

The Ascent to Truth: A Fifty-Year Retrospective

By David Joseph Belcastro

Thomas Merton's 1951 volume *The Ascent to Truth* provides evidence of two things. On the one hand, it witnesses to Merton's willingness, even as a young man, to take on difficult tasks. A book on John of the Cross is a challenge. A book on John of the Cross in terms of the theology of Thomas Aquinas is even more so. A book on John of the Cross in terms of the theology of Thomas Aquinas for the general reader may have been impossible. On the other hand, it tells us something about the formation of Merton's vocation. *The Ascent to Truth* was a clear sign to Merton and readers that he was not destined to become a theologian and that this writing assignment had taken him in the wrong direction. On October 5, 1957, Merton wrote in his journal:

I try occasionally to read the French translation of *Ascent to Truth* in ms. P. François de St. Marie has done much to clean it up and put it in order; it is still an abominable book. Almost no theological insight and no spirit. Tedious and stupid and a waste of paper. And nothing can be done short of rewriting it. Or burning it. And I can no longer do that, after all the trouble so many people have taken to get it published. Yet I don't feel honest in letting it be published either. Another stupid compromise. Saying so, doesn't help much.¹

As a consequence of taking on such a demanding project and one not particularly in accord with his talents, Merton was faced with problems from the outset. On February 9, 1949, Merton expressed his frustration:

My work has been tied up in knots for two months - more. I am trying to write *The Cloud and The Fire* which is a book about contemplation and the theology of contemplation at that. The theology of contemplation does not mix well with fan mail. Also it is difficult. It is certainly impossible to write such a book with a lot of other concerns on your mind. . . .

It takes a tremendous effort of will to get back to *The Cloud and The Fire* and I am usually helpless when I try to move that typewriter and get something on paper.

I have a huge mass of half digested notes, all mixed up, and I can't find my way around in them. My ideas are not fixed and clear. I have been trusting more or less to see them work themselves out on paper as I type, and have in any case made up my mind to regard the whole first draft of this book simply as preliminary notes. On the other hand, when I rewrite anything, I entirely revolutionize it, sometimes with no improvement at all, because I only lose the freshness of the original and am just



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as prolix over again, but in a different and duller way. It is hopeless for me to write without the heat of some new ideas.²

With Merton apparently unable to resolve the problems that made the writing nearly impossible, the confusion persisted until, at last, it was translated into the book. In his review of *The Ascent to Truth*, J. G. Shaw noted:

There is so much of good in *Ascent to Truth* that I am reluctant to set down my opinion that it is an unevenly written and ill-constructed book. I put the volume down (often) in a burst of annoyance at the author. He has a good subject, he is in love with it, he wants to talk about it and knows how to talk about it. Moreover, I want to hear him talk about it. Yet for the greatest part of the book, he does nothing with this near-ideal combination but frustrate its potentialities.³

It would be difficult to disagree with Shaw. As one reads *The Ascent to Truth*, it becomes clear that Merton never quite got the undigested notes organized as well as they could have been. From time to time, the reader realizes that sections of the book are simply not working together. By the time you finish *The Ascent to Truth*, you believe that you have read three books rather than one. While there may be a common thread that holds everything together, it would be difficult to say exactly what it is. One is more inclined to say that there are many things going on in the book, all very interesting, but that Merton has failed to pull them together. With this book, if there is a hidden wholeness, it is hidden very well. It is obscured not only by its awkward construction but also by other problems. Merton does not appear to be clear as to who his audience is. The book is far too difficult for laypersons and not sufficiently developed for scholars. One moment, he speaks as a poet carefully crafting beautiful metaphors of the contemplative experience. The next moment, he sounds like a professor laboring to explain complex doctrines. Behind the two voices, one senses a mind with unresolved issues yet to be encountered and addressed. Consequently, *The Ascent to Truth* makes sweeping statements regarding the contemplative experience, contemplation and action, and the doctrines of the Church that a mature Merton would not have made.

William Shannon believes that it probably had less to do with a bout with writer's block than with Merton's effort to write in a genre that did not work for him. "In writing about the tradition, he seems at times to get submerged in it and to become abstract and unduly speculative; in writing out of the background of the tradition, he is more truly himself, more concrete, more existential, more accessible."⁴ This is an important insight that may provide the key for understanding what went wrong with this project. It is one with which Merton would probably agree. By 1964, with sufficient distance between himself and the book that caused him so much grief, he was able to say: "it is a book about which I have doubts. I think the material in it may be fairly good but it is not my kind of book and in writing it, I was not fully myself."⁵

While there were other problems as noted above, they were less significant than the fact that *The Ascent to Truth* was simply not Merton's kind of book, that is to say, not one that got at and worked out of his vocation, one that could be recognized as Merton. Because of this, *The Ascent to Truth* was destined to become in some sense a failure. But, as noted by Michael Mott, it would be a revealing failure.⁶ *The Ascent to Truth* reveals the path Merton was exploring during his initial years at Gethsemani, a path on which he would continue for the remaining years of his life. Recognizing the limitations of a conceptual knowledge of God, he came to see the crucial role played by love and discipline in the life of a contemplative seeking union with God. He found both in the asceticism of

John of the Cross, in particular, his teaching on detachment, intellectual rigor, and the *via negationis*. For Mott, this is the most important aspect of the book: “To Merton the Apophatic approach (*via negationis*, or the ‘dark path’ of the Spanish mystic and others) had an immediate appeal, and he remained an Apophatic contemplative. This is important to understand. Few in the Christian churches of the West had taken this ‘way’ since the sixteenth century” (Mott 238).

Perhaps it was this that Thérèse Lentfoehr saw when reading *The Ascent to Truth*. She seems to have been able to find her way through the complex twists and turns of the text to recognize that something significant was present. In her review, she notes: “If technical terms or idioms may occasionally cause difficulty, they are more than counterbalanced by the fluidity of Merton’s style, and the simple clarity and homeliness of his illustrations.”⁷ For this reviewer, *The Ascent to Truth* was an essential part of a Merton trilogy:

If in his *Seven Storey Mountain* Thomas Merton gathered an audience and set the stage for that tremendous drama of the union of the soul with God, contemplation, and in his subsequent *Seeds of Contemplation* gave us to hear some of its inner melody, he has, in his latest book, *Ascent to Truth*, given us the full score. For here we have not only the philosophical and theological sub-structures of his theme but hear it counterpointed against the mystical doctrine of St. John of the Cross (Lentfoehr 207).

Lentfoehr’s appreciation for Merton’s latest book doesn’t end here. She believed that *The Ascent to Truth* was destined to become Merton’s most important work:

Among the important works of a significant author, frequently one book will stand out as in a special sense definitive and representative of that author’s excellence in a particular field, as for instance Jacques Maritain’s *Degrees of Knowledge* and Etienne Gilson’s *Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*. Of such caliber and status would seem to be Thomas Merton’s *Ascent to Truth* (Lentfoehr 209).

If such an opinion, after all that has been said, is somewhat confusing, it was no less so for Merton. While we know nothing of his thoughts on Thérèse Lentfoehr’s review of this work, we know what he thought of her other reviews. To Evelyn Waugh, he wrote: “Sister Thérèse, who is extremely kind-hearted, has a misguided notion that I am the cousin of Santa Claus and overestimates every word that I write by about seven hundred percent.”⁸ With regard to her review of *Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton, in a letter to Lentfoehr wrote: “Thank you very kindly indeed for your beautiful review of *Seeds*. How like you it is! You have seen deeply into the book and have been very kind to the author, and have neglected the faults of a brash young writer who is perhaps too bold and too careless.”⁹ Perhaps Merton was able to dismiss Lentfoehr’s praise. D. T. Suzuki’s brief reference to *The Ascent to Truth*, however, may have given him reason to reconsider his rejection of the book. “Apparently Suzuki had read several of my books, and it seems quite a few Zen people read *The Ascent to Truth*. That is somewhat consoling though it is my wordiest and in some ways emptiest book. Or in any case, it is a book about which I have doubts” (E 84).

Even if we share Merton’s doubts, it is nonetheless clear that *The Ascent to Truth* has something to offer. While it may be difficult to argue that it is a good book, it is not so difficult to understand why it is a valuable book. It provides insight into Merton’s intellectual formation, not as a theologian but as a spiritual guide for our times. Sister Thérèse was correct to note that there is something excellent in this book. And, she was correct in recognizing that the excellence resided in the author.

That is to say, it was not the book but the author and the direction in which he was moving that gives us reason to take another look at *The Ascent to Truth*. Here we see Merton exploring a path that had been long forgotten. It was this path that he would offer to the modern world as an opportunity to rediscover for itself religion as a personal experience and vision rather than as simply an intellectual consent to doctrines. It would also become a path where Zen people and Christian monks, among others, could find common ground. So, we should not be surprised to find numerous references to Yoga, Zen, and other Eastern forms of meditation even in this early work that is marked by lingering elements of the Catholic narrowness that was characteristic, at least in part, of *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

The Ascent to Truth may be best understood as representative of the earliest stage of this development. Here we find the culmination of Merton's thoughts (all those undigested notes) on a subject that he had been considering during the preceding years. As such, this book could very well be placed on the shelf between the journals and the collected essays. In other words, Merton may have been writing principally for himself with readers in the background. Of course, this is all conjecture. And, I am not suggesting that Merton was conscious of doing this. On the contrary, if this were what was happening, it would have been at the unconscious level. In any case, it is, at least in part, a book that reveals something of the direction that Merton was mapping as a Christian monk in the modern world.

The function of this book is to define the nature of the contemplative experience, to show something of the necessary interior ascesis which leads up to it, and to give a brief sketch of mature contemplation. When faith opens out into a deep spiritual understanding and advances beyond the range of concepts into a darkness which can only be enlightened by the fire of love, man truly begins to know God in the only way that can satisfy his soul.¹⁰

With this said, it is necessary to point out that *The Ascent to Truth* responded to the growing interest in the spiritual life and the apparent need for direction that was evident at the time of its publication. It was not just about Merton, what was unfolding in his life, it was also about his times and what was unfolding in the life of America. The reviews of *The Ascent to Truth* reflect the times and Merton's place within them. Thomas Sugrue, for example, in his review wrote:

Since knowledge, if it increases ignorance, also increases appetite and aggressiveness, the confusion and insecurity displayed by so many in the present is a normal by-product of contemporary existence. With the threat of a negative destiny hanging over society, people turn instinctively toward religion, and Father Merton expects a wave of false mysticism. As an antidote to that anticipated wave he has written this book.¹¹

Merton recognized that there was a religious revival taking place in America. Not unlike earlier revival movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that followed periods of war, preachers and writers emerged in response to the public's need for spiritual guidance during trying times. Unlike the fiery sermons of Jonathan Edwards during the First Great Awakening or the well-organized revivals of Charles Finney during the Second Great Awakening, Merton chose a different approach. He understood the need as a contemplative longing for which a different kind of response was in order.

The human race is facing the greatest crisis in its history, because religion itself is

being weighed in the balance. The present unrest in five continents, with everyone fearful of being destroyed, has brought many men to their knees. This should not lead us into the illusion that the world is necessarily about to return to God. Nevertheless, the exposure of the nineteenth-century myths - "unlimited progress" and the "omnipotence" of physical science - has thrown the world into confusion. Many are spontaneously turning to the only evident hope for spiritual and moral integration - an order based on philosophical and theological truth, one which allows free expression to the fundamental religious instinct of man (AT 3-4).

While Merton understood this contemplative longing to be essential to human nature, he knew that men and women were not fully aware of this deeper dimension and were in many ways at a loss as how to find it.

Man was made for the highest activity, which is, in fact, his rest. That activity, which is contemplation, is immanent and it transcends the level of sense and of discourse. Man's guilty sense of his incapacity for this one deep activity which is the reason for his very existence, is precisely what drives him to seek oblivion in exterior motion and desire. Incapable of the divine activity which alone can satisfy his soul, fallen man flings himself upon exterior things, not so much for their own sake as for the sake of the agitation which keeps his spirit pleasantly numb. He has but to remain busy with trifles; his preoccupation will serve as a dope. It will not deaden all the pain of thinking; but it will at least do something to blur his sense of who he is and of his utter insufficiency (AT 24-25).

Merton also recognized that interest in the contemplative life could be short-lived or misdirected if the necessary foundation was not laid. The historical account of the previous revival movements in America provides clear reminders of the problems that could emerge. Merton saw this and was fully aware of the serious consequences.

We are living in a time when false mysticism is a much greater danger than rationalism. It has now become much easier to play on men's emotions with a political terminology that sounds religious than with one that sounds scientific. This is all the more true in an age in which the religious instincts of millions of men have never received their proper fulfillment. A nation that is starved with the need to worship something will turn to the first false god that is presented to it (AT 59-60).

He understood false mysticism to be rooted in an anti-intellectualism that ignores the wisdom of the Church and has no knowledge of the spiritual discipline that is necessary for an authentic religious life:

False mysticism is often viciously anti-intellectual. It promises man a fierce joy in the immolation of his intelligence. It calls him to throw his spirit into the hands of some blind life-force, considered sometimes as beyond man, sometimes as within himself. Sometimes this mysticism is political, sometimes religious. It almost always exalts emotion above thought, and its reply to intellectual argument is sometimes a program of systematic violence Why all this? Because the intelligence itself is regarded with suspicion (AT 60-61).

The Ascent to Truth responded to this problem by focusing the reader's attention on the need to be grounded in early Christian wisdom. Believing that humankind's spiritual longing could only be

satisfied in Christ, Merton maintained the Gospel as presented in the New Testament and understood by early Christian writers as the primary source for his thoughts on the contemplative life.

Christ was not a wise man who came to teach a doctrine. He is God, Who became incarnate in order to effect a mystical transformation of mankind. He did, of course, bring with Him a doctrine greater than any that was ever preached before or since. But that doctrine does not end with moral ideas and precepts of asceticism. The teaching of Christ is the seed of a new life. Reception of the word of God by faith initiates man's transformation (AT 11).

Merton describes this transformation in terms of biblical patterns discerned and developed by Gregory of Nyssa, patterns that are inherent in our nature:

Our nature imposes on us a certain pattern of development which we must follow if we are to fulfill our best capacities and achieve at least the partial happiness of being human. This pattern must be properly understood and it must be worked out in all its essential elements. Otherwise, we fail. But it can be stated very simply, in a single sentence: *We must know the truth, and we must love the truth we know, and we must act according to the measure of our love* (AT 8).

The patterns, we are told, unfold in a journey that moves from darkness to light, light to darkness, and, finally, into a darkness that is light. On first reading, the words strike us as a strange paradox. With the assistance of Merton, however, all becomes clear. Here he is at his best. In clear and unambiguous language, this spiritual guide directs us along a path that will eventually lead to a place where we will recognize the emptiness of all visible things, including theology, sacred readings, and liturgy. Here we discover we have been led all along by a desire for something that is invisible. Rather than being disturbed by the darkness, we recognize that in this darkness the heart finds its way into the presence of the One it loves. Here, in this darkness, we are transformed, our hearts are enlarged, and we, at last, rest in the loving arms of God.

Here, in Him, all the articles of faith have converged their rays and have burst open and showered the mind with fire. From Him they came, through Him they came, to Him they return, bringing with them the minds they have raised up in radiance from the sepulcher of vain learning. In Him the articles of faith have disappeared. He is their substance. There is no further need for them to prophesy in part, for when that which is perfect is come, that which is in part shall be done away (AT 301).

The Ascent to Truth is a valuable book. It not only addresses issues relevant at the time of its publication but also the issues that America is encountering today. It is, however, a difficult book to read, perhaps too difficult for most. *The Ascent to Truth*, fifty years after its publication, is perhaps best kept on the shelves of the Merton Archive. From time to time, scholars may choose to give it a read, digging into the early years of Merton's formation as the twentieth-century monk who opened up an old way for a new world. For the majority of readers, I suspect that *The Ascent to Truth* will go unread, or, if read, unfinished. Fortunately Merton discovered another style of writing more compatible with the general public and one that no less gives expression to the excellence noted by Sr. Thérèse - a style of writing that enabled Merton to reach beyond the walls of Gethsemani to generations who would very much need and value his guidance.

- 1 Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 123.
- 2 Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Journals, vol. 2: 1941-1952*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995) 278-79.
- 3 J. G. Shaw, "Assembly-Line Production Mars Merton's New Book," *Ensign* (Montreal, Canada), 3 November 1951.
- 4 William H. Shannon, *Thomas Merton's Paradise Journey: Writings on Contemplation* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2000) 69.
- 5 Thomas Merton & D. T. Suzuki, *Encounter*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (Monterey, KY: Larkspur Press, 1988) 84; subsequent references will be cited as "E" in the text.
- 6 Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984) 239; subsequent references will be cited as "Mott" in the text.
- 7 Sister Thérèse Lentfoehr, review of *The Ascent to Truth*, by Thomas Merton, *Renascence* 4 (Spring 1952) 209; subsequent references will be cited as "Lentfoehr" in the text.
- 8 Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993) 10.
- 9 Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 194.
- 10 Thomas Merton, *The Ascent to Truth* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951) 12; subsequent references will be cited as "AT" in the text.
- 11 Thomas Sugrue, review of *The Ascent to Truth* by Thomas Merton, *The New York Herald Tribune*, 23 September 1951.