

Making the World New from Our “Older Unity”

By **Thomas Del Prete**

Fellow humans who are able to speak authentically to the deeper meaning of our common humanity are rare and needed as much now as ever. Rarer still, and needed even more, are those who can open us to that deeper meaning; that is, who can open us to the possibility of experiencing more deeply who we truly are, and do so while also speaking to the inner and outer forces which distract us and otherwise get in the way. Precious to many of us, in addition, is that person who can speak in both Christian and more universal terms from and through this experience, who can traverse across (put differently, who can see underneath – get into our depths) the ideological, religious, social and cultural boundaries which otherwise separate and divide.

Thomas Merton of course is one of those rare people; and in an age with its own fundamental contradictions – when we have both unprecedented means of communication and chasms of disconnection, when so many of the sources of human division seem exacerbated as well as mitigated – we need him. We need him to speak to us authentically, strongly and gracefully about becoming what we are; about the difference between who we are and how we are and what we do; about our deeper selves as compared to our preoccupied and willful selves.

Particularly evident in his writing from his hermitage years, Merton concentrated a great deal of his thought on human communication, dialogue and transcultural or universal consciousness. One can view this as a paradoxical outgrowth of an experience of solitude in which, as Merton says, we are not alone but rather discover our “original unity,”¹ discover that we are “one with everybody else” in love, love that has to be experienced.² These themes appear especially in *The Asian Journal*, *Contemplation in a World of Action*³ and *Thomas Merton in Alaska*, which contains transcriptions of a series of talks he gave on his way to Asia. Speaking specifically about east-west religious dialogue, Merton mentions the development of what he calls an “intertraditional vocabulary,” language which reflects dimensions of inner human experience that is itself the fruit of religious tradition. In every instance, he places great hope in communication and dialogue shaped by some experiential understanding of the integrity of our “inner depths,” from inner transformation which includes a realization of our human relatedness; put differently, communication and dialogue in which “the other” has already been discovered in us, has become a person like us, in Christian terms, in Christ

In *Contemplation in a World of Action* Merton suggests the importance of contemplatives who have a particular role in creating the kind of dialogue and communication he envisioned; and suggests further the importance of engaging the critical issues of the world from a contemplative perspective (“The Need for a New Education” [CWA 198-204]). Merton imagined contemplatives adept at communication, dialogue and relating; conversant in what we might call the language and ways of being and doing,

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of unity or communion. He exemplified what this might mean through his correspondence, his writing, his private talks with people like the Dalai Lama and his public talks, particularly in Asia. He never had an opportunity to exercise this role to the full extent of his capability; but his work and example remain powerfully illustrative and informative.

It is not hard to extrapolate from Merton's thinking and example, to suggest that all of us, as a matter of human vocation, can follow a path, however modest, which helps us contribute to the creation of a world in which communication, dialogue and community are more firmly rooted in an older unity, a love unity. The path may never be fully clear, but in facing the uncertainties Merton again is a heartening guide.

1. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 308.
2. Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska: The Alaskan Conferences, Journals, and Letters*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: New Directions, 1989) 137.
3. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971); subsequent references will be cited as "CWA" parenthetically in the text.

“I Have Become an Explorer for You”

By Fiona Gardner

I have chosen to illustrate why Thomas Merton still matters by taking a short extract from a letter that he wrote in August 1967 to the Abbot of the Cistercian monastery of Frattocchie near Rome, Dom Francis Decroix. The letter was requested by the abbot as a “message of contemplatives to the world.”¹ Merton explains that his response, composed the day he received the letter, was written directly and simply, but with undoubted speed and spontaneity, in order to be returned to the abbot in time. My suggestion is that this same extract, so quickly penned, can speak poignantly and with much relevance nearly fifty years later.

The extract is prefaced by Merton who says that from his exploration of the contemplative way of life he has no answers; rather he has merely begun to seek the questions. The questions are those that ultimately lie at the heart of each person. What is the meaning of life? Can any explanations answer that? Why is there evil? What might it mean to live a good life? Merton in the ten or so lines that follow offers three crucial and challenging thoughts.

The first: “perhaps in my solitude I have become as it were an explorer for you, a searcher in realms which you are not able to visit – except perhaps in the company of your psychiatrist” (*HGL* 156). The truth that Merton touches on is that silence which is such an anathema and rarity, to be avoided at all costs in the contemporary world, is indeed a place of confrontation, rather than easy consolation. Silence, and encountering God in the silence, opens up the inner world where all sorts of feelings, some acknowledged and others repressed, lie in wait. Merton



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