

1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 238.
2. Thomas Merton, *Life and Holiness* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1963); subsequent references will be cited as “LH” parenthetically in the text.

Merton’s Search for God

By William Apel

One reason why Thomas Merton continues to matter to thousands of readers throughout the world is because the search for God continues to matter. Like that of other spiritual masters, Merton’s quest for God is all-consuming. It leads to a journey inward and outward. It is one that helps reveal his own inner self and uncovers the infinite worth and value of every human being on the face of the earth. There is little doubt that his search for God is contagious. Countless numbers of people have resonated with his honest, straightforward and uncompromising search for union with God. Many, myself included, have wanted to travel with Merton on his spiritual journey – and to the best of our abilities we have. I have no doubt others will soon follow. In some inexplicable way, he has opened his heart to us and invited us in. Usually, we sit as beggars at the gates to our own true selves. But here is someone who invites us in – and we are admitted into the interior of Merton’s life – or is it into our own?

Mary Luke Tobin, SL, a dear friend and Kentucky neighbor of Merton, has written this about her friend: “At the center of Merton’s thought was the search for God – the careful search for God’s will in the events of his life.”¹ Indeed, from his early publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain* to his last writings found in *The Asian Journal*, Merton shares with readers all the twists and turns, the false starts and unexpected trajectories of his relentless quest for the One with many names, and no names at all. Merton’s lifelong search, not only to know God but to experience God, may arguably be the leitmotif of his entire, massive collection of writings.

There is little doubt that Merton’s search for God has a relevance for our times as well as his own. This has much to do with what Sister Mary Luke understood to be Merton’s willingness to open doors, and not to shut himself off from others – no matter how different they might be. She has noted: “He yearned constantly for conscious union with God. . . . Well acquainted with all the great mystics of the Christian tradition, he became increasingly well informed about the spiritual masters of other traditions, never ceasing to integrate their original insights into his thoroughly Christian identity” (Tobin 72).

The “amazing grace” of Merton’s search for God is his ability during his mature years to live out a full gospel life, while remaining open to what is best and most true in other religious traditions. As Sister Mary Luke has

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argued, this kind of openness was possible because of Merton's deep, abiding faith in the risen Christ. He knew himself quite well and remained deeply grounded within the life of a contemplative monk and a disciple of Christ committed to the pursuit of peace and social justice. His faith liberated him to be spiritually free – genuinely open to believers and seekers, to both those within the faith and those outside of it. There was no defensiveness on Merton's part. In sum, Merton's expansive and deeply grounded “yes to God” may well be his greatest contribution to our contemporary quest for God.² He accepted truth wherever it could be found – continuing always to bask in the brilliant light of the living Christ.

1. Mary Luke Tobin, *Hope Is an Open Door* (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 1981) 72; subsequent references will be cited as “Tobin” parenthetically in the text.
2. See Thomas Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani*, ed. Jane Marie Richardson, SL (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1992) 268, 274.

The Trickster-Monk's New Creation

By David J. Belcastro

When we think of Thomas Merton's contributions to his and subsequent generations, the list becomes longer with each new publication. There is one contribution, however, as yet not fully acknowledged. It is a gift that identifies him with a long tradition of tricksters who have the knack of turning everything inside out – or perhaps more accurately everything outside in. That is to say, the trickster who lives on the margin of society recognizes that something has been left out that needs to be brought back in – something essential for life to flourish. While glimpsed throughout much of his writings, it is most clearly stated in an essay entitled “Learning to Live”:

A few years ago a man who was compiling a book entitled *Success* wrote and asked me to contribute a statement on how I got to be a success. I replied indignantly that I was not able to consider myself a success in any terms that had a meaning to me. I swore I had spent my life strenuously avoiding success. If it so happened that I had once written a best seller, this was a pure accident, due to inattention and naïveté, and I would take very good care never to do the same again. If I had a message to my contemporaries, I said, it was surely this: Be anything you like, be madmen, drunks, and bastards of every shape and form, but at all costs avoid one thing: *success*.¹

These words are more than a biographical note from the life of an odd character for his times. They represent the holy folly of a trickster-prophet who embodied the contradictions of his age. On the one hand, it was/is an age that publically broadcasts holiness, compassion and justice. And, on



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