

Prodigals in a Distant Land: Reflections on Evil in *New Seeds of Contemplation*

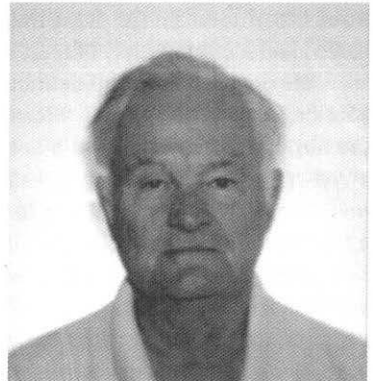
By **John P. Collins**

This article and the two that follow were first presented as part of a Symposium on "The Anatomy of Evil" held April 11-13, 2002 at the College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, Massachusetts.

I

Throughout this symposium we have been reminded of twentieth-century evils including the recent 9-11 devastation, and indeed symposium speakers have grappled with questions about the causes and possible responses to these evils. The purpose of this paper is to render a modest response to the query by St Augustine: "Whence then comes evil?"¹ It is proposed that we examine the insights of Thomas Merton contained in his book entitled *New Seeds of Contemplation*,² which some scholars have called a "spiritual classic."³ Merton has referred to twentieth-century evil in other works. He wrote an essay entitled, "A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichman"⁴ as well as poems entitled "The Guns at Fort Knox," "Chant to be Used in Processions around a Site with Furnaces," and "Original Child Bomb."⁵ I have selected *New Seeds of Contemplation* by Merton because it starts with the roots of evil within the individual rather than a graphic treatise of the massive forces of evil so prevalent in our contemporary society. The book was not meant to be a primer for evil – quite the contrary as the book describes so beautifully those seeds or "germs of spiritual vitality that come to rest imperceptibly in the minds and wills of men" (NSC 14). My thesis, then, is to begin with fallen man, an alienated man trying to journey away from the forces of evil within himself; as Thomas Merton describes the journey: "We are prodigals in a distant country, the 'region of unlikeness,' and we must seem to travel far in that region before we seem to reach our own land (and yet secretly we are in our own land all the time!)" (NSC 280-81).

Let me begin with a brief word about Thomas Merton and his relevance to the twenty-first-century reader. Merton admirers include Jean Leclercq, a Benedictine historian of monasticism who ranks "Merton with the Fathers of the Early Church and those of the Middle Ages" (as quoted in Grayston 3-4). Lawrence S. Cunningham calls Merton the "foremost American spiritual writer of his generation" (Grayston 4). Henri Nouwen claims that Merton must be seen as "one of the most



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important spiritual writers of our century” (Grayston 3). And finally David Tracy has remarked that Merton “may well turn out to be the most significant Christian figure in twentieth-century America” (Grayston 4). The numerous books and scholarly articles about Merton continue to grow as well as the development of the local Thomas Merton Chapters affiliated with the International Thomas Merton Society (ITMS). William Shannon, author and editor of a number of Merton books, describes several reasons why Merton is so contemporary. Merton is human – he is so open about his own human frailties which “he never tried to hide or deny.” Further he could communicate clearly the human condition with its “ambiguities” and “contradictions.” He could write with “wit” as well as “wisdom.” He had reverence for people as well as a respect for “their uniqueness.” Although Merton was firmly rooted in his Christian tradition he had wide cultural interests that set him apart from most spiritual writers. Merton has become, in fact, a “spiritual director for the masses” although this was the last thing he desired or wanted.⁶

New Seeds of Contemplation, published in 1962, is a revision of Merton’s earlier book published in 1949 entitled *Seeds of Contemplation*. The first book was extremely popular and translated into thirteen languages. However, Merton was not happy with parts of it and subsequently added chapters, revised chapters and wrote a new Author’s Note to the revised book, *New Seeds of Contemplation*.⁷ Between the period of 1949 and 1962 Thomas Merton had evolved as a spiritual person and writer. The famous epiphany on the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville, on March 18, 1958, was a turning point for Merton as he now realized he was, in fact, part of the world.⁸ His previous writings, including *Seeds of Contemplation*, reflected Merton’s distance from the world and a propensity for a dogmatic point of view. *New Seeds of Contemplation* reflected Merton’s emerging perception of the “experiential and existential” (Shannon 145). The key difference between the two Mertons, if you will, is his evolution from a unity with others “discovered in prayer” to a “grasp of solidarity with other men brought to prayer, so that unity can be experienced at a deeper level” (Shannon 146). To follow this evolution during the twelve years it is instructive to read Donald Grayston’s book entitled *Thomas Merton: The Development of a Spiritual Theologian*. Through his study of *Seeds of Contemplation* and *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Grayston chronicles “Merton in the very process of his ongoing spiritual and intellectual pilgrimage” (Grayston 11).

II

The treatise on evil by Thomas Merton in *New Seeds of Contemplation* can be examined through three broad themes: the false-true self; disunion and division leading to hatred; hell as a locus of hatred and a culmination of man’s alienation from self and others.

“He that loveth not abideth in death” (NSC 77). This scriptural passage goes to the very heart of Merton’s exposition of evil. Merton explains in Thomistic terms that “Evil is not a positive entity but the absence of a perfection that ought to be there” (NSC 125).⁹ God did not create evil nor can anything be an obstacle to our union with God except ourselves who create or cause the evil by maintaining “our separate, external, egotistic will” (NSC 21). Therefore, our alienation from God is a referral of all things to a false self which is “our god, and we love everything for the sake of this self” (NSC 21). The false self is the external self or the superficial self “which we commonly identify with the first person singular” (NSC 7). This is the self that we show the world and perhaps many times to our family and friends. Merton explains that this “superficial self is not eternal, not spiritual” and it is “the mask, the disguise of that mysterious and unknown ‘self’ whom most of us never discover until we are dead” (NSC 7).

In the process of worshipping the idol of “our imaginary self” we corrupt things and relationships so that the imprint of evil in fact enhances our “attachment to our illusory self” (NSC 22). According to Merton some have identified the body with the “false self” but “The body is neither evil nor unreal” (NSC 26). The body should not be misused or desecrated by a division of the soul against the body as if the body were evil and the soul good. This false division of body and soul leads to the destruction of the person and “there is no longer a living, subsisting reality made in the image and likeness of God” (NSC 27).

We came into the world with the mask of the false self and subsequently we are “shadowed by an illusory person.” Merton continues, “A life devoted to the cult of this shadow is what is called a life of sin.” We believe the “fundamental reality of life” is the “egocentric desires” for “power, honor, knowledge” and “pleasures” which consume our daily existence. As man persists with the false self he becomes, in fact, alienated from himself (NSC 34-35).

Merton cautions against confusing the “*person* (the spiritual and hidden self, united with God) and the *ego*, the exterior, empirical self, the psychological individuality who forms a kind of mask for the inner and hidden self.” The outer self is only a veiled veneer which terminates with death whereas the inner self has no end. The outer self can, in fact, “‘enjoy’ much, ‘accomplish’ much, but in the end all its possessions, joys and accomplishments are nothing, and the outer self is, itself, nothing: a shadow, a garment that is cast off and consumed by decay.” The *ego*, according to Merton “is a self-constructed illusion that ‘has’ our body and part of our soul at its disposal because it has ‘taken over’ the functions of the inner self, as a result of what we call man’s ‘fall’.” The effects of the fall have caused man’s alienation “from his inner self which is the image of God” (NSC 279-80).

III

The facade of the false self leads to division; that is, man distancing himself from others because of a perceived superiority attained through power, knowledge, and/or the accumulation of material possessions. The man living in division “is living in death” and upon his death the man “will discover that he long ago ceased to exist because God . . . will say to him: ‘I know you not.’” Merton extends the concept of division to the disease of spiritual pride which is the “worm in the hearts of all religious men.” When something is accomplished by these men who know it “to be good in the eyes of God” it is destroyed because of their claim of values which, in fact, “belong to God.” As the religious man continues with his habits of “fortitude and self-sacrifice” he tells himself, “I am a saint.” He is different, he is divided from others; in fact, he may be admired by others. There is a fire inside him and “He burns with self-admiration and thinks: ‘It is the fire of the love of God’.” There is more praying, more fasting, more writing of books, the building of hospitals and churches and the start of many organizations. He thinks the inward feeling of satisfaction and the warm feeling “is the unction of the Holy Spirit. . . . (I am not like other men).” The evil of the religious man’s self-satisfaction is limitless as he performs acts in the name of God. No longer can he obey or tolerate the commands of a superior and he views himself as a prophet or a messenger of God or a man with a mission to reform the world. Therefore as a result, the religious man “is capable of destroying religion and making the name of God odious to men” (NSC 48-51).

Hatred is a symptom of division as it “refuses the pain of reunion.” Merton states: “Hatred is the sign and the expression of loneliness, of unworthiness, of insufficiency. And in so far as each one of us is lonely, is unworthy, each one hates himself. Some of us are aware of this self-hatred, and because of it we reproach ourselves and punish ourselves needlessly. . . . Others, who are less

conscious of their own self-hatred, realize it in a different form by projecting it on to others" (NSC 72-73). Those who hate try to remedy disunity by destroying all who are not with us. This resonates with a recent statement by a senior State Department official: "you're either 100% with us or 100% against us."¹⁰ A way to seek peace is "the elimination of everybody else but ourselves" (NSC 75). The disunity and hatred theme is evident in the chapter entitled, "The Root of War is Fear." Merton continues with the hatred of ourselves and others which prompts us to see evil in others but not in ourselves. Subsequently, we can easily pass off the "burden of guilt" to someone else which allows us to minimize our own sins and exaggerate "the faults of others." It is an easy next step to scapegoat others "in whom we have invested all the evil in the world." If we can destroy these evil people "conflict will cease, evil will be done with, there will be no more war." Merton continues that the scapegoating and blaming of others is dangerous "when it operates in the vague, fluid, confused and unprincipled opportunism which substitutes in the West for religion, for philosophy and even for mature thought" (NSC 113-14).

The projection of evil onto others and scapegoating leads to war. Merton emphasizes the hypocrisy of our western culture whereby we "pray for peace" and insert peace slogans on our stamps while at the same time building massive weapons of war to annihilate the evil ones. Man's disunity and propensity for hatred in this world will create fear of others and subsequently war to annihilate "the other evil one." Merton does, however, admit that our prayers for peace can include "the simultaneous use of ordinary human means to accomplish a naturally good and justifiable end." But, he continues, the massive accumulation and use of weapons will invite annihilation of ourselves (NSC 119-20).

IV

The hatred in the world will continue in hell according to Merton. He defines hell as a place "where no one has anything in common with anybody else except the fact that they all hate one another and cannot get away from one another and from themselves" (NSC 123). Merton also states that "'Hell' can be described as a perpetual alienation from our true being, our true self, which is in God" (NSC 7 n.). Each person in hell not only hates others but hates what they see in themselves – "selfishness and impotence, agony, terror and despair" (NSC 123). Sinners, as a reflection of their false self, "hate everything, because their world is necessarily full of betrayal, full of illusion, full of deception" (NSC 125). Hence hell is a culmination of our earthly illusions of false self, disunity from ourselves and others. Hatred and evil are the outward manifestations of these divisions.

Thomas Merton describes the devil as the chief architect of evil and hell. The chapter entitled "The Moral Theology of the Devil" attempts to explain the whole system of theology and philosophy of the devil. The main tenet of the system is that "created things are evil, that men are evil, that God created evil and that He directly wills that men should suffer evil." Within this system of theology God wills and plans the misery and suffering of mankind. Man as the sinner is predestined within this environment so that God "would have an opportunity to manifest His justice." With the enactment of God's justice the Law is "fulfilled" and there is an absence of mercy which explains why God is not present in hell (NSC 90-91).

Man as a sinner is a great opportunity for those "men who preach most vehemently about evil and the punishment of evil, so that they seem to have practically nothing else on their minds except sin," and "are really unconscious haters of other men." According to Merton this theology of the devil is not theology but magic that uses faith as an energy to "exert a persuasive force even on God

Himself and bend His will to one's own will." This "sorcery" of the holy "medicine men" instills within one a faith which will render us the "charmed life." But after finding disillusionment with this false faith man then will turn to the "Totalitarian Mass Movement that will pick us up on the rebound and make us happy with war, with the persecution of 'inferior races' or of enemy classes, or generally speaking, with actively punishing someone who is different from ourselves." This mindset leads to division among men and enhances the feeling that we are "absolutely right" and those against us are "absolutely wrong" (NSC 93-96). "You're either 100% with us or 100% against us" (Elliott 44).

V

As prodigals in a distant land our return "to God and ourselves" begins with the alienated self. God respects our "ego" and "outer self" and allows us to perform the necessary functions which cannot be fulfilled yet by the "inner self." We must realize, according to Merton, that this "outer self" will soon "disappear into nothingness" and we must not believe that the "cultivation of this ego" is the reason for existence but an illusion fired by the cult of the so called "'successful' personality." The return to our "inner self" – our "true self" – our "hidden identity," is through humility. Merton states: "the way to reality is the way of humility which brings us to reject the illusory self and accept the 'empty' self that is 'nothing' in our own eyes and in the eyes of men, but is our true reality in the eyes of God" (NSC 280-81).

Therefore Thomas Merton suggests that as prodigals in a distant land far from our true inner self we have become, in fact, alienated from ourselves and others, fueling the flames of hatred that lead to the evils described at this symposium. To return from the distant land we must seek unity because man "is the image of the One God" (NSC 52). Subsequently, our flight from disunity and separation will lead us "to unity and peace in the love of other men" (NSC 78). In the final chapter of *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton sounds an optimistic note when he reminds us once again that the "external self" is "not by nature evil" and "as long as it does not isolate itself in a lie, it is blessed by the mercy and the love of Christ. . . . The mask that each man wears may well be a disguise not only for that man's inner self but for God, wandering as a pilgrim and exile in His own creation" (NSC 295-96).

Indeed the evils of the Twentieth Century are a blot on the world and its creatures but there is hope if we watch and then listen. Let us all listen carefully to Thomas Merton:

the Lord plays and diverts Himself in the garden of His creation, and if we could let go of our own obsession with what we think is the meaning of it all, we might be able to hear His call and follow Him in His mysterious, cosmic dance. We do not have to go very far to catch echoes of that game, and of that dancing. When we are alone on a starlit night; when by chance we see the migrating birds in autumn descending on a grove of junipers to rest and eat; when we see children in a moment when they are really children; when we know love in our own hearts; or when, like the Japanese poet Basho we hear an old frog land in a quiet pond with a solitary splash . . . [all] provide a glimpse of the cosmic dance (NSC 296-97).

It is the misunderstanding and distortion of God's creation that leads to "despair" and "sadness" and evil. But as Merton concludes, the "reality of things" cannot be tarnished by misguided actions of man because "the joy of the cosmic dance . . . is always there." We are all invited by God to join in this "general dance" (NSC 297).

- 1 St. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. F. J. Sheed (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1943) 137.
- 2 Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961); subsequent references will be cited as “NSC” parenthetically in the text.
- 3 Donald Grayston, *Thomas Merton: The Development of a Spiritual Theologian* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1985) 143; subsequent references will be cited as “Grayston” parenthetically in the text.
- 4 Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1964) 45-49.
- 5 Thomas Merton, *Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 228-29, 345-49, 293-302.
- 6 William H. Shannon, “Something of a Rebel”: *Thomas Merton, His Life and Works, An Introduction* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1997) 49-54.
- 7 See William H. Shannon, *Thomas Merton’s Dark Path: The Inner Experience of a Contemplative* (New York: Penguin, 1981) 142-43; subsequent references will be cited as “Shannon” parenthetically in the text.
- 8 Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 140-42; Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk’s True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 181-82.
- 9 It is instructive to note that Merton was influenced early in his development as a Catholic by the works of St. Thomas Aquinas through the influence of his Columbia professor Daniel Walsh. Question 49 in the *Summa Theologiae* addresses the question of “the cause of evil.” St. Thomas states in a reply to the cause of evil, “We cannot but hold that in some way every evil has a cause. . . . Now to be a cause belongs only to a good; nothing can be a cause except in so far as it is a being, and every being as such is a good. . . . Evil has no formal cause, rather is it instead a privation of form. Likewise it has no final cause, rather is it instead a privation of direction to a due end; and the quality of being is shown not only by an end, but also by a means to it. Yet evil has an efficient cause, but it is one that acts indirectly, not directly. . . . The truth is that the only cause evil has is incidental, and in this way a good is the cause of evil . . . an evil admits of an indirect cause merely. And so it is impossible to take it back to anything that is the direct cause of evil. . . . There is no going back indefinitely in the series of causes of evil. Instead all evils are to be resolved into some cause which is good, and from which evil results indirectly” (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* translated and edited by Thomas Gilby, OP [New York: Blackfriars, McGraw-Hill, 1967] 133-47).
- 10 Michael Elliott, “Retaliation,” *Time* (24 Sept. 2001) 44; subsequent references will be cited as “Elliott” parenthetically in the text.