

THE WORSHIP OF THE WHOLE OF CREATION: MERTON & THE EASTERN FATHERS

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I must begin by expressing my gratitude for the invitation to take part in this second General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society, and my joy at being able to be here today. As I come from across the Atlantic I have not had the chance to know many of you personally, but I feel that I can address you as friends and begin by taking you into my confidence.

One of the things which Merton does for us is to establish friendships between us. He does this by sharing himself wholly with us, by giving that amazing sense that he is speaking directly to us, which I suppose we have all known in our initial meeting with his writings. Elizabeth Jennings speaks of the art of Thomas Traherne, perhaps Merton's favourite among the seventeenth century Anglicans, as the "Accessible Art". "The poetic prose of Traherne's *Centuries of Meditations*, is an example of the art of sharing, of participation. It is an art wholly accessible.... Traherne is, in the deepest sense, a man possessed. What possesses him is a sense of God and this he wishes to share, to distribute." He gives himself to us in such a way that his work "becomes our property, part of our life."¹ Surely this is the case with Merton, so I feel I can share with you at once the perplexity which has been mine in trying to prepare this lecture.

I suppose we have all known the problem of having to give a talk when we feel we have nothing to say. My problem today has been quite the reverse. I have far too much to say. The more I have thought about the topic I have been given, the more it has seemed to be a topic with immense implications which has as yet, with the exception of a fine article by Father Basil Pennington, been only a little explored. It is, moreover, a topic on which there is a vast quantity of material which has not yet been fully examined.

1. Elizabeth Jennings, *Every Changing Shape* (London: A. Deutsch, 1961), pp.83-84.

What I shall seek to do is to show:

- a) how Merton's basic understanding of the nature of mysticism and theology was decisively influenced by Orthodox models;
- b) how important was the influence on him of two of the outstanding theologians of the Byzantine period, St. Maximus the Confessor (7th century) and St. Gregory Palamas (14th century);
- c) his particular attraction for some of the Russian writers of the 19th and 20th centuries, among them St. Theophan the Recluse and Alexander Schmemmann;
- d) his continuing commitment to the study of the monastic tradition as a whole from its earliest period until today.

Through it all there is the thought of the worship of all creation, since it is a characteristic of Eastern Orthodoxy that it has never lost the early Christian sense of the unity of all creation in the praise of God.

This necessarily brief treatment of a very large subject will bring us to a conclusion which will centre on Merton's importance as a theologian and as a prophet of the renewal of Christian unity. Merton was that rare thing, a theologian who is also a poet, a poet who is also a theologian. If I wanted a motto for this lecture I would take the lines

So all theology
Is a kind of birthday
A coming home to where we are
Epiphany and Eden.²

I shall throughout be speaking of the last years of Merton's life and in the last half of the lecture I shall base myself on the *Lectures on Ascetical and Mystical Theology* given at the monastery in 1961 and not so far published, and in the second on some of the *Working Notebooks* to be found in the Archive at Bellarmine College in Louisville.

I. ORTHODOX INFLUENCE ON MERTON'S MYSTICISM

2. Thomas Merton, *Eighteen Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1985). np.

In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* Merton wrote "If I can unite in myself the thought and devotion of Eastern and Western Christendom, the Greek and the Latin Fathers, the Russian with the Spanish Mystics, I can prepare in myself the reunion of divided Christians. . . . If we want to bring together what is divided we cannot do so by imposing one division upon another or absorbing one division into another. We must contain all the divided worlds in ourselves and transcend them in Christ."³ This is precisely what Merton has done, containing the divisions within himself and transcending them in the unity which is in Christ. This is a unity which is cosmo-theandric. I dislike technical terms but this one has its uses. It brings together God, humankind and the world into a single focus. It speaks of the worship of the whole of creation, the huge chorus of living beings.

In this meeting we are thinking primarily of the cosmic dimension of Merton's thought. But that dimension cannot be separated from the two other dimensions, human and divine, which meet in Christ in whom God, humanity and all things created are reconciled. Merton's whole effort of mastering the tradition of Christian East and West or rather of letting himself be mastered by it was anything but antiquarian. It was motivated by an urgent desire to enter more deeply into the life and death and rising of Christ for the sake of the world today. In the introduction to the *Lectures on Ascetical and Mystical Theology* he writes, "the mystical tradition of the Church—a collective memory and experience of Christ living and present within her. This tradition forms and affects the whole man: intellect, memory, will, emotions, body, skills (arts), all must be under the sway of the Holy Spirit. Important human dimensions given by tradition—its incarnate character—Note especially the memory." And he goes on to say that if we do not have a healthy and conscious grasp of tradition we shall be a prey to "unhealthy and unconscious traditions—a kind of collective disposition to neurosis", a highly perceptive comment on some movements that call themselves traditionalist.⁴

I have spoken of the mystical tradition of the Church. But I must go on at once to make the point from which Merton begins his whole teaching on the subject. There is nothing esoteric or exclusive about this tradition. It is simply the handing on of the Gospel of

3. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1966), p. 20. Hereafter referred to in the text as *CGB*.

4. Thomas Merton, *Lectures on Ascetical and Mystical Theology*, p.9. Hereafter referred to in the text as *LAMT*.

Christ, the faith by which the people of God have lived for 2000 years, in its deepest and most authentic form.

One basic purpose of the *Lectures* is to show that "the mystical tradition cannot be separated from the dogmatic and moral tradition but forms one whole with it. Without mysticism there is no real theology and without theology there is no real mysticism" (*LAMT*, p. 1). Merton makes this point at the beginning and he repeats it later on, spelling it out in words which he has adapted from one of the most creative writers of the Russian emigration, Vladimir Lossky. "By mysticism we can mean the personal experience of what is revealed to all and realised in all in the mystery of Christ. And by theology we mean the common revelation of the mystery which is to be lived by all. The two belong together, there is no theology without mysticism (for it would have no relation to the real life of God in us) and there is no mysticism without theology (because it would be at the mercy of individual and subjective fantasy)" (*LAMT*, p.26). Unless our mysticism is truly theological, growing from God's revelation of himself in Christ and his gift of himself in the Spirit, then it becomes turned in on itself, "the experience of experience...the death of contemplation" (*LAMT*, p. 10).

For Merton, then, the heart of the matter lies in an appropriation of the tradition which is at once mystical and theological, subjective and objective, experiential and yet more than experiential. He is aligning himself here quite consciously with a school of thought which was particularly active in continental Catholicism in the middle of this century, and whose outstanding representatives were men like de Lubac, von Balthasar, Congar, Louis Boyer and amongst monastic writers, Jean Leclercq. It was a movement which aimed to recover the theological vision of the first ten centuries, the centuries before the division between East and West, and before the rise of scholasticism in the West, and while it involved a great deal of historical study and investigation its aims also were anything but antiquarian. As Merton remarks, it had been stimulated by the bitter experience of nazism and fascism and the Second World War, an experience which showed Christians in Europe something of the force of the powers of destruction at work in our age, and had made them realize the need to go back to first principles in Christian theology, and in the whole life of the Church.

It was also a movement which was greatly stimulated by the presence in the West, for the first time for ten centuries of a school of theologians who represented the Eastern half of the earlier common tradition. This centred on the group of Russian theologians who worked

in Paris in the 1930s and the 1940s. Merton was well aware of their writings and he quotes another of their outstanding representatives, Father George Florovsky at another vital point in the introduction to his *Lectures*. Florovsky is for him not only a witness to the Eastern tradition of Christianity but also a spokesman for a Church which in 1917 had felt the full impact of 20th century secularization. It was a Church which was aware that we live in apocalyptic times, and that it is only in the power of Christ himself, only in the gift of the Holy Spirit, that the Christian faith can be maintained today:

It is precisely because we are thrown into the apocalyptic battle that we are called upon to do the job of theologians....Theology is called not to judge but to heal. We must penetrate into the world of doubt, of illusion and lies, to reply to doubts as well as to reproaches.

And Merton adds by way of qualification "But not to reply with complacent and ambiguous platitudes. Must be the word of God lived in us." And as if to confirm his own intuition he quotes again Florovsky

a theological system must not be a mere product of erudition...it needs the experience of prayer and spiritual concentration and pastoral concern...We must experience in ourselves by intimate suffering all the problems of the soul without faith who does not seek....The time has come when the refusal of theological knowledge has become a deadly sin; the mark of complacency and lack of love, of pusillanimity and malignity.

The call to the monk is nothing less than to become a theologian in this sense (*LAMT*, p. 10).

How did Merton set out to present this tradition to his brethren? The *Lectures* open with a masterly résumé of the dogmatic and mystical teaching of the Church centred around the twin doctrines of incarnation and deification, which are in fact two sides of the same mystery; God's coming to be with us where we are that we may come to be with him where he is; coming out of himself to us and our going out of ourselves to him. This doctrine Merton sees as firmly rooted in the New Testament, in St. John's Gospel which he looks at in some detail, and in St. Paul's Epistles which he treats much more briefly. It is expressed afresh in the writings of the martyrs—Ignatius of Antioch is central here—and of the Christian teachers of the second and third centuries, most notably Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria. It is articulated in greater detail in the writings of the Cappadocians, above all in Gregory of Nyssa, and of the spiritual writers of that time,

Evagrius, the Macarian homilies, and Denys the Areopagite. It is of course of great significance that Merton makes absolutely no break between the New Testament writers and the post-apostolic writers. Scripture and tradition form one whole.

The movement of Merton's exposition which so far has been rapid and confident, now seems to falter as he comes to what may seem at first sight a relatively secondary question, the question of the spiritual senses. He allows himself a long digression into a controversy between two French scholars of the earlier part of this century, Poulain and Olphe-Gaillard. This discussion is cut short with the help of the Fathers of the Church and an appeal to St. Gregory Palamas, the theologian of the Transfiguration and of our vision of the divine light. Merton comments "the lesson of this is that the doctrine of the spiritual senses when it is expressed in scholastic or phenomenological terms is confusing and inconclusive. It is especially unfortunate that the doctrine gets lost in psychology" (*LAMT*, p. 39).

I would pause for a moment to comment on the significance of this appeal to Palamas. Palamas flourished in the first half of the fourteenth century. Because of the fall of the Eastern empire in 1453 and the schism between East and west his work was never properly known in the West and was largely forgotten in the East. Much of it was published for the first time only in the 1950s and 1960s. The recovery of the knowledge of his theology in Romania, in Greece, in the Russian emigration and finally in Russia itself in the last half-century, has been of great importance for the survival of Orthodoxy through these difficult decades. Merton knew his thought through the work of John Meyendorff, at that stage still teaching in Paris, and he immediately sensed its importance. Here was a theologian who gave himself to defend and expound the reality of the Christian experience of God and to see that experience as rooted in the body and in the bodily senses. Merton sums up the matter thus: "the spiritual senses are thus the senses themselves, but spiritualised under the sway of the Spirit, rather than new spiritual faculties." He refers to a number of vital passages from Palamas on this subject. "The spiritual joy that comes from the spirit into the body is not at all corrupted by communion with the body but transforms the body and makes it spiritual" (*LAMT*, p. 40).

One only has to think of the way that Merton formulated his own deepest and intimate experience of things in such a superb passage as the "Prayer to God the Father on the Vigil of Pentecost" (*Conjectures*), to see how vital the insights of Palamas were for him. I am here "to speak your name of Father just by being here as 'son' in the Spirit and the Light which you have given and which are no unearthly light but simply this plain June day, with its shining fields, its tulip tree, the pines, the woods, the clouds and the flowers everywhere" (*CGB*, p. 175). Through the body and the senses we experience our solidarity with all creation; through the body and the senses we are able to perceive the light of God shining out in that creation, and thus we are able, through the body and the senses, to offer the praise of all creation to almighty God.

The climax of the first part of the *Lectures* comes in chapter 8, "Contemplation and the Cosmos", a chapter wholly given to the thought of Maximus the Confessor. Here Merton treats directly the East-West theme of our meeting today, wedding Byzantine mystical theology to the vision and the skill of the Shakers in nineteenth century America, and drawing together different elements in his own experience in ways which are both creative and healing. It is interesting to note that in his introduction to the *Lectures*, when he describes the subjects he intends to cover, he makes no mention of this chapter. It seems as though it grew under his hands as he was writing.

Merton begins by giving his estimate of Maximus (died 662) as one of the greatest and most authoritative of all the Greek Fathers. "He has the broadest and most balanced view of the Christian cosmos of all the Greek Fathers, and therefore of all the Fathers" (*LAMT*, p. 58). Maximus is a great and complex thinker. Like Palamas he is a theologian who was very little known and studied in the West until the last twenty or thirty years. One of his most striking characteristics is his capacity to unite the mystic's concern with the One, the ultimate unity of all things, with the artist's sense of the value of each specific thing, of the infinite diversity of the creation.

The love of Christ hides itself mysteriously in the *Logoi* of created things.... In all that is varied lies He who is simple and without parts, in those which have a beginning He who has no beginning, in all the visible He who is invisible. (*LAMT*, p. 58)

Maximus teaches that if we are to come to look into the mysteries of God himself and his love for humankind, that is to say, *theologia*, we need first to look into the things which God has made, to exercise ourselves in *theoria physike*, natural contemplation which discerns the inner *logoi* in events and things, their God-given meaning, inscape, specificity and nature. The world is full of *logoi*, expressions of God's creative will and purpose. They meet together in the One who is the *Logos*, the Word, in whom and for whom all things were made. The *logos* within human persons, not just our reason but our whole capacity to see and know, to discern and understand, is created in order to respond to the *logoi* in the world around us, to praise and celebrate their goodness.

In a paragraph where Merton tells us not only what he thought but also what he lived, he writes "the vision of *theoria physike* is essentially sophianic. Man by *theoria* is able to unite the hidden wisdom of God in things with the hidden light of wisdom in himself. The meeting and marriage of these two brings about a resplendent clarity within Man himself, and this clarity is the presence of Divine Wisdom fully recognized and active in him. Thus Man becomes a mirror of the divine glory and is resplendent with divine truth not only in his mind but in his life. He is filled with the light of wisdom which shines forth in him and thus God is glorified in him. At the same time he exercises a spiritualising influence in the world by the work of his hands which is in accord with the creative wisdom of God in things and in history" (LAMT, p.59). Something of the resplendence is to be seen in the faces of Merton and the Dalai Lama, in the photograph taken after their long and truly sophianic conversation in which something healing and creative had been given to both of them. We have also the words of a stranger who met Merton on the last stages of his Asian journey and who tells us of "that cleaner than clean, serenely open, quite halo-like face" as he perceived it in Merton waiting in the airport lounge for the flight to Calcutta.⁵ It is a commentary on our times that the observer could interpret the phenomenon in terms of "psychedelic experience."

It would be tempting to expound at length Merton's understanding of *theoria physike* as he develops it under the guidance of

5. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), p. 555.

Maximus. He sees as an expression of Christian faith in the inherent goodness of things which remains despite all the ravages of sin, and in the power of the divine grace which is always at work to make up what is lacking and to heal what is wounded in the creation of God. He sees the relevance of all this not only to our contemplation of things, but to our use and transformation of them, and he comments on the dangers of our advanced technology when it is ruled by the desire to exploit and manipulate. He speaks about the role of the artist and of the way in which he of all people must be in touch with the *Logoi*.

He does not necessarily have to be fully respectable in a conventional sense. A kind of unconventionality may be in him a form of humility and folly for Christ....We must not forbid the artist a necessary element of paradox in his life....He must at all costs attain to an inner purity and honesty, and sincerity and integrity of spirit. He must be *holokleros*, who understands the *Logoi* of things, and is attuned to the *tropoi*. (LAMT, p. 63)

But it is to the Shakers that I wish to come, and to the way in which Merton speaks about them here. It is important to remember that this was written thirty years ago, when books on the Shakers were few and interest in their work quite limited in extent.

Shaker handicrafts and furniture. Deeply impregnated by the communal mystique of the Shaker community. The simplicity and austerity demanded by their way of life enabled an unconscious spiritual purity to manifest itself in full clarity. Shaker handicrafts are, then, a real epiphany of *Logoi*. Characterised by spiritual light.

See also their buildings. Barns especially. Highly mystical quality; capaciousness, dignity, solidity, permanence. *Logos* of a barn? 'But my wheat, gather ye into my barn.' Note, it is never a question of a barn in the abstract and in no definite place; the Shaker farm building always fits right into its location, manifests the *logos* of the place where it is built, grasps and expresses the hidden *logos* of the valley of hillside which forms its site. *Logos* of the site. Important in Cistercian monasteries of the twelfth century. (LAMT, p. 64)

This last point is of the greatest significance. The *logos* of a thing is always specific. It is in some way universal, it is never abstract. It is in and through the particular qualities of a place, a person, a time, an event, that the divine light shines out, transfiguring the limitations of what is given by nature. This can be seen even in the names of the places, whether twelfth century Cistercians or

nineteenth century Shaker, Clara Vallis, Pleasant Hill, Sabbath Day Lake, Fountains Abbey, Logumkloster, Locus Dei.

II. THE WORKING NOTEBOOKS: CONTINUED DEVELOPMENT

We have been looking at Merton's *Lectures* from 1961. I want now to turn to the subsequent years, the last six or seven years of his life, and see something of how his mind grew and developed during that time. I am reliant here to a large extent on the *Working Notebooks* in the Archive at Bellarmine. From his early days in the monastery Merton seems to have been in the habit of making copious notes on books that he was reading. These he kept in large bound or looseleaf notebooks. Some of the material at Bellarmine goes back to the early 1950s; more of it dates from the 1960s. The last notebooks show his reading in the months and weeks before he set off on the Asian journey. I cannot pretend to have done more than scratch the surface of this material, but in two visits to the Archive it became clear that there is much of the greatest value to be found.

The notebooks give one a new impression of the width of Merton's interests and the seriousness with which he pursued them. They reveal an almost frightening intensity of purpose. In these last years Merton was exploring all the major religious traditions of humankind: Hinduism, Buddhism (Japanese and Tibetan), Hasidism and the world of Judaism. And then in the last years he made a determined raid on the treasures of Sufism. At the same time he was expanding his knowledge of twentieth century literature, the poets of Latin America, novelists in France and the United States. He was breaking into new areas, examining developments in the Third World, particularly at the meeting point between primitive and developed cultures; not to mention his constant involvement with questions of justice, peace and non-violence.

It seems to me that during these years there was an explosion of activity going on in Merton's heart and mind. But it was a very special kind of explosion, one which has no exact equivalent in the physical world. It was a non-disintegrating explosion, and hence its effects were constructive and not destructive. The centre did hold. He did not fall apart. Anyone less well integrated than he was, might well have done so. I am not surprised that *The Vow of Conversation* contains

quite a number of references to physical ailments. Someone living at such an intensity of spiritual and intellectual activity might well find curious side effects in the physical part of their makeup, and might be so absorbed into these things as to neglect their physical condition.

When I say that the centre held, I mean quite specifically, that the *Notebooks* show how through these years Merton was continuing to maintain his interest in the central theological and spiritual tradition of Christendom, both in its patristic and in its modern versions. He was continuing to deepen and develop his already considerable knowledge of the monastic tradition of Christian East and West. More than one hundred pages of notes on Celtic Christianity and Celtic monasticism, for instance, in *Notebook 48* dating from 1963 to 1965, show him still pursuing insights into the origins of the Christianity of our offshore islands.

The centre held, too, in the sense that Merton's discipline of prayer, silence and meditation, so movingly described in the letters to Abdul Aziz provided the background to all this mental activity, the necessary foundation on which it could stand. An entry in his California diary, *Woods, Shore, Desert*, is extraordinarily illuminating in this regard. "Not to run from one to the next, says Theophane the Recluse, but to give each one time to settle in the heart. Attention: concentration of the spirit in the heart. Sobriety: concentration of the feeling in the heart."⁶ It was this characteristically monastic centering of feeling, will and spirit in the heart, this constant search for the place of the heart in the disciplined use of the Jesus Prayer which kept Merton centred in himself and made the immense expansion of his interests during these years both possible and fruitful.

This quotation comes from the nineteenth century Russian writer who evidently attracted Merton greatly. Theophan the Recluse (George Govorov, 1815-1894) was the bishop who after seven years of pastoral activity resigned his see and lived the latter part of his life as a hermit. During these years he made a new Russian translation of the *Philokalia* and exerted a considerable influence as a spiritual director through his extensive correspondence. He is one of those who were canonised by the Orthodox Church at the Council in Moscow in

6. Thomas Merton, *Woods, Shore, Desert, a Notebook*. May 1968 (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1982), p. 16.

1988. Merton had come to know his work partly through the writings of Serge Bolshakoff, but more particularly, through an anthology of texts on prayer published in England in 1966, called *The Art of Prayer*. The book has an excellent introduction by Father (now Bishop) Kallistos Ware. In some ways this is a very ordinary collection of texts about the way of prayer as practiced in Russian lay and monastic circles in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is clear from the markings in Merton's copy of the book in the Archive of Bellarmine College that it was a work that he particularly appreciated. Constantly, it is the extracts from Theophan that are underlined and singled out.⁷

The notebooks give further evidence of Merton's interest in the spiritual and intellectual tradition of Russian Orthodoxy. In 1966 he published a review article in *Monastic Studies* on the first two of Alexander Schmemmann's books to appear in English, *Sacraments and Orthodoxy*, and *Ultimate Questions*. The first of these is a brilliant introduction to the Orthodox understanding of faith and worship, in which the writer introduces his reader to the vision of the world itself as the sacrament of God's wisdom and love. The second is an anthology of texts from some of the major Russian thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The published review reveals Merton's enthusiasm for both books, but the notes in *Notebook 16* (August - November 1965) show the immediacy of his response, as he copies out passages that capture his attention and comments on them on the facing page. It is interesting to note that the same notebook contains twenty-four pages of notes on Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*, a book which he read with even greater interest and excitement.

Schmemmann was a man who had something of Merton's own gift of making theological topics accessible to the general reader, and one feels in Merton a very special resonance to some of his positions. Throughout his writings Schmemmann saw two dangers for the Church in the twentieth century, on the one side that of retreating into a little, tight, artificial world of religious concerns, on the other, that of going out to meet the world wholly on the world's terms. Merton applies this discernment to the position of the monk. I quote from the review:

7. Theophan (George Govorov) Anthologized in *The Art of Prayer* (Intro. by Bishop Kallistos Ware) (London: Faber & Faber, 1966)

the true way of the monk is in fact not to be sought in devising some explicit or implicit answer to any special problems which the world may have formulated for itself. The monk is not a man of answers. He need not be concerned with either an optimistic or a pessimistic attitude

towards these questions, however crucial they may seem. His life is an expression of eschatological hope and joy, of the presence of the Lord in his creation which he has redeemed, and which by the power of the Spirit he will transform. When this is understood, the monastic life will be seen for what it is; complete openness to the Spirit, and hence openness to all that is blessed by God, whether in the world or out of it.

It is in this sense, that without proposing this or that answer to the problems of social injustice, war, racism, technology, automation, the monk will be all the more open, in compassion and love, to his brother in the world, because he is liberated by his vocation from the false answers dictated by the world itself. This openness is illusory unless it is explicitly paid for by obedience to the Spirit and to the word of the Cross.⁸

It is interesting to see here how Merton has become more resistant to the notion of the monk, or Christian, as one who provides "answers" in terms of the questions which the world poses. The monk, the Church, like Christ himself, is to witness "to the presence of the Lord in the creation which he has redeemed," to bear witness to the presence of the kingdom in our midst, to the power and wisdom of God hidden in the *Logoi* of all creation.

If the *Notebooks* give evidence of Merton's interest in the more recent manifestations of Eastern Orthodoxy, they also show his continuing concern for the earliest expressions of that same tradition. One text in particular, in *Notebook 24*, is very striking. It is dated explicitly 'Pentecost 1967', and contains a resumé of the story of the meeting between St. Anthony and St. Paul of Egypt as told in St. Jerome's *Life of St. Paul*. This story is one which is well-known in early monastic history and Merton certainly knew it before 1967. It looks as though he took it on purpose for his reading and meditation on that feast and made it a kind of celebration of Pentecost for that year. In the story we hear how St. Anthony, generally recognized as the first of Christian monks and already an old man, was told by God to go and find another older, better monk, who had preceded him in the desert. Anthony goes off and is guided to the oasis where Paul has lived all

8. *Monastic Studies* (Number 4, Advent 1966), p. 115.

these years a life of hidden prayer. They pass the day in conversation together, and receive their meal from the hand of God, a large loaf brought to them by a raven, which eventually they agree to break together so that one should not take precedence over the other. The story ends with the death of Paul and the arrival of two lions who come to bury him.

The text is an extraordinarily beautiful one, full of characteristic themes of early monastic literature. It is a story about the surprises of God. Anthony thinks he is the pioneer but finds there was another before him. He sets out to look for Paul, like Abraham, not knowing where he is going and he is guided to his destination in unexpected ways. The narrative contains a repeated note of thanksgiving, of eucharist, and a kind of gentle half-ironic humour which would have particularly attracted Merton. Animals, real and fabulous, play a large part in the story. There is a centaur and a satyr as well as a wolf which give Anthony directions on the way. There is a raven which brings the loaf. There are the lions which perform the last rites. All creation serves God; the animal creation seems to do rather better than the human race. Here in a text from one of the greatest Latin Fathers you have a celebration of the lives of the very monks of the Egyptian desert. It is a place where Latin West and Greek and Coptic East are entirely at one, in the grace of the Holy Spirit who unites the two solitaries in their day of eucharistic sharing.

Why did Merton choose to work on that text on Whitsunday 1967? A hint is provided by a note which, also unexpectedly, happens to be dated from a few days earlier. Merton had been reading about the great Anglo-Saxon poem *The Dream of the Rood*. Verses of that poem are inscribed on the Ruthwell Cross, the greatest stone monument from the Anglo-Saxon centuries in Britain. The cross dates from the beginning of the eighth century, and all the scenes carved on it come from the Gospel except this one scene of the meeting of St. Paul and St. Anthony of Egypt. This story from the beginnings of monastic life was of crucial significance to the early monastic communities of Britain and Ireland. The scene is to be found on some of the greatest standing crosses in Ireland. reference to it is found in early Welsh religious verse. It is an element of the one tradition which is to be found at the roots of the Christian history of our two off-shore European islands. It is more than probable that it was the reading of these articles about the Ruthwell Cross which sent Merton down to the monastery library

to collect volume 23 of the *Patrologia Latina*, and make his Whitsun meditation on the description of the meeting of Paul and Anthony in the desert.

III. MERTON: MYSTICAL THEOLOGIAN

To conclude, I would want to affirm that Merton is a great theologian, one of the great theologians of the twentieth century America. He is a theologian primarily in the sense that Evagrius uses that word, one whose prayer is true, one who sees deeply into the mysteries of God. But he is also a theologian in the sense that he is a great and gifted servant of the Word, with a gift for communicating that Word to others, one who allows the mystery of faith to be named and heard in a great many places where it is not usually named and heard. He was, to use the term which Albert Outler uses to describe John Wesley, a fold theologian, not a theologian's theologian. I should prefer to say a people's theologian, a theologian of the people of God. And what Outler says of Wesley is surprisingly true of Merton. He had no academic base, no political base, and no intention of founding a new denomination, yet

we don't have many mass evangelists/popular writers on religion with anything like Wesley's/Merton's immersion in classical culture, his eager openness to modern science and social change, his awareness of the entire Christian tradition as a living resource—and even fewer with his ecclesial vision of a sacramental community as the nurturing environment of Christian experience.⁹

Merton was a great mystical and experiential theologian, a great historical theologian, with a firm grasp of the main outlines of the development of Christian doctrine and a remarkably detailed knowledge of the development of monastic life and thought from the fourth century to the present day. Perhaps above all he was a great poetic theologian who in his writing gives voice to the praise and worship of the whole creation; that rare thing, a great poet, more in his prose than in his verse, who is also a great theologian.

In saying all this, I am not in any way wishing to minimize the importance and creativity of his work in promoting the dialogue of religions, his work at the point of meeting of theology and culture, or

9. *The Place of Wesley in the Christian Tradition*, Ed. Kenneth F. Rowe. (Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow, 1976), p. 13.

his work in the field of justice, non-violence and peace. He is important to us for a great variety of reasons and he excelled in a great variety of fields. But at the heart of it all there was his concern for the tradition of the church "the collective memory and experience of Christ living within her," and there was "his awareness of the entire Christian tradition as a living resource." By his gift of making accessible to us wisdom from distant periods and distant parts of that tradition, he challenges us to grow into a deeper awareness of the resources which are latent there. In particular, he challenges us Western Christians to rediscover the riches of the Christian East, maybe to learn Russian or Romanian or Greek and actually go to the countries of Eastern Europe which have been cut off from us for so long to learn firsthand from our brothers and sisters there what they have learnt of Christ in this twentieth century. It may well be that in the future, it will be Merton's intuitive and prophetic actions in the field of the relations between Christians and people to the life of the twenty-first century. But there is an immense amount still to be done by way of that inner recovery of Christian unity of which he spoke in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. This is in some ways a more prosaic task, nearer to us and less glamorous, but it is nonetheless necessary if we are to recover both depth and balance in our understanding and living of the Christian faith.

Perhaps it is in the end not an either/or but a both/and. The Merton who so impressed the Tibetan abbots and teachers on his visit to India did so in part because he had troubled to learn enough about Tibetan Buddhism to be able to enter into a real and intelligent conversation with them. But he impressed them still more because they at once recognized in him an authoritative and discerning representative of the Christian tradition as a whole, Catholic and Protestant, Eastern and Western. So let the last word be with the Dalai Lama: "This was the first time that I had been struck by such a feeling of spirituality in anyone who professed Christianity. . . . It was Merton who introduced me to the real meaning of the word 'Christian'."¹⁰

10. *Freedom in Exile: The Autobiography of the Dalai Lama* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1990), p. 189.

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