

# Thomas Merton's Ecumenical Landscape

By **William O. Paulsell**

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I first met Thomas Merton in 1960 while I was a student at the Divinity School of Vanderbilt University. Our church history professor, Dr. Bard Thompson, took students to spend a day at Gethsemani every year as a way of acquainting us with the monastic tradition. None of us had ever seen the inside of a monastery and, on that first trip, had no idea what to expect. We knew the place was populated by Catholics, about whom most of us Protestants knew little, but we had no idea what monks did with their lives.

I went on five of those trips, and in March, 1960, Merton spent an afternoon with us, letting us ask him questions about Cistercian life and Christian theology in general. When he entered the room, he was carrying under his arm a copy of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible – a Protestant translation. This was before Vatican II, and that Bible had not yet been approved for use by Catholics. We decided that Merton was the kind of a rebel to whom we liberal Protestants could relate! He certainly destroyed whatever preconceived images we had of a monk. He was a very warm person, he had a great sense of humor, and he listened to us patiently. He taught us much about the contemplative life and inspired us to develop that part of ourselves, an element that was largely neglected in Protestant theological education in those days.

He mentioned the event in a journal entry:

Yesterday spent an interesting afternoon talking to Protestant divinity students from Vanderbilt University. A good lively, and intelligent group, we got along well together, I think. Perhaps I was going more than half way to meet them through saying that in the lives of most monks there must be something akin to Luther's experience – the discovery of faith and the supreme reality of the divine mercy.<sup>1</sup>

That was a wonderful afternoon and stimulated my life-long interest in studying Christian spirituality.

During the next visit in 1961, however, we saw an element of Merton's character that provided a great lesson for all of us. In addition to our group there was present a group of students from a very conservative school. It was clear that these students had come with the intention of converting Thomas Merton. They



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quoted scripture verses at him and asked how, in light of what the Bible said, he could possibly live a monastic life. Those of us from Vanderbilt who generally positioned ourselves at the liberal end of the theological spectrum were fearful that Merton would not be able to distinguish between these conservative students and us, but from his journal it was clear that he did. He described the time: "A good lively session, which continued after None and got too long, degenerated a bit into a kind of relaxed silliness in which they tended to bicker among themselves. The Vanderbilt group is always in general good and mature."<sup>2</sup> We are thankful that he thought of us as generally good and mature!

The important thing for us that afternoon was observing how Merton handled the students who were questioning the legitimacy of his vocation. He answered their questions thoughtfully and in good humor, never showing any irritation. He listened to them respectfully, and by the end of the afternoon he had them eating out of his hand. When the session ended, they all rushed to shake his hand and thank him for the day. He had converted them. Merton was not so ideologically bound that he could not have a constructive conversation with people who differed with him. It was a good lesson for all of us in how to respond to hostile persons in a calm, respectful, pastoral, and caring way. In that setting, he functioned as a truly ecumenical person.

There was another relationship in which I did not participate, but have learned from the one who did. The denomination to which I belong, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), has deep ecumenical commitments. We are a largely Midwest denomination, founded on the American frontier early in the nineteenth century. One of our slogans is that Christian unity is our polar star. We have a theological seminary about seventy-five miles from Gethsemani, Lexington Theological Seminary. In Merton's day, the librarian was a rather unique person named Roscoe Pierson. He was a good librarian, but not the easiest person in the world with whom to get along. He used to say to the students in his bibliography course, "You don't have to learn everything while you are here, but you damn well better know where to find it!"

Because students from our seminary also visited Gethsemani, Merton became acquainted with Pierson and began to borrow books from our library. He was particularly interested in reading prominent Protestant theologians whose books were unavailable at Gethsemani. The correspondence between Merton and Pierson was most active in the first half of the 1960s. The sharing of books was a two-way exchange. Merton borrowed many books from our library, and, in return, gave our library several of the large Latin liturgy books once used by the Gethsemani choir, as well as mimeographed copies of his lecture notes, articles he had written, and books by Catholic writers in whom he thought we might have an interest.

Merton requested books by Karl Barth, John C. Bennett, Robert McAfee Brown, Oscar Cullmann, Victor Frankl, Paul Tillich and Nels Ferre, among others. Merton's open spirit is revealed in these letters. In a June 10, 1960 communication Merton reported: "In our refectory we are reading now an interesting symposium of Protestant and Jewish writers expressing their opinion of Catholicism. I think it will be very salutary. Anything that can help us take a broader view here is welcomed, at least by some of us." As the correspondence developed, the "Dear Mr. Pierson" in Merton's letters changed to "Dear Roscoe." Merton began sending as much material to Lexington as Pierson was sending to Gethsemani. From time to time Pierson urged Merton to keep books no longer than a month if possible, but added, "We are delighted to serve you, and I hope you will continue to call upon us for bibliographical material; it is a pleasure to cross the political boundaries of religious faith and to work together in the spirit of Christ."<sup>3</sup>

In a September 16, 1960 letter Merton expressed appreciation for some of the books that had arrived from Lexington.

I have especially enjoyed [Karl] Barth's Christmas essays. Being so much in the Augustinian tradition, I think I am well disposed to accept his kind of viewpoint. I also found much that was excellent in the [Paul] Tillich presentation volume. It shows me how much fine work is being done by Protestant thinkers in the U. S. With American Protestant thought and French Catholic thought together, I think one really has something.

He added, "By American Protestant thought I mean Tillich, Niebuhr, and men like John Bennett, Paul Lehmann. Not so much popular writers though." Merton requested copies of Karl Barth's *Against the Stream*, John C. Bennett's *The Crisis in Human Affairs* and G. Florovsky's *The Ways of Russian Theology*. He then suggested that Pierson subscribe to *The Catholic Worker*, which he already did, and announced that he was sending along two copies of *Jubilee* magazine in which he had some articles. "I think it is the liveliest and the best," he said. "And broad minded too. It has to be, I suppose, if it takes my stuff. But actually it is run by good friends of mine, and they are very alert."

On December 23, 1960, Merton thanked Pierson for a book by Campbell Garnett who once taught at Lexington Seminary. He also asked if the library had anything by the Swedish Lutheran Nathan Soderblom. Pierson recommended two of his books, *The Living God* and *Christian Fellowship*.

The contact with Merton had a serious impact on Roscoe Pierson. He wrote to Merton about having stopped by Gethsemani on his way back from a trip to Nashville. Merton had recently sent him a copy of *Spiritual Direction and Meditation*. He wrote:

I will think of you and your writings as I munch on your monastery's bread and cheese while I calmly read your new book in the study of my home – the parsonage of a Protestant minister. Something about all this deserves comment, but I flounder for both words and real understanding. Christ sees through it, and I trust we both see him with ever-clearing vision of mind and spirit.<sup>4</sup>

Those of us who knew Roscoe had never known him to flounder for words, but Merton had a way of leading us to that mystery which leaves us speechless.

By the end of 1964 the Merton-Pierson correspondence had come to an end. Soon Merton would enter his hermitage. The correspondence was an experience of lived ecumenicity, the sharing of a spiritual quest. Merton's openness to new approaches to theology, his desire to find truth wherever it might be, and his expressed appreciation for Protestant and Orthodox theologians, reflected a broad and generous personality that transcended ecclesial barriers.

Merton's spiritual quest, however, took him far beyond conversations with Protestants. When I was a graduate student in the 1950s the ecumenical movement was generating much excitement and hope. Old barriers between many Protestant denominations were dissolving and we had great expectations that the oneness of Christ's Church might be restored, at least to some degree. There was great interest in new ecumenical organizations and pending unions between separated groups.

What no one anticipated in those days was the development of strong interfaith relationships. We did not foresee that some Christians would begin practicing Zen and Yoga, that the *Bhagavad Gita* would be given away in airports like Gideon Bibles, that Islamic mosques would begin to

spring up in America, that Christians would travel to India and Japan to study meditation, that an Islamist scholar would become the Dean of Harvard Divinity School, that Native American religion would emerge as a subject of interest, that undergraduate courses in world religions would become popular in colleges and universities, and that a Trappist house would host the Gethsemani Encounter between Christian and Buddhist monastics and scholars. Those of us who didn't quite know what to make of this were greatly helped by reading *Mystics and Zen Masters*, *The Asian Journal*, *Zen and the Bird of Appetite*, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, and *Ishi Means Man*. If Merton could wade into this sea of religious traditions and practices and still be faithful to his own tradition, perhaps we could also, using him as our guide in our own search for spiritual reality. He showed us how our own faith and practice could be enriched by studying the spiritual experiences of others.

But true ecumenism is more than that. I have a question about religious ideologies that divide people. At ecumenical gatherings such as this, it is usual practice to read from John 17 where Jesus asks that his followers might be one so that the world might believe. Many years ago there was an informal journal called *Monastic Exchange* that circulated among the Trappist houses. I submitted an article about a college-student contemplative group that had formed as a result of retreats at Gethsemani. The editor, Father Paschal Phillips, wrote to me and said, "Jesus wanted us to be one that the world might believe. We are not one and the world doesn't believe."

My favorite ecumenical text is from St. Paul's letter to the Galatians: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." And indeed we are.

Those of us in the 1950s and '60s who were excited about the possibilities of institutional unity now see that as a superficial approach. True ecumenical unity, many of us now believe, is to be found, not at the institutional church level, but at the level of the spirit. What unites us is the contemplative dimension of Christian faith, our common quest for intimacy with God that transcends all institutional divisions.

During the 45 years that I have been making retreats at Gethsemani I have been amazed at the huge variety of religious traditions represented among the retreatants. I have encountered people from every one of what used to be called mainline Protestant churches as well as more evangelical types. I have met people who are absolutely firm in their faith as well as seekers who are still trying to figure out what it is all about. I recall one conversation with a man who said he could not bring himself to believe in God, but he thought Gethsemani was a good place to spend some time. He wanted to believe, but he was still searching. This is true ecumenicity.

I suspect that many of us who retreat at Cistercian monasteries do so, at least in part, because of the impact of Thomas Merton on our lives. It is the search for a deeper relationship with God that draws us together, regardless of our religious backgrounds. The source of our unity is not the institutional church, although our churches are important to our religious quests. Our unity, however, lies in our common struggle to understand the transcendent, the Absolute, the One, the Divine. Merton's dialogues with Buddhism, Islam, Native American religion, and others have taught us where our real unity is. There is an invisible spiritual fellowship that exists among those who have experienced transcendence.

In his informal talk presented at the Temple of Understanding Conference in Calcutta in October 1968, Merton concluded:

[T]he deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It

is wordless. It is beyond words, and it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity. My dear brothers, we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are.<sup>5</sup>

I still have a commitment to the ecumenical movement. However, I think we would do well to stop trying to create unity, but recognize and proclaim the unity which we already share as people seeking to know God on the deepest level possible. Thomas Merton has shown us how to do it.

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1 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) 381-82.

2 Thomas Merton, *Turning toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 114.

3 Letter of September 1, 1960.

4 Letter of October 3, 1960.

5 Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 308.