

A Circle Dance of Love: Thomas Merton, Contemplation and the Cosmic Dance

By Nass Cannon

Thomas Merton, through his written works, swirls his contemplative fingers in “the world and time” in rhythm to “the dance of the Lord in emptiness.”¹ Utilizing his writings principally from *The New Man*,² this paper will reflect on this “cosmic dance” and the role of contemplation in enabling us to respond to Merton’s invitation “to forget ourselves on purpose, cast our awful solemnity to the winds and join in the general dance” (*NSC* 297). The paper will expound on “the general dance” by considering Merton’s contemplative gaze on humankind interpenetrated by the Spirit of the resurrected Christ, as all of us become dancers whose movements trace a universal circle dance of love. The general dance will be described as the core rhythm of creation in tune with the flow of the Father’s Love for the Son and the Son’s Love for the Father mediated by the Spirit.

This cosmic dance flows in two waves as movements within time and space, as though they were two halves of an infinity symbol, with a Logocentric wave (the Word of God) initiating the first and a Christocentric wave (the Word made Flesh) the second. Just as there are two halves comprising an infinity symbol while there is only one symbol, so too there are two movements but one Word. St. John proclaims the origin of creation to be the Logos: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (Jn. 1:1).³ St. Paul emphasizes that the Word is Christ who “is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature. For in Him were created all things in the heavens and on the earth. . . . All things have been created through and unto Him, and in Him all things hold together” (Col. 1:15-17). Commenting on this passage, Merton writes: “Christ comes before Adam . . . because in Him Adam is created, like everything else in Heaven and on earth. All creatures, spiritual and material are created in, through and by Christ, the Word of God” (*NM* 136-37).

An aspect of the Logocentric dance of the Word in space and time which St. Paul characterizes as “groaning in one great act of giving birth” (Rom. 8:22) may be described by cosmology which expands our perceptions of the vastness of God as it depicts a universe which spans 93 billion visible light-years. Prevailing theories suggest that the universe began with a big bang occurring 13.8 billion years ago as a cataclysm generating space and time, as well as all the matter and energy the universe will ever hold. The energy from this infinitely dense, hot fireball causes in a fraction of a second a vast expansion of space and births matter. From this cosmic dust, stars ignite at 300 million years following the big bang, and groups of stars under the influence of the



Nass Cannon

Nassif J. (Nass) Cannon, Jr. was a longtime member of the International Thomas Merton Society and frequent presenter at conferences both in America and Great Britain, as well as a distinguished physician. He died at the age of 74 on January 18, 2018. This article is an edited version of his presentation at the ITMS Fifteenth General Meeting at St. Bonaventure University in June 2017.

gravity of dark matter become the earliest galaxies. Our sun forms at 8 billion years.

Creation evolves between the tensions of progressive creative complexity and overwhelming violence such as from the death throes of a supernova giving birth to the elements forming Earth, which has circled the sun for 4.6 billion years. On earth, life appears as simple cells 3.6 billion years from the present time. Simple animals appear 600 million years ago, mammals at 200 million years and the great apes at 20 million years. Through the polarity of a creative building up and tearing down, earth and its inhabitants evolve and man stands upright with an earliest appearance at 2.5 million years ago. Anatomically modern man is a newcomer, appearing only 200,000 years ago. Merton accepts this evolutionary perspective but insists that creation exists for Christ.

The whole character of the creation was determined by the fact that God was to become man and dwell in the midst of His own creation. Creation is therefore not a preestablished fact into which the Word will come and fit Himself as best He can at the appointed time. Creation is created and sustained in Him and by Him. And when He enters into it, He will simply make clear the fact that He is already, and has always been, the center and the life and the meaning of a universe that exists only by His will. (*NM* 137)

The strands of evolution over billions of years generate humankind and the capacity for self-reflection. Man the gatherer becomes man the hunter, then farmer and builder, and migrates from rural villages to become an urban dweller. The strain of violence that is in creation is also inculcated into human consciousness. At times, this violence has survival benefits as seen in the “flight or fight” response. There are clearly biological roots to violence as demonstrated by scientists who can stimulate violent behavior in animals by electrophysiological means. Social factors are equally important – for example early childhood abuse makes one more prone to violent behavior.

Mankind’s capacity for violence expands as the complexity of human consciousness evolves. That pace quickens during the past 400 hundred years as humankind through scientific and technological knowledge increasingly dominates the environment and unravels mysteries hidden in nature and the cosmos. Yet knowledge and wisdom part company as humankind causes mass extinction of species and poisons the environment with toxic exploitation. The theoretical energy of the split atom as nuclear fission quickly became practical weapons of mass destruction vaporizing two Japanese cities. The secret of the sun’s light has been translated into hydrogen bombs, which are poised for planetary annihilation.

Death is a part of creation and our Biblical tradition attributes it to the mysterious happenings occurring within the Garden of Eden – a fall in which God is rejected and sin and death affects the inhabitants of space and time. Merton observes: “The first Adam, by the irresponsible misuse of his freedom, by the act of original pride in which he substituted self-assertion for self-realization, had brought death, illusion, error, destruction into the life of man by awakening inordinate desire” (*NM* 151). Merton states that Adam

exchanged the spontaneity of a perfectly ordered nature elevated by the highest gifts of mystical grace, for the compulsions and anxieties and weaknesses of a will left to itself, a will which does what it does not want to do, hates what it

ought to love and avoids what it ought to seek with its whole being. . . . He was no longer able to control even his own body, which became to some extent the master of his soul. His mind, now, since it no longer served God, toiled in the service of the body, wearing itself out in schemes to clothe and feed and gratify the flesh and protect its frail existence against the constant menace of death.

(*NM* 110-11)

At some point in the human journey, the biblical Cain kills Abel. In the 200,000-year history of modern mankind, Cain continues to kill Abel, in the guise of individuals, tribes, communities, states and empires with an accelerating ferocity resonating with technological prowess as the blood of ever more victims soaks the ground of God's creation.

However unfathomable Adam's fall from grace and its consequences, we can experience in ourselves its effects. Each of us individually recapitulates the story of evolution. A sperm and egg merge and we evolve from embryo to growing child and aging adult. As we mature we carry within ourselves traces of the creative and destructive forces of the universe, marveling at the many expressions of our collective creative genius and dismayed by the violent eruptions of our disordered passions fed by subterranean torrents of pride, avarice, lust, envy, gluttony, anger and sloth. We too can surpass Cain by killing not only one another but through our toxic relationship with the biosphere all living beings.

We, like those who have gone before us, need redemption. Dancing in creation, this Word of Love evolves the universe and mankind until the fruition of time, the apex of Logogenesis when the Word becomes Flesh to redeem humankind. With the birth of Jesus, creation, which had the Logos as its core, now has God on its surface. In this Christocentric wave of creation initiated by the incarnation, Merton conceives Christ to be a Cosmic Mediator. "Even before Adam existed, Christ was already a Cosmic Mediator. All things were created in Him and by Him and for Him. And He was, at the same time, already exercising another Mediation which would include all men in Himself by His Incarnation" (*NM* 135). As Cosmic Mediator, Christ transforms the summation of this violence throughout humanity's sojourn through the redemptive mysteries and evolution passes into another dimension. A law of peace supplants the law of violence found in evolution with Christ's assurance, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you" (Jn. 14:27). Christ's peace is his presence within us as the Spirit writes a new law of Love within our hearts, healing the deep wounds of violence, which scar humankind. Through his Incarnation, Death, Resurrection and the Descent of His Holy Spirit Christ intensifies the spiritualization of the evolutionary process by the law of His Love to build up his Mystical Body.

Merton observes:

Humanity, which was one image of God in Adam, or, if you prefer, one single "mirror" of the divine nature, was shattered into millions of fragments by that original sin which alienated each man from God, from other men and from himself. But the broken mirror becomes once again a perfectly united image of God in the union of those who are one in Christ. Thus, in Christ, "God reunites His whole creation, including, matter, but especially man, in a new economy of salvation" (*NM* 149)

While Merton is emphasizing the restoration of mankind through the redemptive process and includes its effect on matter, most of us probably underemphasize the role of matter in the new creation. However, its critical importance can be seen at the Last Supper when Christ takes ordinary bread and wine and pronounces it to be His Body and His Blood.

Some explorers of the cosmic implications of this view include Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Thomas Berry and Mathew Fox. They along with Merton visualize a Christocentric universe anchored by the cross of Christ and destined for the glory of God. With 13.8 billion years from the big bang until the appearance of modern man, who has existed only for 200,000 years, the short 2,000 years since the Word was made flesh suggests humankind is in an early stage of spiritual maturity and that it may be quite some time before St. Paul's prophecy, "God may be all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28), is fulfilled.

In our cosmic exploration, we must remember that Christ is not dividable. The Christ who is the Word, who is the Word made flesh, who dwells within us, and who is sitting at the right hand of the Father, is not many but one. Christ both fills and transcends the cosmos. As Word, He is the source and guiding light of the cosmos. As the Word made flesh, he redeems the cosmos. As the resurrected Christ, He sows a new creation and this creation is contained within Him.

We enter the cosmic dance by obtaining the saving power of Christ's mercy and love through baptism, which Merton suggests can transform us into a new creation. For him, "Just as Christ is the New Adam, so Baptism is a new Creation" (*NM* 203). As a consequence, Merton believes the baptized "have become other Christs by their relation with the Holy Spirit" (*NM* 206). However Merton's view in this regard appears to be very inclusive when he considers the redemptive mediation of "dying and rising" with Christ available to all humanity because "we are all one with Christ, we are all in Christ by virtue of our humanity, just as we are in Adam by virtue of our humanity, by the very fact that we are made in the image of God, and possess that human nature which the Word of God took to Himself" (*NM* 136).

To actualize the baptismal promise of intimacy with God, he suggests, "we must reverse Adam's journey, we must go back by the way he came. The path lies through the center of our own soul. Adam withdrew into himself from God and then passed through himself and went forth into creation. We must withdraw ourselves (in the right and Christian sense) from exterior things, and pass through the center of our souls to find God" (*NM* 118). We must choose our identity between "the external mask which seems to be real and which lives by a shadowy autonomy for the brief moment of earthly existence, and the hidden, inner person who seems to us to be nothing, but who can give himself eternally to the truth in whom he subsists" (*NSC* 295). Realizing that the "only source of the spiritual life is the Holy Spirit,"³⁴ our recovery depends upon our cooperation with the Spirit who through the modalities of prayer, grace, silence and solitude leads us to our true self.

As Merton realized the deeper aspects of his true self, he poetically suggested that "the world and time are the dance of the Lord in emptiness" (*NSC* 297). Later, he plunged into this emptiness while pondering the great statues at Polonnaruwa, as he experienced the scaffolding of the cosmos, realizing that the "rock, all matter, all life, is charged with . . . emptiness and . . . compassion."³⁵

This dance of the Lord in emptiness pulsates more transparently within the kingdom of God, which Christ teaches is like a mustard seed. It grows slowly over time as the outpouring of the Holy Spirit transforms humankind by transforming individuals one at a time. The Spirit's goal is to unite Christ's spirit with ours to form an individual as a son or daughter of God. This gift allows the individual to put on the mind of Christ, which is Compassion, and acquire the heart of Christ, which is Mercy.

Contemplative consciousness is the Spirit's goal for the individual's evolutionary sojourn in space and time as well as for humankind in its cosmic journey. Although this consciousness is an awareness of Christ's Presence, it is more fundamentally an awareness of the communion of a son or daughter with their Father. Through this communion, the individual is in communion with all that exists. The indwelling Spirit animates contemplative consciousness with a Law of Love for God and for neighbor, which is why Christ was born, died on a cross, rose from the dead and poured out his Spirit – so that He, His Father and the Spirit of Love between them may dwell within us. His indwelling Spirit allows us to cast our awful solemnity to the winds, to consciously join the General Dance.

For Merton, our solemnity, which impedes our joining the general dance, arises from our lack of freedom and consequent lack of spontaneity. For him, the ability to cast one's solemnity to the wind relates to the ability to be free. He observes, "Freedom of choice is not, itself, the perfection of liberty. But it helps us take our first step toward freedom or slavery, spontaneity or compulsion. The free man is the one whose choices have given him the power to stand on his own feet and determine his own life according to the higher light and spirit that are in him" (*NM* 178-79).

For Merton, "The gift of free will is therefore like a talent given to us We are meant to invest it in good actions, actions that correspond to our reality and our vocation, which make us at once more real and more free, so that by our liberty we come closer to God" (*NM* 183). The greatest freedom results from our generous responsiveness to the indwelling Spirit who as Truth not only sets us free but also generates creative spontaneity as it freely blows us where It wills.

Cosmogogenesis is a love story whose Logocentric goal reaches fruition with the birth of Christ. The Christocentric goal of a new creation aims for communion of beings – one to another, to Christ and God's creation. We realize this love through experiencing the indwelling Love of Christ through the restoration of the true self's identity in Christ. This indwelling Love is the source of our capacity to obey Christ's commandment to "Love each other as I have loved you" (Jn. 15:9-12).

The cosmic dance is a circle dance of communal love, which both includes and transcends time and space. Love from the Father as Logos creates and sustains the cosmos as the "emptiness and compassion" at the core of a universe 13.8 billion years old evolving from a big bang through ever-increasing complexity creating stars as countless as the grains of sand. Four billion years ago one sun gives rise to one particular planet upon which single cells combine over millions of years into a diverse array of species of plants and animals. With the full forces of genetics, natural selection, randomness and choice at play, evolution stirred by Love births *homo sapiens* with reflective consciousness, aware of self and creation and imbued with a desire to know its Creator.

In the fullness of time, an immaculate vessel appears and the Word becomes flesh. This Incarnate Word redeems man and creation from sin. The resurrected Christ pours out his Spirit and man and creation are transformed into a new creation. God now dwells in creatures as though in a temple. In such stewards, the circle dance of love is complete, as the Love of God flowing through His created universe pours through humanity by the indwelling Christ who returns all that exists in Love to the Father.

With the recovery of our true self, we can consciously join the cosmic dance because it is God within us who dances. Merton suggests that “At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God.”⁶ Merton identifies this point as love when he exults, “Love is my true identity. . . . Love is my true character. Love is my name” (*NSC* 60). Thomas Merton danced along this road of love and beckons us to follow. He trumpets: “For the world and time are the dance of the Lord in emptiness. The silence of the spheres is the music of a wedding feast. . . . Indeed, we are in the midst of it, and it is in the midst of us, for it beats in our very blood, whether we want it to or not. Yet the fact remains that we are invited to forget ourselves on purpose, cast our awful solemnity to the winds and join in the general dance” (*NSC* 297).

Merton invites us to consciously join the cosmic dance by the recovery of our true self, allowing Incarnational Love to burn away our false self and to erupt as a Living Flame from the embers of our true self’s identity in Christ. If we embrace our identity, we will radiate Love to others and receive their Love in return, which will complete this circle dance by fueling an ever more intense communal Flame. In this circle dance of love, the Word is the Logocentric source of the dance and the Word made Flesh the Christocentric return of creation to the Father. All that exists pulsates in this great Circle Dance of Love which Thomas Merton characterized as the “cosmic dance which . . . beats in our very blood, whether we want it to or not” (*NSC* 297).

1. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 297; subsequent references will be cited as “*NSC*” parenthetically in the text.
2. Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1961); subsequent references will be cited as “*NSC*” parenthetically in the text.
3. All scripture quotations are taken from the *New Jerusalem Bible* translation.
4. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 271.
5. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 235.
6. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 142.