

Thomas Merton and the Second Step of Alcoholics Anonymous: A Commitment to Healthy Spirituality

By Gary Torres

Introduction

I am a recovering alcoholic and drug addict; and I am extremely thankful to be clean and sober. To a substantial degree, I attribute my sobriety to the Twelve Steps of Recovery, which are used in such fellowship programs as Alcoholics Anonymous, AlAnon, Narcotics Anonymous, Over-Eaters Anonymous, etc., and also to my reading and study of the life and writings of Thomas Merton (1915-1968). As an avid student for over thirty years of the life and writings of Thomas Merton, Cistercian monk, contemplative, mystic, writer and peace activist, among many other things, and as an avid student of the Twelve Steps for over 35 years, I find much in the writings of Merton that resonates with the Twelve Steps. In this paper, I will correlate and explore various elements of Merton's writings on faith and spirituality with corresponding aspects of the Second Step, which reads: "Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity."¹ It is also one of the goals of this discussion, using the Second Step as my guide, and the writings of Thomas Merton as a context, to articulate my own spiritual journey from an unhealthy and confused notion of faith and spirituality, to what I hope is a healthy concept of faith and spirituality.

I believe that a comparative study such as this between the Second Step of the Twelve Steps of Recovery and certain related elements of the writings of Thomas Merton can prove to be useful to both practitioners of the Twelve Steps and for students and scholars of Merton as well. I have chosen the Second Step for this study because of its implications for the faith experience, which I think Merton so elegantly wrote about, and which I think the Second Step seeks to precipitate. I believe that one could also find in the Merton corpus other writings which resonate with any of the Twelve Steps, for example, the similarities between his writings on prayer, meditation and contemplation and the Eleventh Step of the Twelve-Step process, which reads: "Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood God, praying only for the knowledge of God's will for us and the power to carry that out." Certainly, Merton wrote very perceptively about prayer, meditation and contemplation, and much can be learned about the Eleventh Step by the reading and study of his writings on this very broad subject.

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Healthy versus Unhealthy Religion

The Second Step connotes to me the notion that there is a Power greater than my own limited abilities that can provide what I need to establish a healthy and creative spirituality. I would like to note at the outset that theologically, I think there is a difference between belief and faith. For instance, belief is about context: that is to say, an individual believes this belief system or that belief system, this religious tradition or that religious tradition. Faith, however, is essentially an orientation, a perspective toward one's whole life, including one's religious and spiritual practice. On this difference, the late Alan Watts, the practitioner and apologist of Zen Buddhism in America, asserts:

Faith is a state of openness or trust. To have faith is to trust yourself to the water. When you swim you don't grab hold of the water, because if you do you will sink and drown. Instead you relax and float. And the attitude of faith is the very opposite of clinging to belief, of holding on. In other words, a person who is fanatic in religion, and clings to certain ideas about the nature of God and the universe, becomes a person who has no faith at all. Instead they are holding tight. But the attitude of faith is to let go, and become open to truth, whatever it might turn out to be.²

It is of some significance to point out that this reflection resonates with another step of the Twelve-Step process, the Third, which declares: "Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God – as we understood God." This Third Step underscores, I think, the "letting go" and detachment dimension of the Twelve-Step process, and the surrender implications of Watts' statement.³

The Benedictine monk David Steindl-Rast, OSB has this to say on the distinction between belief and faith:

To have faith does not primarily mean believing something, but rather believing in someone. Faith is trust. It takes courage to trust. The opposite of faith is not disbelief but distrust, fear. Fear makes us cling to everything within reach. Fear clings even to beliefs. Thus beliefs can even get in the way of faith. In genuine faith we hold our beliefs firmly, tightly. We trust in God, not in our particular understanding of God. That is why people of deep faith are one at heart, even though their beliefs may differ widely.⁴

For the purposes of this paper, however, and in spirit of the Second Step, I will continue to use both these terms, belief and faith, interchangeably. For those readers more theologically educated, I beg your indulgence; and for followers of any of the Twelve-Step Programs/Fellowships, I write in the spirit of the slogan: "Keep it simple."

Also, a note on what I tend to view as healthy religion and spirituality, which I relate to the sanity aspect of the Second Step, as opposed to unhealthy religion and spirituality, which I relate to the insanity aspect of the Second Step, would, I think, be appropriate here. I tend to understand healthy religious and spiritual practice as, among other things, genuine, loving and compassionate religion and spirituality, which Thomas Merton certainly exemplified, and which I will attempt to articulate in the remainder of this paper. And I tend to understand

unhealthy religious and spiritual practice as, among other things, obsessive, dysfunctional, compulsive, addictive, counterproductive and destructive. Some examples of unhealthy religious practice could and would include, I think, certain fundamentalist groups within some sectors of various religious traditions, which promote fear, violence and death as part of their teachings and practice, for instance, the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center by radicalized Islamic terrorists; the beheadings and other atrocities committed by ISIS; the murder of abortion doctors by some Christian fundamentalists; David Koresh, the Branch Davidians and the Waco tragedy, among many others. Other examples of unhealthy religious and spiritual practice would include situations when an individual, or a group, uses religion for purposes of power or control (as for instance the example of David Koresh and the Branch Davidians), or out of a sense of guilt, or as an obsessive and compulsive attempt to avoid and escape reality, responsibility and/or painful feelings and emotions. This is to use religion as a drug. This is called religious addiction. Healthy religious experience, I believe, calls one to an engagement with reality, responsibility and redemptive suffering, not the opposite.⁵

A Personal Reflection

Initially, when I first encountered the Second Step of the Twelve-Step process, the question for me was: did I really acknowledge and believe in a Power greater than myself that was greater than my own personal pride and grandiosity? And if so, did I think this “Higher Power” could be concerned with my life? For a long time, I resisted the reality of God because I didn’t want to believe in anything greater than my own individual ego, grandiosity and subjectivity. My pride and hubris motivated me to be in ultimate control. This grandiosity conditioned me to think in categories of “me, myself and I.” This egocentric thinking is counterproductive to a healthy faith and spiritual practice. Needless to say, these attitudes and feelings made it very difficult for me to get past my own character defects, negativity and sins. But if there is an Ultimate Reality “out there” who is also within me, a God who is omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent, who is greater than my own individual ego and subjectivity, than I am not the master of my fate, nor the center of the universe. This is exactly what I needed to accept to get past the grandiose notions I had about myself. With the continued practice of the Second Step in my life, in addition to my study of the life and writings of Thomas Merton, I began to get past these grandiose notions I had about myself, and also to believe in an all-loving and all-merciful God. I came to believe, as it states in the Second Step, that a healthy spiritual life was possible for me.

In the first place, I no longer needed to sustain a phony pretense of self-sufficiency and control. I could now ask this all-loving and all-merciful God for help with my faith and spirituality. I began to receive the gift of a healthy faith, so that I could now believe in a Power greater than myself, in a loving and caring God who could restore me to a healthy belief and spirituality. In “coming to believe” in a Power greater than myself, in a God that loves and cares for me, I could surrender more of my character defects and shortcomings, my old self-centered negative fears and projections.⁶ As a result, I came to believe that the possibilities for my spiritual growth were open-ended and limitless. I indeed came to believe that the Second Step was a viable, authentic and genuine way for me to practice an authentic and genuine spirituality.

Being Restored to Healthy Religious and Spiritual Practice: A Meditation

To be restored, or introduced to a healthy religious and spiritual practice, means to me that a healthy religious and spiritual practice could be my natural state of being. What is spiritually unhealthy is the dysfunction and pain that goes with my sometimes obsessive and sinful thinking and behavior, and with my preconditions to addiction and to sin. Previous to my encounter with the Twelve Steps of Recovery, and with the life and writings of Thomas Merton, my conception of God was extremely distorted, dysfunctional and confused. To me, God was a judgmental, critical, condemning and unforgiving God, a God who was waiting for me to make a mistake so I could be punished. Working through the Second Step, and applying what I was learning from my study of Merton's writings, opened me up to a whole new dimension of benevolence, forgiveness and mercy. For me, this new dimension of benevolence, forgiveness and mercy is a kind and compassionate God, as I understand that conception of God. In the beginning of my spiritual journey with the Second Step and with Merton, my self-esteem and self-worth was so low that I felt I didn't deserve any goodness from God. A belief in the basic benevolence of the universe wasn't something that was on my spiritual radar. I had been locked inside my addictions, isolation, alienation and sin for so long that I lost hope of ever finding a way out of all the confusion, pain and suffering in my life. But the Second Step and the writings of Merton changed all that for me.

Being introduced to a healthy religious and spiritual practice involved action, a spiritual practice; and as it is often heard in recovery circles, "I act my way into a new way of thinking; I don't think my way into a new way of acting." That is to say, I don't think or feel my way into right actions. I take the right actions, then healthy thinking and positive feelings will follow. It is my further experience that a healthy belief in an all-loving and all-merciful Power greater than myself comes as I put in healthy spiritual footwork, which includes, but is not limited to, prayer, meditation, contemplation, *lectio divina*, liturgy, a support network, etc.

Thomas Merton and the Second Step: Coming to Believe

Thomas Merton certainly had a lot to say about faith and spirituality. I think his whole life and writings can be seen, to a certain degree, in terms of the "coming to believe" element of the Second-Step process. Merton's life was, I would even assert, an attempt to "come to believe" on deeper and more profound contemplative and mystical levels. Many of his writings, I believe, were an attempt to articulate and communicate this deeper and more profound contemplative and mystical spirituality to others. On faith (or the "coming to believe" dimension of the Second Step), Merton writes: "At the present day, when the existence of God has been denied or at least called into doubt by all the characteristically modern modes of thought, the problem of faith reduces itself, in many cases, to a problem of God's existence."⁷ This statement, written in 1962, was assuredly ahead of its time, and is still relevant today in light of the new atheistic authors such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens, who militantly deny and reject any conception of God and/or religious and spiritual experience.

It needs to be noted, however, that the critique of God and religion that these new atheistic authors present, especially Richard Dawkins in his book *The God Delusion*, is a superficial criticism based on one aspect of the religious phenomenon called fundamentalism, which tends,

I think, to make a caricature of God, religion and spirituality, and is an unhealthy and distorted concept of religion, not a healthy, mature and genuine notion of religion and spirituality, as discussed in the present essay.⁸

According to Merton, “A life of faith is certainly irrational unless it presupposes the reality of a God in whom to believe” (LH 93). (I relate this usage of “irrational” to the insanity element considered in the Second Step). And as St. Pope John Paul II tells us in his Encyclical Letter of 1998, *Fides et Ratio*: “Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth – in a word, to know himself – so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves.”⁹ I believe, therefore, that a healthy approach to faith and spirituality needs to be based on reason. But spirituality and faith do not primarily draw their substance and content from reason; on the contrary, and as Merton asserts, reason is “a spiritual light for the intellect” (LH 93). That is to say, belief, faith and spirituality are not antithetical to reason but transcend reason in a way that is healthy, reasonable and rational, as expressed in the famous dictum of St. Anselm: *Credo ut intelligam* – “I believe in order to understand.”¹⁰ Actually, the question of God’s existence necessarily needs to be, I think, open to rational investigation. But as Merton contends, rational investigation “cannot convince when its terms are not accepted or understood” (LH 94). Therefore, as is often the case, those for whom the process of faith and “coming to believe” (Second Step) is based on the acceptance of God’s existence are often confronted with many theological distortions and confusions. As a result, many people lose their faith, or develop unhealthy belief systems, or even lose all faith as long as they cannot resolve the more apparent distortions and confusions in the sphere of theological abstractions. The average person in the postmodern world is therefore in a position where theological abstractions about the existence of God can become an obstacle, a stumbling block, or worse still, become completely irrelevant. On this issue, Merton states: “To engage in an elaborate discussion of the point helps neither faith nor reason but only tends to obscure both and to reduce honest minds to a state of permanent frustration and invincible doubt” (LH 94).

I would contend, therefore, that faith and belief are essential to human existence. That is, as soon as we become fully aware of our own human existence, and as soon as we comprehend the reality of the natural world, of other people and all other living creatures, we find ourselves confronted with the question of a transcendent reality, which is implied by the existence of our very human and limited selves. It follows then, that by the reality of our own existence as rational human beings we seem to have a basic awareness of God without which a fundamental question of God’s existence could not even come into our awareness. This intuition is not, however, in the classic theological sense of the term, a “proof” for the existence of God (for example, the ontological argument of St. Anselm, or the five proofs for the existence of God of St. Thomas Aquinas, among others), but simply an element or a dimension of human existence. This can certainly be the beginning, an invitation, as it were, for a solid foundation for a healthy approach to religion and spirituality, as opposed to a dysfunctional and addictive approach to religion. It can, as Merton asserts, “awaken the intelligence and lead it on to an act of faith” (LH 95).

Unless we reject this essential intuition of belief with a conscious will, we may quite spontaneously find ourselves on a healthy spiritual journey towards a deeper experience of God.

But it is a sad reality that in our modern and postmodern society, atheistic polemics tend to mock this fundamental awareness of God, and to try to make individuals skeptical and afraid of the religious and spiritual experience.

The initial stage, then, in the process of “coming to belief” (again in terms of the Second Step), on a authentic and more genuine level, is a rejection of the usual polemics and criticisms of such “pop” atheists as Dawkins, Harris and Hitchens, among others. This does not imply a rejection of reason and the acceptance of blind belief. It does however consist, I think, in a choice between two opposing belief systems: one being a distorted, dysfunctional system based on fear and theological distortion, on the need to use religion for power, control or other negative purposes; or based on a need to belong to a group and accept its “group-think” and collective ego with passive acquiescence in order to escape from pain, reality, responsibility and redemptive suffering; the other being a healthy, functional belief system based on a “primal intuition” (*LH* 95) of a transcendent and invisible God that goes beyond all the “proofs for the existence of God”; a system that calls for an inner reformation and conversion of one’s whole life.

Conclusion

For me then, a healthy faith and spiritual practice is an acceptance and surrender not only to an acceptance of the existence of God but also of a theology and/or a spirituality which makes the world comprehensible. It is this healthy faith and spiritual practice that is at the center of and gives meaning to my whole life. This is what the practice of the Second Step and my study of the life and writings Thomas Merton have done for me and offered me – and for that I am deeply grateful.

1. See <https://www.recovery.org/alcoholics-anonymous/step-2> for a description of this step of the twelve-step process; the same site provides information on each of the other steps.
2. Alan Watts, quoted in Rami Shapiro, *Recovery – The Sacred Art: The Twelve Steps as Spiritual Practice* (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths, 2009) 28-29.
3. For more on the similarities between the Third Step of Recovery and the life and writings of Thomas Merton, see Gary Torres, “Thomas Merton and the Third Step of Alcoholics Anonymous: A Commitment for Conversion,” *Spiritual Life* 57.4 (Winter 2011) 211-17.
4. David Steindl-Rast, OSB, *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer: An Approach to Life in Fullness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984) 198.
5. On this provocative point see Leo Booth, *When God Becomes a Drug* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991); and Robert Neil Minor, *When Religion Is an Addiction* (St. Louis: Humanity Works, 2007).
6. This is usually done in terms of a Twelve-Step recovery context with the Sixth and Seventh Steps, which are as follows: Step Six: “Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character” and Step Seven: “Humbly asked God to remove our shortcomings.”
7. Thomas Merton, *Life and Holiness* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1963) 93; subsequent references will be cited as “*LH*” parenthetically in the text.
8. For more on these authors see Donnell Kirchner, “The New Atheists,” *Spiritual Life* 57.4 (Winter 2011) 195-200.
9. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio* (14 September 1998); available at: http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html.
10. St. Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion* 1 (J. P. Migne, ed., *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina* [Paris: Garnier, 1844-1865] vol. 158, col. 227C); see also *LH* 94.