The obvious fact of man's material agitation and external frenzy only serves to emphasize his lack of spiritual life.

19. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), pp. 54f.

20. Here Merton is speaking of the tragic abuse of language at Auschwitz where the Jews were told, for example, that the gas chambers were "baths." On the subject of the non-communication of language today Merton also strikes out at the unreliability of the mass media: see SD, p. 107; FV, pp. 151-154, 159, 163, 250f. Advertising, especially, is singled out for its misuse of language: SD, p. 243; CGB, p. 255; TMP, pp. 237f.

21. The next section of this article, which is on silence, will explore how a person who is brought to the depth of his or her self realizes that God cannot be talked about adequately. The realm of the transcendent is beyond the confines of human expression. At this level, the inability to speak of God is an indication of spiritual maturity.

Since it is by symbolism that man is spiritually and consciously in contact with his own deepest self, with other men, and with God, then both the "death of God" and "death of man" are to be accounted for by the fact that symbolism is dead. The death of symbolism is itself the most eloquent and significant symbol in our modern cultural life. ("Symbolism," p. 339)

In sum, then, technology, materialism and godlessness have rendered members of contemporary society sick because they have not allowed them to be themselves. In fact, these forces in today's culture, especially in the United States, have made it nearly impossible for them to be human. And being so dehumanized, so alienated from their true nature, they cannot communicate with one another except on a superficial, inconsequential level. To this situation Merton adds the observation that what is the most tragic of all, is that the lack of depth dimension of contemporary life has made us nearly incapable of seeing that we are not only sick, but slowly dying to our humanness (*FV*, p. 62). Such a world is fatal unless there is still a world within where the source of true life can be found and where persons may discover a power which overcomes the death-dealing, unbalanced effect of the dehumanizing, despiritualizing forces of the contemporary world and from these inner resources attain their ability to relate effectively.

### THE SILENCE

"I am dreaming in a very quiet room."

During some informal discussions in a retreat to contemplatives which Merton gave near the end of his life, the conversation moved to the need for dialogue in renewal in the Church and, in particular, in monastic life.<sup>22</sup> In this context Merton began to speak of the pain of communication. It is a suffering with many sides to it. On the one hand, there is the sickness which comes from having something that needs to be said but with no forum in which to say it. Such needed expression gets bottled up inside, festers and often breaks out in psychosomatic illnesses. On the other hand there is the pain which comes from knowing things must be communicated for life to grow, but words will not do it because there is too much to say. What happens here is that we usually *try* to say what we want to convey and then wonder in dismay why we have not connected with those to whom we

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22. These tapes of the retreat are in a private collection, entitled "First Retreat to Contemplatives. Retiro Allegheny." Hereafter referred to in the text as "Retreat."

have spoken. Here is where we need simply to remain very quiet in our "hospital room."

Merton has spoken of silence eloquently (another example of that amusing irony alluded to at the outset of this essay). Both his writings and his whole way of life are testimony to the important place silence held for him. Of the various effects of silence on the human spirit about which he wrote, several are pertinent to this examination of human communication. In a nutshell, according to Merton, in silence we can be healed of the illusory self. This self has been wounded by a society which fosters and rewards such illusion (and is probably the projected conglomerate of false selves). The illusory, separate, false self speaks the language of Babel. In silence the self hears the soft voice of Wisdom.

In Merton's writings silence is often coupled with the practice of solitude, going to the desert, living in a silent place apart. There, where all is still, past memories begin to fade away and concern about the future tends to disappear. In the desert the solitary is gradually delivered from an obsession with what he or she is not, "with his past and future, what he has ceased to be and has not yet become . . . For only in the present can man come in full contact with the truth."<sup>23</sup> Attention becomes focused on what is present before the person who dwells in silence. In a society which feeds illusion, an individual is governed by what the future can bring, what he or she does not yet possess by way of material goods or personality. But, as we have seen, this concentration on what is not yet is a sickness. It is in the silence of a desert, be it the Sahara or one's heart, that a person comes face to face with the simple reality of the present moment. The experience of time changes and is purified in the silence of aloneness. Because in the desert all things simply are, what is heard there, what is experienced there, what is communicated there in silence is simply the fundamental message of being, the meaning and truth of what is. As we shall see, this silence is one of the primary ways the sickness of the false self, which prevents human communication taking place, is healed.

According to Merton, in a society such as today's which damages the spiritual power of freedom by its noisy pressurized way of life, silence is the key to a freedom in time which cures us of the disease caused by the "hidden and sinister voice of that evil power that makes us captives."<sup>24</sup>

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23. Thomas Merton, *Seasons of Celebration* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1965), p. 162.

24. Thomas Merton, *Come to the Mountain* (Snowmass, Colorado: St. Benedict's Abbey, 1964), p. 27.

As Merton wrote elsewhere: "To understand that one has nothing special to say is suddenly to become free."<sup>25</sup> But the contemporary world, for all that meets the ear, has raised the confusion of the Tower of Babel to the highest power in the history of humankind and, by so doing, has imprisoned us in a clamor of conflicting voices. The confusion of tongues, which the sacred writers of the book of Genesis chose centuries ago to symbolize the chaos perpetrated by the ego-self and reflected in society, still today aptly points to the disorder and division at the base of a culture which issues predominately from the superficial self. The world today does not see that language, even the most refined, inadequately expresses reality.<sup>26</sup> Rather, as Merton mentions again and again, even about himself: "We are afflicted with the disease of constant talking with almost nothing to say" (*SD*, p. 276). The arrogant faces of the contemporary world, the machine-like face of the contemporary world, all mouth noise, resist silence, fill up the emptiness at the center of illusion and prevent a person from thinking about much else than the empty talk, cliches and nonsense these systems feed on (*SD*, pp. 276f, 286).

Merton knew from personal experience that by silence the smoke-screen of superficial conversation is dissipated and the noise barriers we place between our true selves and God and everything else are broken. Reflecting on his religious experience during his first Christmas at Gethsemani, for example, Merton wrote how he began to realize that words and actions, even within a person, are useless. In silence one hears what is really being said. In silence truth and communion with truth are made possible:

Suddenly, I began to grasp the fact that I might be wasting my time, and that all these things (interior acts and mental monologues) were unnecessary: that perhaps I had already possessed far more than they could give me.

Had I never noticed the fruitfulness, the deep, mysterious vitality of the silence that had been opening out within me? Surely, all my mental images and concepts and words and acts and sentiments and movements and discourse: all these things were only getting in the way! There was some other voice, that far transcended anything of my own, was far simpler and wiser and more perfect that might speak to me if only I learned to hold my peace, and be still.<sup>27</sup>

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25. Thomas Merton, *Silence in Heaven* (New York: Studio Publications / Thomas Y. Crowell, 1956), p. 27. Hereafter referred to in the text as *SH*.

26. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 48. In Zen Buddhism Merton found a way which claimed to break through the limits of language so that reality may be seen as it is and not through the limitations placed on it by words.

27. Thomas Merton, "First Christmas at Gethsemani," (unpublished material from *The Seven Storey Mountain*) in *Catholic World* 170 (December 1949), p. 169.

To live silently is as important to a person as breathing in Merton's opinion. This is because silence purifies a person from the falseness which hides the true self. Silence binds up the words which divide a person. Merton wrote:

Not only does silence give us a chance to understand ourselves better, to get a truer and more balanced perspective of our lives in relation to the lives of others: silence makes us whole if we let it. Silence draws together the scattered and dissipated energies of a fragmented existence.<sup>28</sup>

To be silent a person must be ready to submit to long periods of waiting during which nothing seems to happen. Hidden in silence is hope. And so when time is not marked by conversation or commotion or even the ticking of a clock, time will not pass by quickly. It may not seem to pass at all, but to have slowed down to a stop. In this stillness, Merton wrote, "we listen for the unexpected . . . we are open to what we do not yet know, and . . . we slowly and gradually prepare for the day when we will reach out to a new level of being with God" ("Creative," p. 43). Impatience with illusion brought the word-sick person to the desert, the "quiet room," where in silence that person now patiently waits, waits for the promised secret of all that is to be revealed.

A complete silence is grave and it is totally open. The ear of a silent one is ready to hear the stillness of the present moment. In a silence of this depth there occurs what Merton called a "higher kind of listening, which is not an attentiveness to some special wave length, a receptivity to a certain kind of message, but a general emptiness that waits to realize the fullness of the message of God within its own apparent void."<sup>29</sup> In this silence, Merton wrote cryptically, the hearer is no-hearer: "The Hearer listens, and the Hearing is No-Hearing."<sup>30</sup> In a silence which is absolute the ear catches nothing. It hears nothing more than "the silence and peace that is 'heard' when the rain wanders freely among the hills and forests" ("Love," p. 31; *RU*, p. 10). In this silence the message is no-message because it is a message which comes from a world devoid of speech. The no-hearer "waits on the Word of God in silence, and when he is 'answered,' it is not so much by a word that bursts into his silence. It is by his silence itself suddenly,

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28. Thomas Merton, "Creative Silence," in *Love and Living*, p. 43. Hereafter referred to in the text as "Creative."

29. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969), p. 112. Hereafter referred to in the text as *CP*.

30. Thomas Merton, "Love and Solitude," in *Love and Living*, pp. 31, 33. Hereafter referred to in the text as "Love."

inexplicably revealing itself to him as a word of great power, full of the voice of God" (CP, pp. 112f). This is the silence of "the little . . . the ignorant and the helpless" to whom Nurse Wisdom will cry out.

### THE VOICE

"I am awakened, I am born again at the voice of this my Sister."

The patient slips into a state of "primordial nothingness" in his quiet room and resembles someone dead. In profound silence time stands still—just as it does in death. But in silence death is conquered. The chatter and noise of the work is a protection put up by the false self against facing the reality of death which it will find in the deep darkness and silence of its being. Silence reveals life which is beyond death:

Death is the enemy who seems to confront them at every moment in the deep darkness and silence of their own being. So they keep shouting at death. They confound their lives with noise. They stun their own ears with meaningless words, never discovering that their hearts are rooted in a silence that is not death but life. They chatter themselves to death, fearing life as if it were death.<sup>31</sup>

At the center of one's being, then, is life, not death. This is the message of silence. This is communication at the deepest level, for it is a communication which is a wordless communion with the dynamic center of one's own existence. There is no need to say anything because it is all there in silent splendor. As the present moment breaks through to the abyss of eternity where all is Now, the silent one is led to a direct intuition of the act of being, to the primary movement of creation in his or her own person. "It is like coming forth from primordial nothingness and standing in clarity, in Paradise" (*Hagia Sophia*). The person experiences that which makes him or her present, allows him or her to be. The person learns that it is the silence hidden in all things which is real, which transfigures what is ordinary, which binds all that is into a unity which makes communication possible. The person comes to know silence as the mother of truth, as "the positive rest of the mind in truth" (*NMI*, p. 233). Silence strikes the rock of all that is and brings forth the gush of realization of the significance of what is meant by "is," and particularly *who* one is. Merton described this fundamental message of silence in a variety of ways. The silent person "is attuned

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31. Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1955), p. 262. Hereafter referred to in the text as *NMI*.

to all the Hearing in the world, since he lives in silence. He does not listen to the ground of being, but he identifies himself with that ground in which all being hears and knows itself" (*IEW*, p. 34). In another place Merton observed: "Silence teaches us to know reality by respecting it where words have defiled it."<sup>32</sup> Quoting the Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu, Merton wrote:

...emptiness, stillness, tranquility, tastelessness,  
silence, and non action  
Are the root of all things.<sup>33</sup>

And in his own poetic prose, Merton described the silence at the root of all things:

The silence of God drives the hurricane, and overturns the mountains and stirs up the sea and makes it roar against the cliff. It is from the silence of God that men borrow power for their machines, and it is once again by virtue of something hidden in His silence that we uproariously plough up and dissolve even the material elements that make up our fretful universe.

It is the silence of God that forms the solid floor on which we fight our battles, and if His silence gave out beneath us we would all fall together with our cataclysms of sound into the depths of oblivion. (*SH*, pp. 25f)

In other words, there is a primacy of silence over sound — sounds of nature and sounds of human invention, of talking and technology.

To ignore this truth about the order of things, to make of existence an affliction from which to seek relief by choosing untruth, not a reality to be contemplated in truth, is, according to Merton, "the real root sin of modern man" (*CGB*, p. 221). To arrive at the knowledge of being, however, is to be released from that sin which makes a disease of existence. To hear the word of being in silence is to encounter Truth in the present tense, to experience immediately the fullness of time.

In this presence to the presence of the Word of God dwelling in silence the secrets of divine wisdom are revealed. Only the silent heart can hear this no-speech of wisdom, for silence, as has been said, is the forerunner of the Word of God. Silence readies a person to receive the word of truth that person seeks, "for the eternal Word of Truth is uttered in silence. If He is uttered in silence, He must be heard in deepest silence."<sup>34</sup> In silence the no-message revealed is that God's universal love is the power of being.

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32. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1958), p. 86.

33. Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (New York: New Directions, 1965), p. 81.

34. Thomas Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness* (New York: New Directions, 1953), p. 129. Hereafter referred to in the text as *BW*.



In the City of Babylon language is chaos and non-communication. In the City of God it is charity and communion, and those who speak it best speak it in silence. In the silent depths there is communion of being with the power of being and no longer for the ego-self is there a distinction between I and not-I. The "I" disappears into the eternal "Thou" present at the root of all. In a communion love the divided self is made whole.

In the words of *Hagia Sophia*, when the dreamer is awakened "It is like all minds coming back together into awareness from all distractions, cross-purposes and confusions into unity of love. . . . Love takes him by the hand and opens to him the doors of another life, another day."

## THE FOUNT

"There is in all things . . .  
a silence that is a fount of action and joy."

As we have seen so far, Merton blamed our sell-out to modern technology for bringing about the inner confusion of contemporary society. He felt that a system dominated by technology tries to solve human problems without the vision wisdom gives of the "hidden wholeness" of all visible things. But once wisdom awakens us to the truth about ourselves, we are able to relate to the world with an honesty that enlightens and no longer divides and confuses. When we are healed by the voice of Wisdom we discover that we reflect the features of our mother because "wisdom . . . is at once my own being."

Once having broken out of the "womb of collective illusion," of invented identities, the one reborn from Wisdom soon is engaged in activity which flows from the "fount of action" which Wisdom is. This activity "cries out to all who will hear," inviting all to share in the joy and freedom of truth found in the mysterious source of life that all share, from which all come. By our very nature we are equipped to reach out to others, our ego being dissolved in the ground of our fecund Creator. We have no longer any self to protect or puff up by treating others as objects from which to be distinguished. Rather, having been nursed with mercy and gentleness, the reborn person speaks to others with that voice of compassion which called softly to him or her while sleeping in littleness and ignorance and helplessness. And with a compassionate voice the new person helps restore communication between people which has been lost in mass society.



One of the Biblical images alluded to earlier in this article which Merton used to symbolize the division which exists among persons and nations is the Tower of Babel. Merton pointed out that human beings in their efforts to construct a sure means to commune with God, although they did work with others on the project, really built a monument to their own self-centered egos. Hence, the end result of the group endeavor was not a community of people united with each other in their ascent to God, but a conglomerate of ego-selves at odds with each other at the basic levels of communication.<sup>35</sup> In contrast, the one who has relinquished the self seeks to build the kingdom of God, not a Tower of Babel, by restoring modes of communication to a society deaf from the noise of empty language and by teaching through word and silent example that the origin of all meaningful conversation is in communion with God who dwells at the center of all that is.

Meaningful language and real communication, the reborn person knows, flow from silence for in silence the word of God is spoken. As Merton wrote:

Silence teaches us to know reality by respecting it where words have defiled it. When we have lived long enough alone with the reality around us, our veneration will learn how to bring forth a few good words about it from the silence which is the mother of Truth. (*TS*, p. 86)<sup>36</sup>

Consequently, one task of the healed person is to encourage others to learn the value of silence so that they may become sensitive to the truth and alert to falsity.

Merton felt very deeply that those who call themselves "religious" people, that is to say those who openly declare that their lives are oriented to the ultimate reality, must in their language and manner of life speak the truth which is the center of their lives. In speaking to contemplatives one time, Merton described one of the prophetic tasks of their lives was to develop an unusual skill: the ability to read advertisements in a way that breaks the power advertisers have taken to themselves to tell people who they are by what they buy or use.<sup>37</sup> Especially today when the truth is

35. Thomas Merton, *The Tower of Babel* (New York: New Directions, 1957), especially pp. 56-58.

36. Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1961), pp. 72-77. Merton gives an excursus on *parrhesia*, the free speech of a person reborn in God.

37. "Retreat." In "Camus and the Church," *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*; edited by Brother Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981), pp. 261-274, Merton seems to agree with Camus' severe criticism of the Church which he judges has betrayed the message of the gospel by engaging in official doubletalk and the language of bureaucratic evasion. Merton writes: "And the teaching of the nations is not to be accomplished by the triumphal utterance of totally obscure generality."

obscured by so many different voices and by a complex bureaucracy must the message of religious people be honest, direct, simple and clear. This is the best way to improve communication — to speak and live according to the truth one has come to believe at the center of one's being.

Meaning can also be restored to human expression, Merton contended, by reinstating symbols in contemporary society. Merton felt that technological society's degradation of symbol, particularly the symbol of love, is evidence that members of that society are spiritually dead for symbols reveal and articulate ultimate truths. They do not pretend to contain all that they express, but point to the mystery they symbolize, whether it be the mystery of God or the mystery of the person or of nature. To bring back the use of symbol in language and art, in all modes of human expression, is therefore to awaken us to an awareness of the ineffable which is at the heart of all that is. The restoration of symbol will encourage us to see that our true center resides in a reality which transcends the limits of our egos.

Merton saw the unique value of the symbol to be its uselessness as an efficient means of communication. It is not simply a "bit" of quickly retrievable data, but goes beyond the practicality of communicating information or telling something new. The symbol, instead, revives and deepens an awareness of what is already present in the human individual. It puts us in contact with truth within and it manifests a union which exists between subject and object, between divine and human persons. Merton put it this way: "The symbol awakens awareness or restores it" ("Symbolism," p. 344). It therefore does not aim so much at communication as communion with the truth.

There is, then, a level of communication deeper than the sharing of ideas and facts as is the case in honest media communication. It is a communication which takes place when one moves from the particular to take on a universal consciousness. And since Merton believed that the problems in society can be solved only in universal terms because their dimensions are so vast, human beings can meet these problems only by transcending themselves and developing a universal consciousness through the deepening and broadening of their own consciousnesses. There true communication with the human race will take place. From there all meaningful verbal dialogue will emerge. When communication among people is on this level, true community will be achieved. This deepest level of communication is what Merton meant by "communion." This kind of

communication is "beyond the level of words, a communion in authentic experience which is shared on a 'preverbal' level but also on a 'postverbal' level."<sup>38</sup> It "is the awareness of participation in an ontological or religious reality: in the mystery of being, of human love, of redemptive mystery, of contemplative truth" ("Symbolism," p. 344).

Communion is attained in silence where the truth of words comes into focus as the self is purified and stripped of all masks and illusions. The person who learns to become absolutely quiet within herself or himself discovers in that stillness that the message of being is love. All other words emanate from this one true word which is heard in a communion of the person with the ground of love, where that person is literally *in* love. Here in the depths of silence one learns the message that needs to be communicated to others, the words Merton said we need to know today more than ever before. The message heard in silence is that everyone is lovable because they are grounded in love.

The healed sleeper, the true one awakened by the soft voice of Wisdom, is a bearer of this message. Freed from the conventions of society which restrict understanding and inhibit the experience of the new, this one can initiate in society a communication between people based on communion in God. Wide open to life, this one is able to communicate with others no matter how divergent their verbal expressions or insights or convictions. Capable of experiencing another as his or her other self, the healed self is open, not only to the ideas or viewpoints of another person, but is open to that other as a person. By communicating with persons in this way a depth of interpersonal exchange which can be termed "love" can begin to take place. The initiative may have to be taken by the person who has come to understand the truth about reality, but by approaching others who may not yet have heard the voice of Wisdom with the attitude of acceptance and conscious bondedness, the first steps of authentic human communion can take place. Such efforts will help bring about true human community.

The communication of the message of love that builds community is also a message of merciful forgiveness. Persons in a genuine community accept their own fragile lot and, in so doing, can readily accept others as

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38. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*; edited by Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973), pp. 315f. Hereafter referred to in the text as *AJ*. This quotation is from a talk Merton gave to monastics in Bangkok. After mentioning this kind of communication and the need for it in the contemporary world, Merton went on to show how monastic training should enable a monk to communicate on this level with holy men and women of different religious traditions.

they are. As Merton put it, in having been forgiven and ready to pardon others, "we no longer seek to defend our defenselessness, and are ready to accept our own boundless need in a merciful exchange with others whose poverty is as great as our own!"<sup>39</sup>

Because the awakened person has been reborn in the death of Christ, that one will also suffer for the life of others and seek to build community in this total way. Grounded in the love of God by his or her participation in the death and resurrection of Christ, such a person will willingly give her or his life to another, even to death. This one does not seek to dominate, but to serve. In this attitude of total giving this person is able to commune at the depths of the other for there is no self which is in the way of the gift of love. This is the kind of interpersonal exchange which is the heart of true community. By none other than this kind of giving — in love, forgiveness, and self-sacrifice — will the new society be formed. By this kind of loving, we can benefit from all the wonderful advances and conveniences of technology because we will not need things to prove who we are.

The communication that flows from communion with God and forms true community is not a monologue, but a dialogue, for love which is the fundamental message must be *shared*. Merton often spoke of the need for mutual exchange — of ideas and of one's deepest being — with others. We learn from each other by sharing insights, clarifying ideas, articulating the truth. After all, Merton noted: "Truth develops in conversation" (CGB, p. 218). And particularly in the conversation of ecumenical dialogue does a person grow in his or her new life, and in so growing help develop a new society.

## ECUMENICAL DIALOGUE

Merton's own interest and involvement in the ecumenical movement is an excellent example of how a person in touch with the sources of his true self seeks to participate in the reunification of society by means of dialogue on the ultimate questions of life. Merton himself anticipated by several years the ecumenism of Pope John XXIII by meeting with Protestant students and ministers on a weekly basis in order to discuss rapprochement in various religious denominations. Furthermore, in his essay "Ecumenical

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39. Thomas Merton, "The Climate of Mercy," in *Love and Living*, p. 207.

Monk," Brother Patrick Hart shows that Merton's ecumenical dialogue included members of both Christian and non-Christian religions.<sup>40</sup> Most broadly, Merton saw ecumenism as including dialogue with non-believers who are serious in their search for meaning.<sup>41</sup>

The importance of such dialogue is heightened today, Merton felt, because in the contemporary world many of the structures of religion are falling away, due in part to the atheism emerging out of new philosophies, the agnosticism to which some scientism gives rise, the scepticism which is the product of the self-criticism which has gone on in some religious groups over the past few decades. In fact, in his last talk delivered at Bangkok, Merton told his audience: "The time for relying on structures has disappeared" (A), p. 338). With the collapse of structure believers of all persuasions, Merton said, are moving into a diaspora situation where they can no longer find rest in the security of laws and customs which surrounded and supported their faith and way of life up to this time, useful as they have been.

But Merton did not view as lamentable this time of dispersion when religious persons are finding themselves living on the margin, when foundations of belief are being tested and the walls protecting the members of a particular sect are being broken down. The destruction of walls also opens the way to interchange among persons who previously have been separated from each other. The diaspora situation, Merton pointed out, is one which the true self is both equipped and commissioned to meet. The ability to dialogue with others in a way which seeks to bring about community and not division is a gift that has been given the new person. Someone established in her or his own identity can accept others and honor their uniqueness. And the true self is the one who has discovered one's own identity.

Detached from his or her own peculiar interests, the awakened person in the diaspora situation can dialogue with others without perishing. Without ever moving away from a centeredness in God or compromising what has been handed on to them in their own spiritual tradition, such persons are ready to change, willing to take on an alternative approach, free to see things another way. They can remain honestly faithful to what they believe is true while being prepared to discuss and negotiate the

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40. *Thomas Merton / Monk: A Monastic Tribute*; edited by Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1974), pp. 208-217.

41. See "The Unbelief of Believers" in *Faith and Violence*, pp. 199-204, and "Apologies to an Unbeliever" in *Faith and Violence*, pp. 205-214. It is of interest to note here that what eventually became Merton's hermitage was originally built as a place where such dialogue could take place on Abbey property.

expressions of their belief. They can accommodate themselves to others, listen to their explanations, sympathize with them. Rooted in the ground of openness, this kind of person can “open his mind and heart to the partial truths that are contained in other philosophies and other religions, in order that he may recognize the genuine points of contact between himself and those who believe in those religions [or] . . . those who claim to be totally indifferent to all religion.”<sup>42</sup> Because such a person is grounded in the absolute God, that one can eagerly and joyfully accept the contingent and relative — even in the belief system that one espouses. Thus one meets the other as a brother or sister, not as an adversary, and with the other grows in knowledge of the truth in which they both believe.

Merton maintained that the most effective means of ecumenical dialogue was what he called the “poorer means,” those which seldom or never have any visible results: prayer, sacrifice, and silence. All conversations must stem from silence and in some cases remain in silence, “turned to God in wakeful hope” and trusting that it is God who will bring about reconciliation and mutual understanding. These poorer means are the most effective, Merton felt, because they “imply a more complete surrender to God, a greater delicacy of faith, a deeper appreciation of honest differences, a renunciation of concern with results, a more profound humility and purity of heart.”<sup>43</sup> These are, after all, the steps each individual must take along the path to the true self, so it should not be surprising that they are the roadmarkers in bringing about communion among persons and groups of persons.

Particularly is contemplative prayer a means of fruitful dialogue, for contemplation directs a person to union with God in Whom all live and move and have their being. Communion among persons who seek God comes about, not so much by programs and activities, important though these be, as by a mutual experience of the ultimate reality Who binds all into one. In contemplation where each person is opened to his or her full capacity, each person sees how she or he is like every other person — and discovers in what ways each is unlike all others (CWA, pp. 170, 181-197, 200; AJ, pp. 307f, 311f, 314-317). One finds in prayer that where there are what

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42. Thomas Merton, “The Christian Message in a Changing World,” *UMC News* 1 (Summer 1964), no. 1, p. 2. In his preface to *The Asian Journal*, Amiya Chakravarty says of Merton’s “fitness” for ecumenical dialogue: “Readers of Thomas Merton know that his openness to man’s spiritual horizons came from a rootedness of faith; and inner security led him to explore, experience, and interpret the affinities and differences between religions in the light of his own religion” (AJ, p. vii).

43. Thomas Merton, “The Poorer Means,” *Sobornost* 5 (Winter-Spring 1966), no. 2, pp. 77-79.

seem to be irreconcilable differences in doctrine among religions, there is a similarity in religious experience. Ecumenism in its most profound meaning is a "communion and sharing, not only of information about doctrines which are totally and irrevocably divergent, but also of religious institutions and truth which may turn out to have something in common, beneath surface differences" (MZM, p. 204). In seeking and sharing this inner and ultimate ground which underlies all articulated differences, a new society will emerge — and it just may turn out to be the kingdom of God.

## CONCLUSION

The latter part of the twentieth century has been marked by stupendous advances in technology, especially in the area of gathering, storing and displaying information. Computer techniques and language are taught as a common part of elementary curriculum. The mass media offers around-the-clock and around-the-world coverage of events. These technological inventions have made it possible for us to know more than ever before possible, to produce more than ever before imagined — maybe even more than we really want or need.

Because Merton died before the computer revolution with its decided contribution to the information explosion of the latter half of this century, it is only guesswork to say how he would regard a "silicon society." Having lived longer with the definite advantages of technology, he may have been less categorical in attributing to technology such dire consequences for the human spirit. Nonetheless, I would not be surprised if he would challenge the investments being made both with money and time in information systems. He might raise questions such as these:

- \* With so much information available are we beginning to think we can arrive at the answers of the fundamental questions of life?
- \* Does the media "con" us into thinking that what is given as the news is really what is going on?
- \* With all the machines for communications, why are human relationships breaking down at an almost epidemic rate?
- \* With so much data, why is there so little wisdom among our leaders?
- \* Are we still erecting the Tower of Babel, only now with advanced technology?



And on the more constructive side, would Merton be helping us find ways which allow us to use these tools for human communication to full potential without letting them take over our identities or absorb our attention or without confusing what they can indeed deliver with ineffable truth, the absolute truth upon which we rely for life? Would he encourage us to dwell in the self-emptying or silence and not-knowing so we might have something life-giving to say to each other? Would he not call us again into the quiet room to listen to a soft voice awaken us? I would not be surprised.