

## The Necessity of Pilgrimage

By Kathleen Tarr

I hold two contrasting images of Thomas Merton – one idealized, the other realistic. In the first, it is sometime around 1967 and I imagine he is well-settled into the privacy of his hermit-hut, enjoying an almost perfect evening. He calmly sorts through his stack of personal correspondence and stops occasionally to gaze through the window to the pine trees outside. After prayers, he sips a mug of Lipton tea and delves into another dense book without interruption. As he builds a fire, and listens to its pop and crackle, he thinks about how being near a fireplace brings him immense joy. Each day, another step towards the gradually peeling off of diversions and non-essential things. At the fire's last embers, he falls into a short but peaceful sleep in his narrow bed.

In the second image, he is a sleepless, ragged contemplative. An overworked Cistercian monk bogged down with non-stop mental activity, compulsively writing and revising, jotting lecture notes and thinking about the essays he has not yet begun. Library books spill across his table near the manual typewriter. This obsessive literary producer rubs his bloodshot eyes, fidgets, tries to lessen his chronic neck pain. Though the hermitage has been a gift and blessing, he imagines one day he will take leave of it and will strike out into the great unknown as a pilgrim-monk. Follow the winds of the Spirit. Trust completely in an uncharted route. *Simply, go. See what's out there.*

Paradoxes defined key aspects of Merton's character and personality and he wasn't at all shy about admitting it. In the more than 54 years since his death, people from all faiths and persuasions have found common ground with Merton's innermost contradictions. Here was a renowned spiritual thinker who sugar-coated nothing about the possible psychic dangers inherent in the darkness of one's spiritual struggles and journey. Even monks living solely for God are confronted by bouts of existential crisis.

Merton's inner restlessness (*inquires*) and his sense of wanderlust have been frequently acknowledged: "For the single overriding attribute of Merton, and the image he uses time and time again in his writing, is that of a man on a journey. For Merton the journey is always understood as arduous and sometimes agonizing. It is a journey through fire and purging, or one taken among high mountains."<sup>1</sup> But as a monk of the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance who had sworn a vow of stability, it was expected Merton should keep his *inquires* to himself. Changing monastic locations and settings, even temporarily, ran contrary to Cistercian tradition. But Merton "never quite came to grips with that part of himself which wanted to be on the go."<sup>2</sup> In life and literature, he was a "relentless pilgrim."<sup>3</sup>

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Merton's choice in 1968 to transform himself into something of an "American, Catholic, Cistercian pilgrim" (Malits 116) was made in the context of America's social upheaval, its political fracturing, the civil rights movement and the raging Vietnam War. For him, his spiritual action required continuing down the road to ecumenical discovery and not only in a figurative sense – it became physically urgent, as well. Thomas Merton understood the path to human authenticity was lonely, full of risk, "a pilgrim's terror."<sup>4</sup> His writing articulated his lifelong journey and commitment to multi-cultural understanding and authentic spiritual exchanges. "He commands our attention, moves us, prods us to embark on our own pilgrimage" (Malits 20).

As I write these words, a sense of renewal and "normalization" is beginning to appear in the air as the impacts from COVID-19 are lessening. But the tangible signs of hope and optimism were abruptly undercut by another global crisis as of February 24, 2022: Russia's invasion and war against sovereign Ukraine. It may be time to re-think our notions about pilgrimage, the reasons and underlying purposes of it, to give pilgrimage a kind of re-boot.

For years, Merton, the monk of many spiritual colors, had studied the ancient pilgrim traditions within Christianity and in the other great religions. Pilgrimage, Merton wrote, "takes the faithful back to the source and center of the religion itself, the place of theophany, of cleansing, renewal, and salvation."<sup>5</sup>

As Merton scholar Monica Weis has written, Merton's serious immersion in the *peregrinationes* of legendary seafaring Celts such as St. Brendan struck a soulful, personal chord, given his Welsh ancestry.<sup>6</sup> And he was enthralled with stories of itinerant Buddhist monks who lost themselves in Japan's spring rains and mist-shrouded mountains. Matsuo Basho (1644-1694), in particular, spoke to his heart. Basho, though not a monk but a master poet, wrote travel sketches and linked verses (*renga*).<sup>7</sup> He relinquished most of his earthly possessions, sold his house, and left on the third of his major journeys by foot in 1689, roaming through northern Japan for two and a half years. Known for combining haiku and prose so that each was illuminated, he "sought a vision of eternity in the things that are, by their own very nature, destined to perish."<sup>8</sup>

The year 1968 represented not one, but a mosaic of pilgrimages for Merton, each one meaningful in its own way and monumental in total geographic scope and diversity. Think of the terrain he covered: deserts; canyons; Alaska's sub-arctic, its high country, its hemlock-covered rainforests; California's redwoods; Asian tropics; ocean vistas; and remote gateways to the Himalayas. Though imagining himself a "poor pilgrim," Merton journeyed to distant lands *not* by blistered foot, garbed in a medieval-type cassock, carrying a canvas satchel and a pilgrim's begging bowl. He traveled in the relative comfort of commercial airplanes, dressed in street clothes, and skipped wearing the Roman collar most of the time to be seen, not as a priest, but as nobody special. While on the road he relished random encounters and casual conversations with everyday people, the non-writers, the non-intellectuals. Besides the standard religious reasons for pilgrimage – paying tribute to holy sites and sacred shrines – Merton believed interior perspectives, conditioned thoughts, could be changed by undertaking an authentic and genuine pilgrimage. Such pilgrimages might involve meeting others and the Other along the way. Merton determined to go as a humble listener, to be open and receptive to all as he entered the spirit of the place. One of the possible, profound outcomes of pilgrimage, at least on a small, individual scale, is that it can serve to increase compassion and empathy in a world sorely lacking both.

### **Spatial Dimension of Pilgrimage**

The beloved nonfiction writer (and Merton admirer) Barry Lopez (1945-2020) spent years traveling across the “Arctic’s long, unbroken bow of time,” and writing about the history and culture of its indigenous inhabitants, the animals the arctic peoples subsisted upon and the explorers who mapped the vast region. Lopez said that in today’s world we live in what he called “funnel space.” Assuming most of us are not already living on a 120-acre homestead in interior Alaska as the poet and writer John Haines once did, or on a ranch in Montana, the sheer scale and magnitude of our surroundings creates an immediate effect on our interior journey.

From time to time, Lopez said, humans needed an escape from funnel space. (Merton would probably concur that an escape from one’s monastic cell, skete or monastery could represent a personal re-awakening to God’s presence.) When we humans are overwhelmed by the infinite scale of nature – of desolate, lonely coasts, “empty” deserts, large swaths of ice sheets, high, snow-covered mountain ranges – we are spiritually strengthened and rejuvenated by the glaring paradox it presents: the fact of our own insignificance, and the fact that we are intrinsically connected to what we still do not understand.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, people missed the easy freedom to travel, to roam around parklands and public squares. They needed an escape from the isolation of their domestic cloisters, their high-rises, their more closed-in living spaces. Accessing nature’s less-trodden trails has grown more necessary as a spiritual practice. Aren’t we wired to wander? Merton’s limited peregrinations around the Abbey of Gethsemani, under sycamores and redbuds, among meadowlarks and downy woodpeckers, around small frog ponds and up dirt paths, formed an ever more crucial part of his spiritual discipline. But by 1968, I venture a guess that he hungered to explore more wild spaces far beyond the abbey’s walls. Like many of us, he craved more freedom in which to move through greater physical space. The seeker in him needed physical as well as mental release.

As a pent-up pilgrim, Merton believed monks should be liberated from habitual and routine mechanisms in their territorially limited lives. Pilgrimage opened one up to the *whole of reality*, beyond the narrow lens of one’s confining home front. A more fruitful pilgrimage, as he understood it, represents an interior journey to self-discovery and self-transcendence. Pilgrimage provides a path towards being a more fully integrated person. Translated into today’s terms, pilgrimage is more than clocking the miles and speed you achieved on El Camino de Santiago – or as a pious Christian, being smug about the number of obligatory sacred shrines you have visited. As cliché as it sounds, in the silence of a pilgrim walk, there is simply more time to think, reflect, discern, recollect and dream. “The true monk in the contemporary world” must not merely be a punctilious observer of external traditions, but a living example of traditional and interior realization. He must be wide open to life and to new experience because he has fully utilized his own tradition and gone beyond it” (Malits 315).

### **Fellow Pilgrim, Marco Pallis**

Among Merton’s growing heap of correspondents – and so many of them were remarkable people – was the writer, musician and mountaineer Marco Pallis (1895-1989). Pallis may be the one-and-only mountaineer whom Merton ever befriended. Born in Liverpool, England to Greek parents, Marco Pallis was, one could say, part of that great wave of British alpinists who had trekked to the still “unconquered” peaks of the Himalayas. Pallis made mountain-climbing expeditions there in 1923,



**Theotokos Icon**

Pallis for sending him the book, *Born in Tibet* by Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche.<sup>14</sup> *Born in Tibet* (1966) told of the lama's perilous escape from the Chinese through the Himalayas; Pallis, who considered himself a pilgrim of Tibetan Buddhism, had written the book's Foreword.

Around this time, 1966, Merton hinted to Pallis how much he would like to go on a still-to-be-approved and defined pilgrimage to increase his spiritual understanding: "I on the other hand must pay for my hermitage with the sacrifice of not being a pilgrim too, except spiritually. One cannot have everything or rightly demand it. Still, it is a lack. I feel the loss, for I know I would gain spiritually. No matter" (*HGL* 477). Merton admits to Pallis (March 11, 1966) that more experiential knowledge is required: "I realize of course that an authentic spiritual guidance is not a matter of letters" (*HGL* 475) – and this writer would add that it's not a matter of reading more books, either.

Before Merton's overseas plans materialized, Pallis had also mailed his friend copies of his own acclaimed books, *Peaks & Llamas* (1939)<sup>15</sup> and *The Way and the Mountain* (1960),<sup>16</sup> both enthusiastically read by Merton. These mountain-related books must have further fueled the monk's thoughts about being a 1960s pilgrim headed in the direction of mysterious Tibet and Nepal.

### **Merton's Vow of Wonder**

In this pilgrim portrait I have sketched, Merton sounds very New Age: a Beat poet ready to join some of his religious buddies on a wild road trip; a Trappist seeking a New Way to Enlightenment; a man pining for a change of scenery and some new cross-cultural dialogue. "He [Merton] was utterly faithful to life as a journey into the unknown, confident that God would lead him to a fullness beyond imagining" (Malits 117). Merton chose to enter into the direct and spontaneous experience of Life

1933, 1937 and again in 1947, once travel disruptions caused by the Second World War had ended. Their friendship began in 1963 and continued until May 1968; a total of 31 letters comprise the Merton/Pallis archive at the Bellarmine Thomas Merton Center.<sup>10</sup> (While touring with a chamber musical ensemble, Pallis paid Merton a visit in 1964.<sup>11</sup> They had been introduced earlier through a third party because of their mutual interests in Buddhism, a subject which proved life-altering for both men.<sup>12</sup>)

Marco Pallis, primarily known to Merton scholars as the person who gifted a valuable and unique Byzantine icon to Merton,<sup>13</sup> was influential to Merton in his important sojourn to the East. Pallis had lived in Kalimpong, India for five years where he had continued his deep studies as a practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism. Pallis later offered logistical assistance for Merton's Asian pilgrimage by sharing his important personal contacts in Dharamsala and Darjeeling.

In his letter of December 24, 1966 (*HGL* 477), while living in his cinderblock hut, Merton thanked

itself, *in the present moment*, wherever his pilgrim shoes led him, and with complete acceptance of the physical wear and tear to his body any future, extreme traveling might cause. Materially, his life had been pared down long ago. “The paradoxical themes of homelessness and finding one’s true home come together for Merton in the metaphor of the pilgrim. The wandering is a return, the going out a coming back, the seeking a finding. Merton’s trip to Asia was but a continuation of his journey into solitude, which was always a seeking for God” (Malits 114).

Merton sought true communion and understanding of people and place, without judgement, and in real humility. With his sheer receptivity and openness to life,<sup>17</sup> he hoped to build stronger bridges between different faith groups and cultures in a world that in 1968 seemed in dire trouble. In his last piece of correspondence to Marco Pallis (June 16, 1968), Merton admitted he did want to “learn more and then apply it to greater solitude and deeper silence. I am certainly going to write and publish less. Depth is what counts.”<sup>18</sup>

I like to think that Merton, rooted to his monastic home as an obedient, penniless monk for 27 years, was sworn to another vow, too, a more secret one, perhaps, but also a necessary and urgent vow in an age of chaos and political unrest: Merton took the “*vow of wonder*.” To become a pilgrim, physically or metaphorically, is to internally swear an oath to abide by the “vow of wonder.” Pilgrimage connects us to a mythological purpose, not only harkening back to the early Christian roots of the Desert Fathers, but to something more ancient, even primordial. As part of a personal faith journey of any kind, having taken the “vow of wonder,” we can alleviate the empty feelings that we are nothing more than digital bits controlled and distracted by algorithms and the media gods. On pilgrimage, we might unleash from devices. In the triumphant procession of objective laws, the economic measurements of worth and success, and the dark forces we know are there, pilgrimage reclaims something of what’s been trampled and lost.

As Merton reflected on the horrific barbarism of the twentieth century – its two world wars; the rise of totalitarianism; the gas chambers and death pits of the Holocaust; Stalinism; the gulags; the violence and racism tearing America apart during the year of his Great Departure – he chose to push forward *into the light*. In his continuous search for more spiritual clarity, he stuck to his “vow of wonder.” He traveled the Old Silk Road of spiritual exploration.

Pilgrimage today represents more than an obligatory religious ritual. It stands as a symbolic act for inner freedom – against the tyranny of violence, lies, technological manipulation and alienation. To see the *real*, politically unfiltered, *un-propagandized reality of existence* is part of what a genuine pilgrimage is all about. It’s also a writer’s essential task, to swear an oath to the “vow of wonder,” to believe the world is not all suffering and nihilism.<sup>19</sup>

1. Herbert O’Driscoll, “Prologue: Hermitage of a Thousand Windows,” in Donald Grayston and Michael W. Higgins, eds., *Thomas Merton: Pilgrim in Process* (Toronto: Griffin House, 1983) xxx.
2. Elena Malits, *The Solitary Explorer: Thomas Merton’s Transforming Journey* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980) 147; subsequent references will be cited as “Malits” parenthetically in the text.
3. Lynn Szabo, “Poetry as Spiritual Direction with Thomas Merton and Denise Levertov,” “Tuesdays with Merton” online lecture, July 13, 2021, available on YouTube at: <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=pYm-2fibr-A>.
4. Michael W. Higgins, *Heretic Blood: The Spiritual Geography of Thomas Merton* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1998) 180.
5. “From Pilgrimage to Crusade,” in Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967) 91.
6. See Monica Weis, *Thomas Merton and the Celts: A New World Opening Up* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016).

7. See Merton's journal entries for November 28 and December 8, 1967: Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey. Journals, vol. 7: 1967-1968*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998) 18, 27.
8. Matsuo Basho, *The Narrow Road to the Far North and Other Travel Sketches*, trans. Nobuyuki Yuasa (London: Penguin, 1966) 37.
9. Barry Lopez, interview with Robert Macfarlane, June 13, 2019, Powell's Bookstore, Portland, Oregon; available on YouTube.
10. Thirteen of Merton's letters to Pallis are included in Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 463-77; subsequent references will be cited as "HGL" parenthetically in the text.
11. See Merton's journal entry for October 25, 1964: Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 157-58.
12. Merton and Pallis first became acquainted when an editor at a publishing house whom Pallis knew was personally involved in assisting Tibetan monks who had fled their country during the Chinese communist takeover in 1959, and who had made their way through sponsorships to the East Coast of America. Pallis offered to write America's most well-known monk, Merton, for advice about how and where these Tibetan monks might revitalize their life of meditation and contemplation in the West. As for his mountaineering experience, Pallis led a small climbing team credited with the first ascent of what is considered a lesser peak in the Western Himalayas – Leo Pargial (also known as Reo Purgyil), at 22,280 feet, on the border of India and Tibet.
13. In 1965, Pallis presented Merton with an original Macedonian icon of the Theotokos, Holy Mother, surrounded on separate panels featuring Sts. Charlambos, Nicholas, Demetrius and George. The icon, possibly from 1700, thrilled and excited Merton; he treasured it more than any book he was sent (see his December 5, 1965 letter to Pallis [HGL 473-74]). For an excellent study of Merton and iconography, see Donna Kristoff, OSU, "'Light That Is Not Light': A Consideration of Thomas Merton and the Icon," *Merton Annual* 2 (1985) 85-108.
14. Chögyam Trungpa, as told to Esmé Cramer Roberts, *Born in Tibet* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1966).
15. Marco Pallis, *Peaks and Lamas* (London: Cassell, 1939).
16. Marco Pallis, *The Way and the Mountain* (London: Peter Owen, 1960).
17. For a valuable perspective on Merton's relational intelligence, receptivity and intellectual openness, see Aaron Kerr, *Encounters in Thought: Beyond Instrumental Reason* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2019).
18. Unpublished letter in the archives of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY.
19. An earlier version of this article was presented online at the Seventeenth General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society, June 24, 2021.