

Bystander at the Abyss: A Contemplative's Vision of Liberation

By **Vivian Ligo**

Introduction

In 1868, *The Atlantic Monthly*, in an article entitled “Our Roman Catholic Brethren,” claimed that Catholicism had the resources to shape American conscience. “If the same office is still to be performed for mankind, I think the organization that performs it will have to study deeply and long the Roman Catholic Church, and borrow from it nearly every leading device of its system, especially these three – celibacy, consecration for life, and special orders for special work.”¹ Its author might well have been speaking also about Thomas Merton. One hundred years later, America did know a celibate, consecrated for life to be a Trappist, who dared discern what might be right for his nation. At the onset of the 1960s, Merton put his contemplative perspective into the public forum. He spoke on behalf of a vision. He was its recipient and consequent minister. This vision communicated a deeper sense of God and the resultant responsibility to live accordingly. The American Church today, cognizant of its resources beyond celibacy, consecration for life, and special orders, can very well learn from Merton to continue the task of forming the conscience of the American nation.

Merton understood that the social, political and economic issues that constituted the upheavals of the 1960s were symptomatic of a spiritual malaise that plagued his era. These upheavals assumed a lasting significance because they led to the collapse of the theological legitimization of the American nation.² When Merton died in 1968, the nation had already been shaken by the assassinations of King and Robert Kennedy. Besides these traumatic events, there was the escalating Vietnam War, the heated anti-war protests, the race riots, the student riots, the civil rights movement, and the women’s liberation movement. These took a toll on the American spirit.³ The “new Israel, the new Chosen People of God,” underwent a serious religious self-examination. Self-styled Death-of-God theologians abandoned such a task and hailed the advent of definitive secularity.⁴ The close bond between culture and



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religion was severed. Many Americans did not grasp that it had been severed for good. “Religion’s service as an integrating underpinning of America is dead, and with it the moral, communal anchor for American liberalism.”⁵

Liberalism is founded on three tenets: commitment to pragmatic intelligence; tolerance in politics, social norms and lifestyle; and affirmation of the importance of the individual and individual freedom.⁶ Though various religious sectors, like the Catholic Church, may once in a while challenge this liberal culture, they are deemed far too integrated into liberal America to risk any radicalism.⁷ They simply serve as alternatives to or “escapes” from the dominant liberal culture.

By *refuge* I mean a retreat in a religious sense, a place where one escapes liberal society or its costs and enters into another and, in its way, quieter realm. This situation might lead, of course, to conflicts with liberal America. Once in a while, it has, and we do see some signs of this possibility today. Mostly, though, the path people have chosen has been retreat in the curious partial way religion and churches exist in American lives. The retreat is only temporary. It is not meant as a desperate escape, or even a general repudiation of liberal culture and liberal values. Religion is, rather, another realm that is valuable in its differentness, but loved – as liberal society is – only with a partial or ambivalent love. If refuge translates to support religion supports through its passive role in a far more subtle fashion than is usually argued. Religion has not built modern America, nor does it cheer it on. Yet, by providing a temporary alternative, which fills needs that liberal culture cannot, it helps sustain our liberal order. It serves to fill up, so to speak, some of the inevitable but real fissures of American liberalism – by being a relief-giving and yet nonthreatening alternative.⁸

This functionalist interpretation of religion and the churches goes well with an unquestioning acceptance of liberalism as approved reality. The unquestioning acceptance underestimates the seriousness of liberalism’s difficulties. Pragmatic intelligence unformed by values, tolerance that becomes indifference, individual freedom divided from a social matrix have untold devastating effects on culture and on human beings.

Here lies the challenge to the American Church as it reforms itself in order to transform the world: America can be said to be undergoing a Dark Night of the Soul and Merton must have sensed it coming:

Each year on the Feast of the Transfiguration of Christ, monks and pilgrims climb to the summit of Athos and there in a small chapel, built upon the peak, the office of the feast is solemnly chanted and the sacred liturgy of the day is celebrated at dawn. Far out at sea, the ships can see the light of a huge fire triumphantly kindled on the mountain. The flames dancing in the dawn wind and reaching into the purple sky to mingle with the stars speak a far different message from those which we receive from the artifi-

cial earth satellites which man has hurled into orbit by the power of his science. It is certainly right and fitting that the mind of man should reach out to explore the cosmos. But in that case, he must be prepared for what he finds there. He must be prepared that the void into which he has projected his mind should in turn take possession of his heart. He must be prepared to find his pseudo-humanism undermined and have it collapse under him while he plunges into the darkness and emptiness of a nominalist abyss. As long as it is only the light of our own mind that peers into infinite spaces, the cosmic depths will reflect nothing but our own vacuity.⁹

In Merton's terms, America has fallen into the Abyss. Theologian David Tracy calls this the experience of "the uncanny, of homelessness, of the void, of the *nihil*."¹⁰ Thirty years after Merton's death, there is no longer a rallying center, strong enough in its gravitational pull, around which some constellation of meaning and value can revolve. Institutions that claim to be the sources of meaning and value, like the American Church, have become but one of many options in the free market of ideologies. This exchange is also one of questions and problems that these ideologies purport to answer. What is worse is that some have even declared these questions meaningless. There are no common questions as there are no more common answers.¹¹

Merton's Contemplative Theoria

Out in a monastery, a lone monk once grappled with his own sense of fragmentation as he dealt with the upheavals of his own life. His struggle was a microcosm of what was to become the macrocosmic upheavals that began in the 1960s. Merton's vision of liberation emerged from this struggle. The contemplation that ensued shifted from "the flight of the alone into the Alone" to "becoming void in the void to be all in the All."¹² This shift dropped him right into the bowels of the Abyss. He faced the tumultuous undercurrent of his own psyche: raw irrationality, confusion, pointlessness and chaos. He confronted the reality of evil. This fall was marked by the experience of *agonia* or anguish or dread. Holding out in faith and hope, he sensed that the Abyss offered a discovery of his own buried spiritual potentialities. Then something did buoy him up. Some energy or force held him aloft. This energy or force was associated with the God of Abraham, of Isaac, of Jacob, of Jesus. God validated the fundamental trust that had been risked. The *agonia* or anguish or dread was overcome. The Abyss became a setting for a theophany. The Abyss promised the gift of a second innocence after the Fall. There was no longer room for doubt, nor was there room to doubt himself and the goodness that was possible in the human world.¹³

Merton was indeed the solitary one following the summons of God. He went against the current of his own time and the undercurrent of his own restlessness to obey the demands of a solitary journey. But he reached a turning point of his contemplation when he saw the radical interconnectedness of his prayer and the issues that confronted contemporary America. He was still the solitary one but he bore the woes of America with him into

his solitude. He was still the restless one but he communicated the sense of peace and unity he found in prayer to America.

The other side of the imagery of the Spirit of God hovering above chaos is a maternal one of containing chaos in a womb to bring it toward creation. Merton contained woes that he saw and brought them to God in prayer. He emptied everything into God. In the experience of the Abyss, that became a setting for a theophany, he believed that God received him and his prayer. He became void in the Void. In the Abyss that became his center he experienced the flooding of God's presence into himself. From the Abyss that had become plenitude, Merton in turn addressed the issues that America faced. He was all in the All.

Only from two recorded instances of Merton's life can we infer what the process of being "void in the Void to be all in the All" meant. Merton described his method of prayer to his Moslem friend Abdul Aziz:

It is centered entirely on attention to the presence of God and to His will and His love. That is to say that it is centered on *faith* by which alone we can know the presence of God. One might say this gives my meditation the character described by the Prophet as "being before God as if you saw Him." Yet it does not mean imagining anything or conceiving a precise image of God, for to my mind this would be a kind of idolatry. On the contrary, it is a matter of adoring Him as invisible and infinitely beyond our comprehension, and realizing Him as all. My prayer tends very much toward what you call *fana*. There is in my heart this great thirst to recognize totally the nothingness of all that is not God. My prayer is then a kind of praise rising up out of the center of Nothing and Silence. If I am still present "myself" this I recognize as an obstacle about which I can do nothing unless He Himself removes the obstacle. If He wills He can then make the Nothingness into a total clarity.¹⁴

Merton seemed to first undertake the process of self-emptying before God. He emptied whatever he bore in himself, his concerns, even including himself, into God in order to recognize its total nothingness. By so doing he adored God as invisible, and infinitely beyond comprehension. By so doing he revered God as the "Void."

The second instance in which a similar process of self-emptying took place indicated how to be "void in the Void" led to "being all in the All."

He emptied his thoughts of everything except the reality of the moment – the vast silence of the woods full of fireflies and stars. No light from any house or farm penetrated the darkness.

Merton sat on the porch and deliberately refused to rationalize anything, to explain anything or to comment on anything. "Only what is there. Fireflies, stars, darkness, the massive shadows of the woods, the vague dark valley. And nothing, nothing, nothing."

He waited, fixing his attention to the south on the huge sign of the Scor-

pion and the red eye of Regulus, until the nothingness filled with a sense of presence, totality and peace. Nothing became everything.¹⁵

Merton's Contemplative Praxis

The paradox of “being void in the Void, to be all in the All” was the still center which drew Merton centripetally toward God and from which sprang the centrifugal movement of responding to the issues of the world. From his prayer emerged his activism. No matter what issue he addressed he always returned to a center that provided him solidity and integrity. From that center Merton plunged into a meaningful involvement with political matters and defined his own position. And every centrifugal move drew him back into a centripetal one. Merton’s rendition of the *todo y nada* way of St. John of the Cross had a remarkable salvific function apropos of the world. His contemplative praxis was his engagement in dialogue. It had two inseparable movements: protest and reconciliation.

Within the monastic institution, Merton protested against factors that ran contrary to the monastic ideal. He also saw that contemplation was no longer an exclusive business of monasteries. He called for their openness to the world. Monasteries must offer the contemplative perspective as one way of coming to terms with the world’s problems and questions. Monasteries cannot just go about their own business unmindful of the world. Nor can the world go on its own without peril if it totally cancels out the contemplative perspective.

Merton’s dialogue with non-Christian traditions was also a praxis of protest and reconciliation. He protested against the narrow-mindedness and complacency of Christians who were content with claiming for themselves an unexamined sense of superiority. He also protested against the despiritualized and despiritualizing world. Thus he called for a development of “a strong and coherent ‘third world’ that can stand on its own feet and affirm the spiritual and human values which are cynically denied by the great powers.”¹⁶ This “third world” must keep alive the spiritual dimension of human existence. The overall malaise that pervaded the world required a spiritual response.

Merton protested against war, more specifically, against the Vietnam War. By so doing he also assumed the political ramifications of his contemplative praxis. The memory of the horrors of the atomic bomb and the concentration camps was at the background of Merton’s protests. The threat of nuclear disaster or genocide was too serious to be ignored.

Merton protested against racism. He endorsed the leadership of Martin Luther King in the African-American struggle not only for racial equality but also for moral transformation. He saw that King, who was inspired by Gandhi, was a significant factor for the reconciliation of the races in conflict.

Merton was also interested in Gandhi’s thoughts on non-violence. They resonated with Merton’s own conviction that the struggle for peace must be radicated in something spiritual.

The spiritual life of one person is simply the life of all manifesting itself to him. While it is very necessary to emphasize the truth that as the person

deepens his own thought in silence he enters into a deeper understanding of and communion with the spirit of his entire people (or of his Church), it is also important to remember that as he becomes engaged in the crucial struggles of his people, in seeking justice and truth together with his brother, he tends to liberate the truth in himself by seeking liberty for all.¹⁷

*The Possibilities of Merton's Contemplative Vision
for the American Church Today*

Merton's *theoria* and *praxis* constitute an integral contemplative vision. Such a vision is one of the possible routes in the passage through the Dark Night. "To pass through the sacred void of our own moment disallows any easy, clever, 'canny' refusal of the route of the *nihil* in our uncanny nihilism. And yet, like the great spiritual traditions of the East, like the apophatic theologies, the hermetic and mystical traditions of the West itself, we may now learn to drop earlier dismissals of 'mysticism' and allow its uncanny negations to release us."¹⁸ Mystics have always pioneered the exploration of inner reality. They have also tapped hidden resources of the human psyche. They reveal that human beings have a spiritual potential not only to withstand the destruction of known worlds but also to create better ones. Such spiritual potential always tends towards wholeness and healing.

Merton's contemplative vision reached beyond the Christian tradition. He linked himself with a "third world" that affirmed spiritual and human values. The impulse toward unity and wholeness knew no boundaries. Merton showed that the Dark Night could be healed on the level of *theoria* and *praxis*. Merton's contemplative vision carries a revolutionary potential for protest and reconciliation. The vision protests against any factor that short-changes the human capacity for contemplative consciousness. It also encompasses all fragmented views into itself in order to bring about a sense of unified wholeness in the light of God. The two aspects of protest and reconciliation have active and passive moments. Merton confronted the powers that be, yet his monastic status kept him as a "guilty bystander." He took steps to contribute to the task of reconciliation yet so much of this was done in the context of "powerless" prayer.

To claim that mystics crown the peak of their civilization¹⁹ is only half-true. They are also the ones who see its impending demise. They sound off a warning and point to a sign of redemption. Merton broke the record of "theological silence of too many mystics on concrete history."²⁰ His concrete engagement with the issues of his time was no longer a "retreat from history and the sense of personal and communal responsibility for the struggle for justice."²¹ Neither did Merton retreat from the serious demands of contemplative life. His confreres acknowledged that he was a good monk.²²

Merton lived out a vision that has surpassed his mortality. Such a vision can still be inspiring. The vision can only live on in a Church willing to undertake its struggle for authenticity while responding to the situation of the world from its resources of prayer and *praxis*. To be authentic, to be responsive to the contemporary situation, and to be prayerful

are the stuff of which the life of the Church is made. How these are lived out in different lifestyles is the task of each Christian to discover. Merton assumes a paradigmatic role in this regard because he has shown their feasibility here and now.

Merton undertook the classic mystic way of purgation, illumination, union. The temporal and perspectival distance between Merton and the Christian mystical tradition is one in which change, in terms of conceptualizations of reality, has occurred. Descartes, the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, the two world wars, the technological revolution have carved their ineradicable mark on the Western psyche. That Merton was able to bridge the distance is a remarkable feat. He succeeded in retrieving the mystical tradition of Christianity as one bearing a revolutionary potential.

A mystical rupture took place in Merton. Like a pebble thrown into a still pond, what he lived for still affects us today so that even though Merton died more than three decades ago he still stands as someone to take seriously. If the Church allows itself to be inspired by him as it lives out its own witness, then Merton's significance will prove lasting. A hope for another St. Benedict has been expressed for the twenty-first century.²³ Merton can be seen to have assumed a similar role for his era. It is for us, the Church, to be caught up by the vision to move on.

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1. James Parton, "Our Roman Catholic Brethren," *Atlantic Monthly* 21 (May 1868) 573.
 2. Deane William Fern, "Religious Thought Since World War II," *Encyclopedia of the American Religious Experience* (1988 ed.) II:1161.
 3. *Ibid.* 1164.
 4. James H. Moorhead, "Theological Interpretations and Critiques of American Society, in *Encyclopedia of the American Religious Experience* (1988 ed.) I:114.
 5. Robert Booth Fowler, *Unconventional Partners: Religion and Liberal Culture in the United States* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989) 75.
 6. *Ibid.* 4.
 7. *Ibid.* 109.
 8. *Ibid.* 4.
 9. Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960) 80-81.
 10. David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 125.
 11. *Ibid.* 341-352.
 12. Cf. Merton's Preface to the Japanese Edition of *The Seven Story Mountain*, in "Honorable Reader": *Reflections on My Work*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 64: "This precisely is the liberty I have always sought: the freedom of being subject to nothing and therefore to live in All, through All, for All, by Him who is All."
 13. Cf. Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1961) 3-19; see also *New Seeds of Contemplation* (London: Burns and Oates, 1962) 10-11, 107, 175-176, 220.
 14. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1985) 63-64.
 15. John Howard Griffin, *Follow the Ecstasy: Thomas Merton, The Hermitage Years, 1965-1968* (Fort Worth, TX: Latitudes Press, 1983) 106.
 16. Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love* 51.
 17. Thomas Merton, ed., *Gandhi on Non-Violence: A Selection from the Writings of Mahatma Gandhi* (New York: New Directions, 1965) 6.
 18. Tracy, *Analogical Imagination* 360.
 19. Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (London: Methuen, 1930) 453.
 20. Tracy, "The Prophetic-Mystical Option in Christian Theology," a public lecture delivered to the Faculty of Theology, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Louvain, Belgium, March 1988, 16.
 21. *Ibid.* 18.
 22. Victor Kramer, *Thomas Merton Oral History* (privately published) 196, 213.
 23. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (London: Duckworth, 1985) 262-263. St. Benedict and his monks rebuilt the Western world after the barbarians pillaged imperial Rome. Their monastic life was the rebirth of Western civilization. Although MacIntyre recognized the tenuousness of his comparison between fallen Rome and the twentieth-century Western world, he still believed that indeed the Western world may need not a "Godot, but another – doubtless very different – St. Benedict."