

THOMAS MERTON

AND DANIEL CLARK WALSH

by **Robert Imperato**

To people who have lived at the Abbey of Gethsemani the word "person" evokes the name of Daniel Clark Walsh, and within that monastic circle there is an acknowledged recognition that Walsh and Merton shared a common insight into the spirituality of the person, or, as Merton would say, "true self." Without exposure to the Gethsemani community most Merton scholars rely upon written sources and thereby overlook the ongoing influence of Walsh upon Merton because Walsh published little of his thought. This oversight is confirmed easily as one reads from the numerous books about Merton and sees few references to Walsh. The standard reference is to Walsh as trusted professor and friend to whom Merton went for consultation about entering the priesthood. The oversight of Walsh by Merton scholars surprised me one day at the Thomas Merton Studies Center at Bellarmine College. I told a respected Merton scholar, who was also visiting the Center that day, that I was studying the meaning of person versus individual in Merton. This scholar's eyes brightened with wonder, and he admitted that, though he had often read about that distinction in Merton's writings, he did not know what it meant. That encounter was confirmation to me that the thought of Walsh needed to be given a wider audience as a way toward understanding Merton's thought. In the next few pages I would like to offer a brief summary of several important points from the personalistic thought of Merton and Walsh.

Many know of Daniel Clark Walsh through his relationship with his student, Thomas Merton. Walsh and Merton met when Merton was a student at Columbia University, and Walsh was teaching medieval philosophy as a visiting professor there. At the time he was professor of philosophy at Manhattanville College of the Sacred Heart. He had studied under Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain and received his doctorate at the Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies at the University of Toronto.

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Merton went to Walsh for advice when Merton began thinking about the priesthood and religious life. This meeting was the beginning of their long friendship. Around 1960 Walsh came to Kentucky to teach at the Abbey of Gethsemani and at nearby Loretto Junior College. He later taught at Bellarmine College in Louisville and, at age fifty-nine in 1967, he was ordained a Roman Catholic priest of the Louisville archdiocese. Abbot James Fox gave Merton permission to meet with Walsh each week and they were able to continue their friendship and to develop together their Christian thought until Merton's death in 1968. Walsh died on the Feast of St. Augustine, 28 August 1975, and was buried at Gethsemani.

In his long teaching career, Walsh wrote very little. A student may have access to articles and transcriptions of talks which Walsh gave while living in Kentucky and several transcriptions of discussions that took place at the Abbey of Gethsemani with some monks and friends. In addition there are his doctoral dissertation and a series of cassette recordings of a course on medieval philosophy which he gave at Bellarmine.

Walsh's notion of the person has emerged as his central insight and it may provide a metaphysical foundation for Christian spirituality. Walsh's notion of the person can also help the student of Merton to understand the latter's thought, especially the true versus the false self.

Towards a Description of Person

The person in Walsh's thought is an image of Trinitarian love: "The person is God expressed in the totality of his knowledge and love, that perfect image of God proceeding from the divine Trinity."¹ The person is not a static notion; it implies a process of development in love. The person is one who really is, not *what* one is, and therein lies the difficulty in trying to define person. Definitions deal with essence, but person is not an essence. "Know thyself" is at the source of the mainstream philosophical and spiritual traditions of Greece, of Christianity, and of India. Most people believe they know who they are, but those who take the trouble to dis-identify with their own images of self, with their own roles, come to understand that selfhood is hidden in a promising knowledge of the truth of oneself and of one's union with God and all that is. Without going into the technicalities of the origin of person in Trinity I can say simply that Walsh asserts that persons are images of Divine love, that persons originate in, are guided by, and called to union with Divine love.

Walsh's Rejection of Boethian Definition of Person

Walsh rejects the Boethian definition of the human person as individual substance of a rational nature.² Walsh's basis for going beyond the Boethian definition is that Boethius focuses on "nature" which for Walsh is not sufficiently primordial. To focus on individuality, substantially, or rationality as does the Boethian definition is to pass over the intimate relation with God that makes person to be person.

To be a person first means "to be made in the image and likeness of God." Now the perfect image of God is Christ, the second Person of the Blessed Trinity. A created person is one *who* is made in this

1. Daniel Clark Walsh, Philosophy Conference given at the Abbey of Gethsemani, 2 June 1966, p. 3.

2. Daniel Clark Walsh, "Some Intimations of the Person in the Noetic of Knowledge and Love in the Doctrines of St. Thomas and Duns Scotus." Paper presented at St. Meinrad's Archabbey, Indiana, 1963, p. 15. Hereafter referred to in the text as "Some Intimations."

The man who lives in division is not a person but only an individual.

(*New Seeds*, pp. 47-48)

The identity founded on difference from all others is an identity founded on alienation. Individuality is an insufficient base for authentic existence which derives from God's creative love, a love that all people share. The ascetical task for Merton is to save the person from the individual, to save what God has conceived from what humans in their security operations have fabricated (*New Seeds*, p. 38).

Merton, unlike Walsh, also speaks in positive terms of individuality. In *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton entitles a chapter "Things in Their Identity" and there asserts that things must be true to their individuality to be true to God.

... each particular being, in its individuality, its concrete nature and entity, with all its own characteristics and its private qualities and its own inviolable identity, gives glory to God by being precisely what He wants it to be here and now, in the circumstances ordained for it by His Love and His infinite Art.

(*New Seeds*, p. 30)

Walsh also acknowledges positive language when describing individual creatures but reserves the word "uniqueness" for the positive pole of individuality. Merton ascribes both positive and negative meanings to individuality and this approximates ordinary English usage more than Walsh. Merton's praise of individuality protects him from falling into the very abstractness he believes to be alien to contemplative knowledge of God. At the same time Merton's pejorative meaning of individuality as self created alienation is a key element in his analysis of the human condition.

Conclusion

I point to two distinctions person versus nature and person versus individual in order to illustrate the common terminology, insight, and concerns of Walsh and Merton. Through careful study of Walsh one can unearth the metaphysical framework of Merton. The student of Merton can learn much from Walsh. The contribution of Merton and Walsh to Christian thought is also to be found in their personalism. The term person has been entangled in Christological and Trinitarian disputes (two natures and one person; three persons and one nature). Merton and Walsh remove the concept of person from ancient controversy and rejuvenate the concept with the significance of image of God from the spirituality traditions of Christianity. For Merton and Walsh, the question of human identity cannot be answered without reference to God.



THOMAS MERTON & DAN WALSH

Walsh's Ordination Day, Pentecost 1967

Courtesy Gethsemani Archives

image and the end for which the person is created is to manifest the Truth of Christ in the love God has for Himself in His Divine Trinity.³

To be a person is to image God's relation to Himself. To try to translate person into the categories of Aristotle, as Boethius and others have tried, is to omit the origin and end of person in God's inner life.

The individual is a separation, is self-created, made himself. When Adam separated himself from God he became an individual in the true sense of separation. So an individual is someone separated from the unity in which he has the fruition of his being. Matter is the principle of this, so God created matter as something which would provide for man's restoration. He's given us this to start the work back. ("Some Intimations," pp. 14-15)

A fuller treatment of Walsh's thought would explore the positive dimensions of a person's uniqueness, but space does not permit further discussion of the polarities within Walsh's thought. I would like to turn to Merton to indicate some of the equivalent thought between Merton and Walsh.

Person versus Nature in Merton's Thought

The spiritual significance of the person versus nature polarity in Merton's thought appears to involve his concern for experience of God versus relating to God as an abstract idea.

... In contemplation abstract notions of the divine essence no longer play an important part since they are replaced by a concrete intuition, based on love, of God as a *Person*, an object of love, not a "nature" or a "thing" which would be the object of study or of possessive desire.⁴

The difference between person and nature reflects different epistemological levels: the level of experience or encounter versus the level of knowledge or information. To encounter a person, human or Divine, in love is not reducible to obtaining knowledge *about* that person, much less knowledge *about what* that person is. Merton, like Walsh, uses the person versus nature distinction to express a valuing of the person encountered as "who" over human nature as an abstract "what."

Person versus Individual in Merton's Writings

Psychologically the individual is what is constructed by discrimination from all other individuals; the unique person is constituted by Divine love.

People who know nothing of God and whose lives are centered on themselves, imagine that they can only find themselves by asserting their own desires and ambitions and appetites in a struggle with the rest of the world. They try to become real by imposing themselves on other people, by appropriating for themselves some share of the limited supply of created goods and thus emphasizing the difference between themselves and the other men who have less than they, or nothing at all.

They can only conceive one way of becoming real: cutting themselves off from other people and building a barrier of contrast and distinction between themselves and other men. They do not know that reality is to be sought not in division but in unity, for we are "members of one another."

3. Walsh, "Anselm and Duns Scotus on Faith and the Person." Paper presented at the Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C., 1966, pp. 14-16.

4. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), p. 27. Referred to in the text as *New Seeds*.