

TEACHING THOMAS MERTON IN ASIA

by **Lawrence S. Cunningham**

Through an odd set of circumstances that need not be rehearsed here, I was invited to give a short one week course on the history of Christian spirituality with a special focus on Thomas Merton at the East Asian Pastoral Institute which is housed on the campus of the Jesuit run Ateneo de Manila in the Philippines. I lectured for four hours a day for five and a half days in the Spring term of 1994.

My class of forty persons was a miniature profile of the Church in Asia. There were priests, religious, and lay people from areas as widespread as Australia, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Tanzania, the Philippines, mainland China, Fiji, Korea, Japan, Papua New Guinea, and India. There was also a small contingent from Thailand including an American Ursuline with forty years of experience in that land. She had been at the conference where Merton lectured before his death and told me a very mertonian story. Merton sat down next to her after a conference and she, to make conversation, said that she had heard that he had retired to the hermitage. That was true, Merton replied, but it was no big deal because, he said wryly, he even had a flush toilet.

While most of the participants had heard of Merton, not many had read much of his writings beyond the early ones. The question for me was how to make Merton pertinent to this particular audience in a brief period of time. While I spent an hour talking about his life, most of my energies went into discussions about what I thought to be most useful in his writings for Christian life in general and their experience as pastoral workers in the East in particular.

There was not time to do this in any rigorously systematically fashion so I xeroxed short texts that could be read in class to give a sense of the flavor of his style and the orientation of his thinking. My choices were not all that original but were made with the hope that they would speak to these people who were pastoral workers in areas, which, with few exceptions, were largely non-Christian.

We began with the now famous epiphany at “Fourth and Walnut described in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. My focus on that text was less centered on the putative shift in his own thinking and more directed to his insight that to be a “religious” (in the canonical sense of the word) apart from being fully conscious of being part of the common destiny of all of the creatures of God is an illusion and a dangerous one at that. I tried to link that insight to the Christian/Buddhist notion of compassion as it springs from contemplation.

We looked at Merton’s “Firewatch” epilogue to *The Sign of Jonas* not to get a tour of a Trappist monastery but to tease out some perennial themes in the Christian spiritual traditions: the *topos* of watching; the crucial role of questioning in the spiritual life; the importance of a sense of place; and, most importantly, the symbolic power of the

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images of descent/ascent as a controlling motif of the spiritual journey.

The preface to the Japanese translation of *The Seven Storey Mountain* is a crucial text in its insistence that where a person is and who he/she might be is a *sacramentum* of Gospel values. Merton's dialectic of NO/YES is a powerfully compressed image of the prophetic life. Its particular power comes from Merton's insistence that one shapes a meaningful life from where one is.

We spent time with the sapiential theology of Merton as refracted through his prose poem "Hagia Sophia" and the "General Dance" which serves as an epilogue to *New Seeds of Contemplation*. Merton's sustained meditation of Proverbs 8 was a valuable launching point for trajectories on everything from a renewed theology of creation to a cosmic sense of Christ as that Wisdom which interpenetrates the world. As we worked through those texts it dawned on me that much of Merton's christology could be seen by a studied approach to his ongoing meditation on wisdom. Furthermore, his emphasis on the sapiential binds his doctrine of creation, grace, and christology into a coherent whole.

For the rest of the sessions we read everything from "Day of a Stranger" to his last writings on the future of the contemplative life. My goal was not comprehensiveness nor was it even to get to know Merton better. It was to get them to see his "method" and to invite a reading of texts in a manner that would allow them to see how a contemplative stance of viewpoint could provide a privileged place for looking at problems and issues in a new and compelling fashion. Since most of the participants were Asian my recurring themes were on the Hiddenness of Christ as Wisdom, the role of a contemplative presence in the world, and the relationship of a contemplative focus to compassion for the world.

Interestingly enough, many of the participants were interested in a topic that I felt most unprepared to discuss in any deep existential fashion: the renewal of, and models for, consecrated religious life. We did look at some of what he said on monastic renewal in *The Asian Journal* and in some of the essays from *Contemplation in a World of Action*, but my best advice to them was to encourage them to read *The School of Charity* since those letters, expertly edited by Patrick Hart, represent his own evolving sense of what religious life was all about.

Our last day of class on Saturday was a half session. I had requested that each person write out a reflection paper of one page on what they had found in Merton and how they reacted to the readings and to the discussion. They were also encouraged to indicate other areas that aroused their interest (one that was suggested to me in class was on Merton and liberation theology; we did spend some time on that issue at our Saturday roundtable).

Although some had read Merton earlier in their religious life, only one person had a wide acquaintance with his work. Few read him now mainly because his books are not easy to get in Asia. American books are very expensive (I saw a little book of mine that sells for 300 pesos; the minimum daily wage in Manila is 125 pesos!). A publisher's representative from Claretian Publishers told me that the cost of doing reprints, because of high copyright fees, is prohibitive (Merton would turn over in his grave at this news!) and, as a result, Merton's work does not circulate widely in the Philippines.

Herewith a few reactions from my class based on a very selective reading of Mertonian texts:

I may qualify him as an eternal contemporary. (Religious sister from India).

Merton—as a man whose life's meaning is drawn from paradoxes . . . Let's set our feet and be on our way with the paradoxes of life. (Filipino priest).

I needed Merton's lyricism and play and imagination for it seemed I had lost all of my own. (Austrian missionary working in Asia).

Merton helps me to live with the contradictions that have troubled me in the past. (Indian priest).

I hear Merton speaking to me twenty five years after his death. I can journey with him. (Filipina sister working with mentally handicapped in Hong Kong).

Thomas Merton permits me to see the Unum Necessarium. (Filipino lay missioner working in Germany).

Merton possesses a radical openness to the great religions of the East . . . He was an example of Human Silence. (Religious sister from India).

In reading Merton I am led to let go of the questions that cannot be answered. I feel invited to explore those questions simply. (Swiss Capuchin working in Indonesia).

He had helped me to see what ridiculous figures we are when we take ourselves seriously, as if we carried the responsibility for the ordering of things. (Christian Brother working in Fiji).

I hope, like Merton, to wake up from the dream of [racial and ethnic] separateness. (Tanzanian Jesuit).

I pray that Merton, who died in my country, now prays for our church which has so much need of prayer. (Thai sister).

Any myself?

The week spent with these exemplary Christians, representative of the church in the world of Asia, was a source of intense edification in the deepest sense of that world: an occasion to build (*edificare*) bridges of friendship, solidarity, mutual support and prayer. It was also a time to go over some classic Merton sources and read them in a new perspective and from a different starting point.

An inquirer once asked the Buddha: "Are you a god or a saint or a magician?" The Buddha answered: "I am none of these things." The next question was: "What are you?" The Buddha replied: "I am awake!" Merton, we agreed, was awake and in his alertness he also helped us, teacher and student, to rouse ourselves slowly. I could not help but think of one of Merton's poems:

See! See!
 My love in darkness!
 Only in the Void
 Are all ways one:
 Only in the night
 Are all the lost
 Found.
 In my ending is my meaning.

(From Merton's "The Night of Destiny")