

## Merton and Mysticism of the Mind

Robert Faricy, SJ

Thomas Merton's theology of contemplation developed over his lifetime, and surely would have continued to evolve had he lived longer. His posthumously published and never really completed and polished book, *Contemplative Prayer*,<sup>1</sup> contains his last ideas on contemplation. How does Merton's theology of contemplation, as we find in *Contemplative Prayer*, fit into the Christian tradition of contemplative prayer? How is it related to Zen meditation? Why is it sometimes misunderstood?

One can find two currents in Christian theology and in Christian mysticism: the intellectualist and the voluntarist, the mind and the heart. In medieval theology, Thomas Aquinas (the primacy of the intellect over the will) and John Duns Scotus (the primacy of both, with no real distinction between will and intellect) represent these two currents. In contemporary theology, Karl Rahner in his dogmatic theology, Hans Küng and Francis A. Sullivan are examples of theologians of the intellectualist current; Hans Urs von Balthasar, Henri de Lubac and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin exemplify the voluntarist current. In spiritual theology, and especially in the theology of contemplative prayer, Pseudo-Dionysius, Meister Eckhart (1260–1327) and Merton represent the intellectualist tradition, the mysticism of the mind. Most Carmelite writers on contemplation represent the voluntarist tradition,<sup>2</sup> the mysticism of the heart, as well as many Jesuits

1. New York: Doubleday, 1969.

2. Jacques Maritain and others have taken John of the Cross to be a sort of Thomist because he uses so many scholastic and even Thomistic words and phrases. These are the words and phrases he learned studying theology at the University of Salamanca. However, John of the Cross uses the scholastic terminology quite creatively to describe contemplative experience. He stands squarely in the tradition of the heart, the voluntarist tradition, along with Teresa of Avila and Thérèse of Lisieux.

who write in the field of spiritual theology, including Karl Rahner when he wrote in that area.

These two currents represent two ends of a spectrum between intellectualist and voluntarist theologies and spiritualities. Many theologians in Christian history have found themselves somewhere around the middle of the spectrum: for example, Suso, Tauler, Ruusbroek and several Cistercians. Merton, at least in his later years, quite clearly stands near the intellectualist end of that spectrum.

I would like to describe briefly the mysticism of the mind of Meister Eckhart, then, after that, describe Zen Buddhist meditation underlining its intellectualist orientation, and finally draw some conclusions about Merton's theology of contemplation. Here I will, like Eckhart, Zen and Merton, talk about experience, about the experience of contemplation. Not metaphysics nor dogma, but models of experience: models of experiencing union with God in contemplation (or, as the Buddhists say, in meditation).

Merton was influenced by Eckhart and by Zen because he found himself in Eckhart and in Zen. They spoke to him about his own experience in contemplative prayer. He recognized his prayer, or at least principal elements of it, in Eckhart's theology and in Zen writings. They helped Merton to understand his own experience; they gave him categories of understanding what he himself did every day in union with God. To that extent, and in that sense, Eckhart and Zen had a considerable influence on Merton's later theology of contemplative prayer.

### Eckhart and Mysticism of the Mind

Meister Eckhart, like John of the Cross, uses Thomistic theological and philosophical language not to analyze but to describe his experience of God, and especially the experience of God in prayer. His model is one of intimate union in identity. I experience myself as one with God, as in intimate union with God to the point of experiencing that I am identical with God, really somehow one with God.<sup>3</sup>

3. The soul's union with God without distinction (*unio indistinctionis*) is the soul's most profound reality. Note that the Dominican order in 1986 petitioned the Holy See to recognize Eckhart's writings as a good and authentic guide for Christians, and that several contemporary scholars find continuities in Eckhart with elements in the earlier tradition, especially with neo-Platonist Christian currents. Note too that some accepted mystics have used expressions similar to those found in Eckhart's writings. For example, St Catherine of Genoa: 'My *me* is God, nor do I recognize any other me except God himself ... My being is God, not by some

This intellectualist model differs considerably from the voluntarist model of, say, Teresa of Avila who understands contemplative prayer as 'being with the one whom I know loves me,' as intimate friendship with Jesus Christ. The Carmelite tradition views contemplative prayer as conscious union with Jesus Christ in close friendship, in intimate companionship.

God, for Eckhart, is closer to me than I am to myself. God is pure being (*esse*); but beyond that and more exactly, God is pure *understanding* (*intelligere*). 'God exists because he understands', and not the other way around.<sup>4</sup> Existence means created; existing things are creatures. So God is above and beyond existence. 'In God there is no being or existence.'<sup>5</sup> 'God...is higher than being.'<sup>6</sup> I am in the image of God precisely because I can know. My intellect is the ground of my freedom and the seat of grace in me.

My union with God, then, is primarily at the level of my understanding. I know him and so I love him. But God, of course, is beyond my understanding; my knowledge of him is necessarily a dark knowledge. Contemplative experience, then, is the knowledge that God and I are one; and I experience that oneness as oneness, as identity.

Eckhart does not really confuse the existence of the creature with that of God. They are totally different. So much so that if I can be said to exist, then God is so far above existence that he does not exist. But if God exists, then I do not, then I am nothing.

But I *experience* my union with God as my identity with God. I am lost in God; I am in a certain sense, not of course in a metaphysical sense, God.

My experience of God, for Eckhart, has to be completely apophatic, because God is so totally other and so far above anything I can understand. My knowledge of God is a no-knowledge, necessarily. And so

simple participation but by a true transformation of my being' (quoted in F. von Hugel, *The Mystical Element of Religion as Studied in Saint Catherine of Genoa and her Friends* [2 vols.; New York: E.P. Dutton, 1908], I, p. 265).

See J. Wiseman, 'To Be God with God: The Autotheistic Sayings of the Mystics', *Theological Studies* 51 (1990), pp. 230-51. Wiseman states that the intensity of the union that these mystics experience with God can lead them to make such bold claims, but that their orthodoxy finally must be evaluated by how they live, by whether or not the union of identity that they describe leads them to a kind of solipsistic fixation on themselves or to reach outward in love to others.

4. *Parisian Questions and Prologues* (ed. A. Mauer; Toronto: PIMS, 1974), p. 45.

5. Eckhart, *Parisian Questions*, p. 46.

6. Eckhart, *Parisian Questions*, p. 50.

the basic virtue for Eckhart is detachment, to be empty of all created things so that I can be full of God. Because if I am full of created things, then I am empty of God. I want to know God in an unknowing and to love him in an unloving, in an indistinct union that becomes identification with and oneness with God. Yes, we are distinct. But my experience of our union is an experience of indistinction, of oneness, of union of identity.

To know God is to know that I am one with him and that we have the same being: his. This union is with the Father and with the Son in the Spirit, and with the Divine Essence which is Understanding, and has an existence beyond existence in which I share and in which I am in God.

Eckhart describes the divine activity among the Three Persons as *bullitio*, a coming to a boil. He also speaks of *ebullitio*, a low level boiling, a kind of simmering. Creation, always ongoing, is *ebullitio*, a boiling up or simmering of God into those manifestations of him that are creatures. I am a boiling up of God. The image is similar to Thomas Aquinas: as fire sets on fire, God who is Existence gives me my existence. But Thomas is speaking metaphysically, existentially. Eckhart is talking about experiencing God.

Merton first mentions Eckhart in a notebook in 1938. In the book *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*<sup>7</sup> he seems to have newly discovered Eckhart: 'Stand still', Merton hears from Eckhart, 'do not waver from your emptiness ... Learn to be at home in this darkness'. By 1968 Merton was referring to Eckhart as 'my life-raft'.<sup>8</sup> And in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*,<sup>9</sup> Merton writes that in Meister Eckhart can be found a full and true expression of Zen in Christian experience.

### Zen Meditation as Mysticism of the Mind

Zen, like Eckhart and Merton, is intellectualist, a mysticism of the mind. Zen writers like D.T. Suzuki, who had so much influence on Merton, understand Eckhart and find him appealing; they belong to the same intellectualist line of mysticism.<sup>10</sup> Merton points out the affinity between Eckhart and Zen, 'Whatever Zen may be, however you define it, it is somehow there in Eckhart'.<sup>11</sup>

7. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966.

8. Patrick Reilly, 'Moses as an Exemplar: The Paradox of Thomas Merton', *The Merton Seasonal* 21.3 (Autumn 1996), pp. 12-18.

9. New York: New Directions, 1968, p. 9.

10. See *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, p. 110.

11. Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, p. 13.

Suzuki shows the similarity or perhaps identity between the emptiness that Eckhart speaks of and the emptiness of Zen. Detachment from all things. This emptiness is the *nada* (nothing) of John of the Cross. In my contemplative prayer, I leave all that is not God to go to God; I leave behind my image of God, my interior pictures of God, my feelings about God, everything, to go to God. But are not Zen Buddhists atheists, non-believers in God? My Zen master in South Korea told me the first time I met him that he definitely did not believe in the existence in God. But, like all Zen Buddhists, he does believe in the Buddha Nature, in True Mind. Since Nagarjuna (c. 200) and Vasubandhu (c. 500), Zen Buddhists have held that all phenomena are void, with the exception of consciousness only.<sup>12</sup> This consciousness is the Buddha Nature, or True Mind, or True Consciousness, or True Understanding. What is the Buddha Nature, or True Mind? True Mind is the ultimate reality. Does it exist? Yes, and because it is ultimate reality, nothing else can exist in the same way. Like Eckhart, Zen philosophy has no analogy of being. If ultimate reality exists, then nothing else does. But if creatures exist, then ultimate reality is nothing, beyond being, a Void. Finally, only the Void, ultimate reality, True Mind, exists.<sup>13</sup> What we perceive, including ourselves, are manifestations of True Mind (like the boiling up of Eckhart's creation theology, or the flaming up of the creation theology of Thomas Aquinas).

Is this True Mind what Christians call God? Yes. Do Zen practitioners really contemplate God? Yes, they do, and Merton understood this.

Zen contemplation is apophatic, dark, empty, without concepts. When I did Zen at a hermitage attached to the main monastery of the Korean Chogye order (the world's largest Zen order), my Zen master gave me advice that could have come straight from John of the Cross, the Catholic master of apophatic contemplation. When I told him that Jesus had given me my koan and that it worked fine for me, the Zen master told me that it was a very good koan. And when I told him that during my daily 11 hours of Zen Jesus was talking to me, telling me things, the Zen master showed no surprise at all. 'Fine', he said, 'but do not hold on to what you hear; let it go, let it go, stay in a blank

12. See J. Pereira and F. Tisot, 'The Evolution of Buddhist Systematics from the Buddha to Vasubandhu', *Philosophy East and West* 38.2 (April 1988), pp. 172-86.

13. See John of the Cross (*Ascent of Mount Carmel* 1.13.11): 'God is all in himself, but nothing to us; light in himself but darkness to us; plenitude in himself but emptiness to us'.

place, in the quiet meadow; hold on to nothing, let it go'. This is, certainly, apophatic. The Zen contemplative enters, through the koan or through just sitting, into Ultimate Reality, True Mind, the Void, what we call God. And he does it non-conceptually. If there are any spiritual fireworks, any manifestations of that Ultimate Reality, the Zen contemplative ignores them as completely as possible and leaves them aside.

Merton found Zen familiar and helpful because he was already in the intellectualist tradition and because his contemplation was strongly apophatic, dark, empty. Merton found himself in Zen, and it strongly influenced Merton's theology of contemplation.

### Thomas Merton and Mysticism of the Mind

Merton's theology of contemplative prayer is sometimes misunderstood because people interpret it as though it were in the 'heart' tradition instead of in the 'mind' tradition. Merton's own prayer, as well as his theology of contemplative prayer especially in the last part of his life, was clearly in the intellectualist tradition, the tradition of mysticism of the mind. There is not much room for felt affectivity in Merton's theology of contemplation. And it is quite apophatic, going beyond all created reality, leaving it aside and behind, to enter the darkness where God is.

Furthermore, like Eckhart and like Zen, Merton's model of contemplative prayer is one of identity, of a union with God in an experience of identity. This is what Merton means when he writes about 'the true self'. Contemplative prayer leads me to my true self. What is the true self? It is me in union with Christ. The true self is the union itself. The two of us, Christ and me, as experienced by me in the darkness and in the dryness.

Certainly Merton affirms the real distinction between the creature and the Creator. We are not really God. But his experience of contemplative prayer is one of a union of identity. In great darkness. And without felt sentiments.

My true self is not really just me. It is me in union of identity with God. And that union is what I experience in a kind of dark and dry and empty and void experience in my contemplative prayer.

Merton seems to have had, probably unconsciously or at least without really reflecting on it, the common practical epistemology of our time and culture: Kantian. Emmanuel Kant, with his philosophy of knowing through categories of the mind and not possibly knowing the thing-in-itself, has given to modern science, and to Western

culture in general, a way of thinking how we know.

For Merton, I cannot know God as he is in himself in this world. My knowledge of God is necessarily apophatic, totally negative. I can know only what God is not, not what he is. He escapes my categories of knowing, he stands infinitely beyond them, my grasp as far as knowing goes.

I know God therefore in total darkness, in a deep night. This, for Merton, is normal contemplation. Contemplation is dark, by nature and by the nature of God and of how we know. The 'dark night' for Merton is not exactly a darkness. Darkness, for him, is normal. Contemplation is dark contemplation. The dark night, on the other hand, is desolation, an anguish in the face of God. The dark night is 'dread'.

This, of course, is not the Carmelite tradition, not at all the teaching of John of the Cross. For the Carmelites, the dark night is essentially a darkness in calm, not desolation or dread or anguish. Desolation and anguish can come during the dark night, but they are not really a part of it as such.

Most Catholic theologians have trouble with Merton's idea of contemplative prayer because we have been trained in neo-Thomistic epistemology, in a modern Catholic realism that, in fact, says that even though we cannot in this life know God as he is in himself, we can and do know being, beings, things. And not just the (Kantian) categories. When Merton writes about the object of contemplation as 'the true self', we pause and think: 'solipsism'. But the true self, for Merton, is precisely the union between myself and God. It is us, God and me, as known by and in me. I do not really know God; what I do know in contemplative prayer is my union with him, me in him and him in me, or—in other words—my true self.

Does affectivity, love, have a place in Merton's theology of contemplative prayer? Yes, love is central. Affectivity is central. But *felt* affectivity, felt love, seems not to be present. The emotional affect that normally accompanies love seems to have little or no place in Merton's theology of prayer. Love, yes. Feelings of love, loving feelings, or even feelings of being loved by God, seem to be markedly absent.

Surely this has much to do with the fact that Merton for most of his life considered himself incapable of love, thought of himself as someone who did not know how to love. And it might help to explain his comportment and lack of balance once he fell in love a few years before his death.<sup>14</sup>

14. Did Merton really pray? In my opinion, he could not have written what he

### Contemplation and Experience<sup>15</sup>

It comes down to this: how do I experience God in my contemplative prayer? What is my model of experience, my model of contemplative prayer? There are at least two general lines, two broad traditions, of this experience or of the interpretation of the experience of God in contemplative prayer.

The main and most important tradition interprets contemplative experience of God, union with God, knowing God, as an interpersonal union of two personal beings, the contemplator and God, or, more usually, Christ. This is the common tradition, the great British tradition from *The Cloud of Unknowing* through Evelyn Underhill up

wrote without a consistent prayer life, and he could not have written as he did about contemplative prayer without practicing it.

Did he pray, practice contemplative prayer, during his last years when he apparently did not obey all the monastery rules nor conscientiously live out all his vows and promises? It certainly seems so.

Access to God, finding favor with the Lord, after all, depends not on our goodness but on God's, not so much on avoiding falling into sin as in recognizing that we are sinners and coming in lowliness before the Lord. Many of Jesus' parables have just that point: the parable of the pharisee and the publican in the temple, for example. The publican, not the good man, not the model of prayer and good conduct, finds favor with God. Jesus teaches the same thing by example in his public life: for instance, he is clearly more comfortable eating with the prostitutes and the publicans than he is at the house of Simon the Pharisee.

15. Merton's theology of contemplative prayer is spiritual theology. Almost always, spiritual theology describes experience. For example, the experience of contemplative prayer. It never or almost never finds its roots in metaphysics. Unlike dogmatic theology, which historically has been metaphysical, spiritual theology is experiential, not just based on experience by describing experience. Merton's theology of contemplative prayer describes his own experience and tries to generalize so that others can profit from it.

How did Merton pray? He writes in a letter to a Sufi scholar, Aziz Ch. Abdul, 'I have a very simple way of prayer ... It is centered on *faith* by which alone we can know the presence of God ... It does not mean imagining anything or conceiving a precise image of God, for to my mind this would be a kind of idolatry ... If I am still present myself, this I recognize as a kind of obstacle ... It is not "thinking about" anything, but a direct seeking the face of the Invisible. Which cannot be found unless we become lost in him who is invisible' (*The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns* [ed. William Shannon; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985], pp. 63-64). However, Merton's own experience of contemplative prayer is not in all respects universal. Not all will recognize themselves in Merton's description of contemplative experience, and in his reflections on that experience. Many, of course, will.

to the present, the tradition of the Carmelites and the Jesuits, the tradition in fact of the followers of Eckhart like John Ruusbroeck, John Tauler and Henry Suso. Thomas Merton belongs to the second, not so common, tradition. He has a general model along the lines of Meister Eckhart, a model that has much in common with Zen. Merton's is a mysticism of the mind, not of the heart. This does not mean that Christ is not the focus of contemplation for Merton, on the contrary.<sup>16</sup> Merton could have spoken Paul's words, 'I live not I but Christ lives in me' (Gal. 2.19-20). He nearly did in one of his last conferences before he died, a conference on prayer, 'My being is in Christ ontologically'.<sup>17</sup> Christ is always present, and present in a hidden way, in Merton's contemplation, and in his writings on contemplation, as well as in much of his poetry.

Though I show my true self only in the dark and to no man  
(For I appear by day as serpent)  
I belong neither to night nor day.  
Sun and city never see my deep white bell  
Or know my timeless moment of void:  
There is no reply in my munificence.

When I come I lift my sudden Eucharist  
Out of the Earth's unfathomable body.<sup>18</sup>

The white bell is Merton's secret and true self, the center of his being. The poem containing the above verses, 'Night-Flowering Cactus', describes the contemplative experience.

Merton's later theology of prayer, especially in *Contemplative Prayer*, can be and sometimes is misunderstood because it is read as though it were within the heart tradition, the voluntarist current, of Christian understanding of contemplative prayer. Merton's mysticism, however, is intellectualist, apophatic and represents an important current not only in Christian contemplation but also in the contemplation of

some non-Christian currents such as Zen.

Most Catholic systematic theology since Aquinas has been squarely intellectualist, holding the primacy of the intellect, and most Catholic spiritual theology has assumed a less intellectualist philosophical anthropology. This helps to account for the split between systematic and spiritual theology. Merton's spiritual theology, including his theology of contemplative prayer, is sometimes underappreciated by Catholic systematic theologians because it is spirituality, and by spiritual theologians because it is in the intellectualist tradition.

16. See Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, pp. 74-75.

17. Not just Merton's theology of contemplative prayer but his religious thought in general, including his poetry, is Christocentric rather than theocentric. See George Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993); and by the same author, his response to those who think that Merton's thought is theocentric rather than Christocentric, in 'Review Symposium: Author's Response', *Horizons* 21 (1994), pp. 342-47 (345-47).

18. 'Emblems of a Season of Fury', *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New Directions: New York, 1977), pp. 351-52. In 'Cables to the Ace' (*Collected Poems*, p. 453) Merton writes, 'I am about to make my home / In the bell's summit'. See Robert E. Doud, 'Emptiness as Transparency in the Late Poetry of Thomas Merton', *Horizons* 21 (1994), pp. 253-69, especially pp. 261-63.