

# MERTON'S JOURNEY

## FROM SEEDS TO NEW SEEDS

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In 1949, just eight years after entering the Cistercian Order, Thomas Merton authored a book on contemplative life and prayer called *Seeds of Contemplation*. In the introduction he called it a "collection of notes and personal reflections . . . that came to mind at odd moments and were put down on paper when there was time, without order and without any special sequence."<sup>1</sup> Addressed not only to monks, but to all Christians, the book covers topics concerned with living the Christian life, especially the life of prayer. Just twelve years later, in 1961, Merton issued a revised edition of this book, *New Seeds of Contemplation*. His purpose was "not simply to make a larger book out of a small one, but to say many new things that could profitably be added to the old."<sup>2</sup> By comparing these two books we can determine what "new things" Merton added and thus gain some insight into the evolution of his spiritual theology in the intervening years.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (Norfolk, Connecticut: New Directions, 1949), pp. 13-14.

2. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), p. ix.

3. After the first draft of this study was completed a much more thorough textual comparison was published by Donald Grayston, *Thomas Merton: The Development of a Spiritual Theologian*, Toronto Studies in Theology 20 (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1985). Grayston's detailed textual analysis supports my thesis. Grayston used not only the two popular versions of *Seeds* and *New Seeds* but also the typescript for each of these volumes and also a little known revised edition of *Seeds* (Norfolk: New Directions, 1949) which appeared nine months after the original. Subsequent references to this study are referred to in the text as "Grayston."

Before examining some of the textual changes in the later book, we will review a number of the significant events of Merton's life between 1949 and 1961 that influenced these changes.<sup>4</sup>

## Biographical Background

On May 26, 1949, the same year that *Seeds of Contemplation* was published, Merton was ordained to the priesthood. This event which he eagerly anticipated was followed by a period of depression and spells of scrupulosity when saying Mass. He struggled with boredom in choir, insomnia, longing for solitude, and an inability to write creatively. In November he was asked to teach a class to the scholastics and novices, which added to an already heavy schedule. It is not surprising that he succumbed to flu in the community epidemic in the spring of 1950. In September he was admitted to the hospital in Louisville with sinusitis, and again in November for a nose operation and stomach and chest problems that were treated by rest. Whether it was the medical attention, the rest, or the opportunity for contacts outside the cloister, Merton experienced an inner renewal and peace, and, as well, the return of his writing ability.

He was named Master of Scholastics in the spring of 1951, with the responsibility of teaching and guiding some forty young men preparing to be choir monks. He enjoyed the classes, the spiritual counselling, and the association with these enthusiastic men who, by and large, loved and admired him. Gradually the pressure of his duties again conflicted with his desire for solitude and his irrepressible need to write. "He felt under continual tension and began increasingly to think that he was not called to the communal conventual life but to something far less structured, which, while keeping him away from the distractions of 'the world,' would allow him more liberty for private prayer and contemplation" (Furlong, p. 203). He began thinking seriously of transferring to the Carthusian or Camaldolese Orders where he could be more of a hermit.

Early in the 1950s he was informed that his journal *The Sign of Jonas* was being withheld from publication by the Abbot General of the Cistercian Order because, as a journal, it was not "in the tradition." But Merton's publisher and friend, Robert Giroux, wrote to Jacques Maritain who in turn

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4. The events in Merton's life from 1949 to 1961 as given here are taken from his journal *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1953) and from two biographies: Monica Furlong, *Merton: A Biography* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980) and Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984), subsequently referred to in the text as "Furlong" or "Mott."

apparently influenced the Abbot General to change his mind. "But it left a scar on Merton -- there would be worse scars from censorship to follow -- and may have influenced his desire to leave the Trappists" (Furlong, p. 204).

He was also angered by an Official Visitor of the Cistercian Order who condemned the "hermit mentality" which he found at Gethsemani, and who told the community they could not walk in the forest outside the enclosure. Merton's abbot, James Fox, tried to calm Merton after the Visitation by naming him Chief Ranger of the woods, so that he, at least, could legitimately "patrol" the forest.<sup>5</sup> The exact sequence of events which followed is difficult to trace from the various sources, but, about this time, Merton wrote to Rome for permission to transfer to another Order, while at the same time Dom James asked Rome to deny the petition (Mott, p. 297). The Abbot General became involved in the process, and placed a five year ban on Merton's writing in the hope that that would lessen the tension of which he complained. In the meantime the Kentucky State Forestry Department built a fire watchtower on a ridge near the Abbey. Merton immediately spotted it and asked the abbot for permission to be the Fire Warden and to make the tower a hermitage of sorts. The abbot obtained permission from the Abbot General who agreed, "but with this condition, that Fr. Louis be 100% hermit -- that is, not be a cenobite in the morning and a hermit only in the afternoon" (Fox, p. 150).

Then a strange turn of events occurred. Three days after this permission was made known to Merton, he came to Dom James and volunteered to take the vacated position of Novice Master. The abbot was pleased to appoint him to this important position, but with two conditions, "one, that you'll keep the job for three years, and two, that you'll give no conferences on becoming hermits" (Fox, p. 151).<sup>6</sup> The abbot kept him in this position for ten years (1955-1965), at which time Merton resigned to take up the hermit life officially at Gethsemani. It is ironic that this monk -- whose writings were questioned by superiors and censors of the Order, who was in the process of requesting a transfer to another Order, who manifested neurotic symptoms of illness at times, who was carrying on a fight with his superiors to become a hermit in a cenobitic tradition -- should be appointed, at his

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5. James Fox, "The Spiritual Son," in *Thomas Merton/ Monk: A Monastic Tribute*, ed. Patrick Hart (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company), 1974, pp. 147-149. Subsequent references in the text are referred to as "Fox."

6. Mott comments, "Dom James was astonished. He had worked hard to get Father Louis what he said he wanted. To the abbot this was a major failure of nerve on Merton's part. Having almost attained the solitude he had been talking about for at least seven years, Merton backed off." (Mott, p. 287).

own request, Novice Master, the one who would teach, guide, and form the future members of the community. Merton energetically assumed the duties of Novice Master, and even decided to give up writing in order to devote more time to the novices. But, in spite of his resolve and the five-year ban, he could not refrain from writing, and so journals, essays, lectures, translations, and poetry continued to flow. In the midst of this, Merton still had periods of depression and hankerings after more solitude.

In the summer of 1956, Merton was allowed to attend a conference at Collegetown, Minnesota, where he had a disastrous confrontation with a psychoanalyst, Dr. Gregory Zilboorg. In the presence of Merton's abbot, he accused Merton of being pathological, adding "You want a hermitage in Times Square with a large sign over it saying 'HERMIT'." It was perhaps the most damaging ten minutes of Merton's monastic life and left both him and his abbot lingeringly suspicious that he was mentally unbalanced and unfit for the hermit life (Mott, p. 297).

Through much of the fifties, Merton continually seemed to maneuver to become a hermit at Gethsemani or elsewhere with Dom James sabotaging each initiative, and Merton subsequently repenting and resolving to be obedient. An involved and dangerous game developed between the two men with a lack of mutual trust, and yet "there survived beyond all this a mutual respect and even a deep, if guarded and sorely bruised, affection" (Mott, pp. 278, 283). Finally, in 1960, an ecumenical center was built on the Abbey grounds, and Merton was granted permission to use it as a place of solitude.

Out of these varied experiences and struggles several books emerged and *New Seeds of Contemplation* appeared in 1961. It is easier to understand and appreciate the additions and changes made by Merton in his revision when we know something of the personal challenges he faced. I will now examine these more carefully, as we compare *New Seeds of Contemplation* with *Seeds of Contemplation*.<sup>7</sup> In each section, after noting the changes made by Merton, I will recount some biographical material from his other concurrent writings that relate to the topic under discussion. Finally, I will attempt to interpret, where possible, the ways in which Merton moved from *Seeds* to *New Seeds*.

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7. References to *Seeds of Contemplation* and *New Seeds of Contemplation* will hereafter be cited in the text as *Seeds* or *S* and *New Seeds* or *NS*.

## Contemplation

When one compares *Seeds* and *New Seeds*, one's first observation is that the latter book is longer by nearly one hundred pages. Although there are thirty-nine chapters compared to twenty-seven in the first book, there are really only three chapters of completely new material, two at the beginning and one at the end. Most of the other additions are excursions into topics that were only lightly treated in the first book. The two new chapters at the beginning are an attempt at a fuller description of contemplation, even though Merton says contemplation is

beyond explanation, beyond discourse, beyond dialogue, beyond our own self. (NS, p. 2)

Contemplation is the highest expression of man's intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder, . . . a sudden gift of awareness, an awakening to the Real within all that is real. A vivid awareness of infinite Being at the roots of our own limited being. (NS, pp. 1, 3)

It can be compared to a spiritual vision, yet it is not vision because it is beyond seeing, and cannot be grasped in images, or even in words or concepts. It reaches out to an experience of God, an awareness of an "existential contact" with God. It is God answering God's own call to us.

Somewhat at a loss for words and concepts, Merton continues in the second chapter of *New Seeds* with a negative approach: what contemplation is not. But even this approach is insufficient.

The only way to get rid of misconceptions about contemplation is to experience it. One who does not actually know, in his own life, the nature of this breakthrough and this awakening to a new level of reality cannot help being misled by most of the things that are said about it. For contemplation cannot be taught. (NS, p. 6)

Perhaps that is why Merton could not treat contemplation as thoroughly in the first book; he had become a Catholic only eleven years before, and had been a monk for only seven years. It is amazing that he had as much depth and knowledge of prayer as he did. Or was *Seeds* mostly a synthesis of what he had read in the works of John of the Cross and Bernard of Clairvaux, both of whom he mentioned in his introduction? Was it only after twelve more years that he was able to speak more directly from his own experience of contemplation?

Contemplation can never be the object of our calculated ambition. It is not something we can plan to obtain with our practical reason. . . . It is not we who choose to awaken ourselves, but God who chooses to awaken us. (NS, p. 10)

The topic of contemplation appears in many of his works during the years between *Seeds* and *New Seeds*. *The Ascent to Truth* (1951) is a treatment of mysticism with special emphasis on contemplative prayer according to St. John of the Cross. *Bread in the Wilderness* (1953) has a chapter on "Contemplation in the Liturgy." *No Man is an Island* (1955) treats of silence and solitude as the climate for contemplation, and *Thoughts in Solitude* (1958) expands on that theme. That Merton studied St. Bernard's spiritual theology is evidenced in a book published posthumously, but containing essays written between 1948 and 1954, titled *Thomas Merton on Saint Bernard*.<sup>8</sup>

### True Self and False Self

In *Seeds* Merton introduces a concept that reappears several times in *New Seeds* -- the contrast between the true self and the false self. This concept is intimately connected with the experience of contemplative prayer, for if contemplation is defined only in terms of feelings and reactions, it is being situated where it cannot be found, in the superficial consciousness of the false self.

Contemplation is not and cannot be a function of this external self. There is an irreducible opposition between the deep transcendent self that awakens only in contemplation, and the superficial external self which we commonly identify with the first person singular. (*NS*, pp. 6-7)

This "I" that observes itself and talks about itself is not the true "I" which is united to God in Christ. The outer "I" is a mask, a temporal disguise for the hidden self which is eternal.

Merton continues his elucidation of the false and true self in Chapter Four of *New Seeds* in the context of what was originally Chapter One in *Seeds*, "Everything That Is, Is Holy." He retains the thesis that the saints love everyone and everything because they love God, but he begins the chapter with a new passage on detachment from self.

There is no evil in anything created by God, nor can anything of His become an obstacle to our union with Him. The obstacle is in our "self," that is to say in the tenacious need to maintain our separate, external, egotistic will. (*NS*, p. 21)

This false self becomes a god which both uses created things for its own glory and yet calls them unholy because only the ego of the false self is

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8. A thorough exposition of Merton's thought on contemplation as it developed through the years is presented in John J. Higgins, *Thomas Merton on Prayer* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1971).

holy. The enjoyment of creation is seen as sinful, and the false self cultivates feelings of guilt which make it feel pious. It cannot be said that the false self is located in the body, because the body is holy -- the temple of God. Neither the body nor the soul is the whole self because the two cannot be divided. "If the two are separated from one another, there is no longer a person, there is no longer a living, subsisting reality made in the image and likeness of God" (NS, p. 27).

That Merton grew to understand a distinction between selfhood, which is basically good, and the false self can be seen in two sentences from *Seeds* which he revised for the later book:

<i>Seeds</i>	<i>New Seeds</i>
The only true joy on earth is to escape from the prison of our selfhood. (p. 22)	The only true joy on earth is to escape from the prison of our own false self. (p. 25)
.....	.....
To worship ourselves is to worship nothing. (p. 23)	To worship our false selves is to worship nothing. (p. 26)

He continues this distinction in the next chapter discussing the need to be true to one's nature and identity in God. "We are at liberty to be real, or to be unreal. We may be true or false, the choice is ours. We may wear now one mask and now another, and never, if we so desire, appear with our own true face" (NS, p. 32). Because we are free, we share with God the creation of our own identity. But there is a temptation to play with masks; in fact, Merton claims, "I was born in a mask" (NS, p. 33). He continues with material from *Seeds* where he had originally introduced this concept: "Everyone of us is shadowed by an illusory person: a false self" (S, p. 28), which is not known by God because it tries to exist outside the realm of God's will and love, and it is here that sin originates.

Merton draws further distinctions on the "selves" in Chapter Thirty-eight on "Pure Love" where he added four pages to his original material.

If there is an awareness of myself as separate from God when I pray, then I am not yet in the fullness of contemplation. As long as there is an "I" aware of itself, we remain in the realm of multiplicity, activity, incompleteness, striving and desire. The true inner self, the true indestructible and immortal person, the true "I" who answers to a new and secret name known only to himself and to God, does not "have" anything, even "contemplation." (NS, p. 279)

But this true self remains hidden and appears to be as nothing, to be unreal, while the illusory self appears to be real. But this outer self is only "a shadow, a garment that is cast off and consumed by decay" (NS, p. 280).

Perhaps fearful that he had been too severe and negative with the illusory or false self, Merton offers a corrective in the last chapter of *New Seeds*.

Yet we must not deal in too negative a fashion even with the "external self." This self is not by nature evil, and the fact that it is unsubstantial is not to be imputed to it as some kind of crime. It is afflicted with metaphysical poverty: but all that is poor deserves mercy. So too our outward self: as long as it does not isolate itself in a lie, it is blessed by the mercy and the love of Christ. (NS, p. 295)

Merton's thoughts on the true self and the false self could possibly have had their origin in his study of St. Bernard, who speaks of the "false nature."<sup>9</sup> Perhaps his own growth in self understanding and his guidance of the scholastics and novices also provided some of the background for his distinction of the "selves." He wrote in his journal in 1951,

I have become very different from what I used to be. The man who began this journal is dead, just as the man who finished *The Seven Storey Mountain* when this journal began was also dead . . . Thus I stand on the threshold of a new existence. The one who is going to be most fully formed by the new scholastics is the Master of Scholastics.<sup>10</sup>

## Mercy and Compassion

One of the interesting and revealing changes made by Merton in *New Seeds* is a new emphasis on the "mercy" of God. There are two passages of about a page and a half each added to two chapters from *Seeds*. In the chapter "Pray for Your Own Discovery" from the earlier book, Merton writes that God utters the Divine Word in us, and if we are true to that word, we shall be full of God's actuality and find God in ourselves. "We become contemplatives when God discovers Himself in us" (S, p. 32). In this context Merton expands his thoughts on mercy in *New Seeds*.

When I consent to the will and the mercy of God as it "comes" to me in the events of life, appealing to my inner self and awakening my faith, I break through the superficial exterior appearances that form my routine vision of the world and of my own self, and I find myself in the presence of hidden majesty. (NS, p. 41)

This mercy of God is revealed and shared with us so that we are filled with God's glory and become more our true selves.

9. Thomas Merton on Saint Bernard, Cistercian Studies, Series 9 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1980), pp. 181-188.

10. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, pp. 328, 330. Hereafter referred to in the text as SJ.



This is the "mercy of God" revealed to us by the secret missions in which he gives himself to us, and awakens our identity as sons and heirs of his kingdom . . . . In the revelation of mercy and majesty we come to an obscure intuition of our own personal secret, our true identity. (NS, p. 42)

Thus God's mercy and our true identity are interrelated.

In the chapter "The Moral Theology of the Devil" from *Seeds* Merton claims that the devil wants us to believe that all created things, including people, are evil, and that God wills evil and suffering. The devil encourages meditation on sin, especially the sin of others. Sin is pleasure, and pleasure is sin. Since pleasure is inescapable, no one can avoid sin either; so the concept of sin becomes irrelevant and meaningless. In *New Seeds* Merton expands on the devil's moral theology. In the devil's system, hell was the first thing created, and those who follow this system are obsessed with hell and evil. Multiplying laws and rules, they insist on punishment as the fulfillment of law.

The law must devour everything, even God. Such is this theology of punishment, hatred and revenge. He who would live by such a dogma must rejoice in his punishment . . . . The Law must triumph. There must be no mercy. This is the chief mark of the theology of hell, for in hell there is everything but mercy. That is why God Himself is absent from hell. Mercy is the manifestation of His presence. (NS, p. 91)

There are at least five other passages in *New Seeds* where material was changed from the original version, in order to stress God's mercy.

#### *Seeds*

The saint knows nothing but the love and the mercy of God and he is on earth to bring that love and that mercy to all men. (p. 21)

From then on our life becomes a series of choices between the fiction of our false-self, whom we feed with the illusions of passion and selfish appetite, and our true identity in the peace of God. (p. 34)

Let my tongue taste no bread that does not strengthen me to praise your glory. (p. 35)

#### *New Seeds*

The saint knows the mercy of God. He knows that his own mission on earth is to bring that mercy to all men. (p. 25)

. . . and our loving consent to the purely gratuitous mercy of God. (p. 41)

. . . to praise your great mercy. (p. 44)

... and we are able to find out who He is from the experience of His own selflessness reflected in our purified wills. (p. 56)

In order to know and love God as He is, we must have God dwelling in us in a new and special way. (p. 33)

... from the experience of His mercy, liberating us from the prison of self-concern. (p. 78)

... in a new way, not only in His creative power but in His mercy, not only in His greatness but in His littleness, by which He empties Himself and comes down to us to be empty in our emptiness, and so fill us in His fullness. (p. 40)

A reader of Merton can only conjecture why these additions and changes were made in favor of "mercy." During the years when he was struggling with a frustrated desire to be a hermit, when his writing was censored and banned, when he felt misunderstood by his abbot, did he come to experience more fully his own need for the mercy of God? Did he realize that he could not earn his own peace of soul, that all he could do was to open his arms to receive God's undeserved gift of mercy?

As early as 1950 he wrote in his journal about his severe inner struggle.

When the summer of my ordination ended, I found myself face to face with a mystery that was beginning to manifest itself in the depths of my soul and to move me with terror. Do not ask me what it was. I might apologize for it and call it "suffering." The word is not adequate because it suggests physical pain. That is not at all what I mean. It was a sort of slow, submarine earthquake which produced strange commotions on the visible, psychological surface of my life. (*S*), p. 230)

In looking back at that experience he could see that the cloud lifted on its own the following year. From it he discovered that a vocation to be a solitary "is a vocation to fear, to helplessness, to isolation in the invisible God" (*S*), p. 231).

A later book, *No Man is an Island* (1955), contains a chapter on "Mercy," which would seem to reflect Merton's own experiences.

Only the man who has had to face despair is really convinced that he needs mercy . . . . It is better to find God on the threshold of despair than to risk our lives in a complacency that has never felt the need of forgiveness.<sup>11</sup>

One can hardly discuss the mercy of God without realizing that when mercy is received, one must in turn be willing to give it to others. Mercy arises

11. Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1955), p. 21. Hereafter referred to in the text as *NM*.

from a sense of compassion for the other. Merton relates mercy and compassion to solitude, for it is solitude that teaches the saints

to bring the good out of others by compassion, mercy, and pardon. A man becomes a saint not by conviction that he is better than sinners but by the realization that he is one of them, and that all together need the mercy of God. (NS, p. 57)

Merton strongly believes that compassion and mercy must arise out of solitude; in fact, "the only justification for a life of deliberate solitude is the conviction that it will help you to love not only God but other men" (S, p. 52). Solitude is a gift given for the sake of the whole body of Christ; it gives a "clarity of compassion." Compassion and mercy are not optional virtues for a solitary.

But I cannot treat other men as men unless I have compassion for them. I must have at least enough compassion to realize that when they suffer they feel somewhat as I do when I suffer. And if for some reason I do not spontaneously feel this kind of sympathy for others, then it is God's will that I do what I can to learn how . . . . Contemplation is out of the question for anyone who does not try to cultivate compassion for other men. (NS, p. 77)

Through the experience of depression and despair, Merton came to know the mercy and compassion of God, and knowing it, he recognized the obligation of sharing it with others.

## Solitude and the World

The chapter on "Solitude" in *Seeds* undergoes some changes in thought and is expanded into two chapters in *New Seeds*. Merton retains the core of the original version which emphasizes that true solitude is more internal than external. "The truest solitude is not something outside you, not an absence of men or of sound around you: it is an abyss opening up in the center of your own soul" (S, p. 59).

But he speaks more strongly in *New Seeds* about the necessity of exterior solitude. He claims that those who say "only solitude of the heart really matters" (NS, p. 90) have never experienced real solitude. He also makes a plea for quiet, dark churches where people can retreat to enjoy the silent presence of God, a place where they can descend into the quiet places of their heart to worship God in secret. Then he takes an unusually ironic tone to criticize "men dedicated to God" who restlessly run away from interior solitude.

They do everything they can to escape it. What is worse, they try to draw everyone else into activities as senseless and as devouring as their own. They are great promoters of useless work. They love to organize meetings and banquets and conferences and lectures. They print circulars, write letters, talk for hours on the telephone in order that they may gather a hundred people together in a large room where they will all fill the air with smoke and make a great deal of noise and roar at one another and clap their hands and stagger home at last patting one another on the back with the assurance that they have all done great things to spread the kingdom of God. (NS, p. 83)

One wonders if Merton was taking a jab at his own activities of the past ten years, especially because of the reference to writing circulars and letters, and to the ecumenical meetings which he had initiated at Gethsemani. It was mainly through his efforts that an ecumenical center was constructed on the Abbey grounds in 1960, the year before the book was published. Or were there other monks at the Abbey who Merton thought were not appreciating their solitude enough? That Merton's attitude toward the world and its place in a life of solitude was changing can best be illustrated by comparing passages from the two books.

#### Seeds

Do not read their newspapers, if you can help it. Be glad if you can keep beyond the reach of their radios. Do not bother with their unearthly songs or their intolerable concerns for the way their bodies look and feel. (p. 60)

Do not smoke their cigarettes or drink the things they drink or share their preoccupation with different kinds of food. Do not complicate your life by looking at the pictures in their magazines. (p. 61)

#### New Seeds

Be glad if you can keep beyond the reach of their radios. Do not bother with their unearthly songs. Do not read their advertisements. (p. 84).

Expanded into two pages of comment. (pp. 84-86)

Since Merton omits his earlier prohibition against reading newspapers, we can surmise that he was reading them, though perhaps on only a limited scale. He makes a comment in his journal *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* that "by exception, I was able to read the papers" while a patient in a Louisville hospital.<sup>12</sup> Though this note was written in 1962, it is probably safe to assume that he read the papers on his previous hospital stays.

12. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1966), p. 264. Hereafter referred to in the text as CGB.

For a one sentence prohibition of drinking and smoking in *Seeds* he substitutes a two page discourse on self-discipline. He now admits that contemplatives do not necessarily have to give up smoking and drinking altogether, but they should keep such desires under control. In these areas a serious contemplative would practice self-denial. "In general it can be said that no contemplative life is possible without ascetic self-discipline" (*NS*, p. 86).

By the time of *New Seeds*, television had become a commonplace in the world, but Merton admits, "I am certainly no judge of television, since I have never watched it" (*NS*, p. 86). However, judging from what he heard from his friends, he called it "degraded, meretricious, and absurd, . . . a completely inert subjection to vulgar images" (*NS*, p. 86). This seems to be a rather severe judgment to make from hearsay. In spite of his disdain for television, he does not prohibit its use, but says it should be used only with extreme care and discrimination.

In another passage he moves from the idea of escaping from the world to the concept of compassion for those who live in the world.

*Seeds*

But if you have to live in a city . . . accept it as the love of God and as a seed of solitude planted in your soul, and be glad of this suffering: for it will keep you alive to the next opportunity to escape from them and be alone in the healing silence of recollection and in the untroubled presence of God. (p. 61)

*New Seeds*

But if you have to live in a city . . . accept it as the love of God and as a seed of solitude planted in your soul. If you are appalled by those things, you will keep your appetite for the healing silence of recollection. But meanwhile -- keep your sense of compassion for the men who have forgotten the very concept of solitude.

(p. 87)

Living in the city is no longer called a suffering, and one who lives there does not have to run for escape. Compassion is substituted for condescension. In a later chapter a short passage indicates another change in attitude toward the world. In discussing the role of feelings and emotional states in prayer, Merton warns that explosions of good feeling may be more natural than supernatural, and are certainly not to be taken necessarily as signs of spiritual advancement. But since they may have good natural effects, they are not harmful either.

*Seeds*

. . . a couple of glasses of wine or a good swim -- and monks neither drink wine, (in America) nor do they swim. (p. 162)

*New Seeds*

. . . a couple of glasses of champagne or a good swim. (p. 246)

Note that Merton no longer claims that monks do not drink or swim!

That Merton had a special love for solitude is seen not only in *Seeds* and *New Seeds*, but can also be detected in his other writings that were published between these two books. Two chapters on solitude and silence appeared in *No Man is an Island* (1955). In a completely new book on the topic, *Thoughts in Solitude* (1958), he wrote that he now was able to "enjoy special opportunities for solitude and meditation."<sup>13</sup> He also admitted, "when solitude was a problem, I had no solitude. When it ceased to be a problem I found I already possessed it, and could have possessed it all along" (*TS*, p. 85). In the book *Disputed Questions* (1960), he included a chapter on the philosophy of solitude -- a chapter which had trouble getting by the censors of the Order.<sup>14</sup>

Even though there was no significant change in Merton's thoughts on solitude, we do find his attitude changing toward the world and its relation to solitude. Some specific changes seen in *New Seeds* were noted above, but we can also detect the progression of those changes in other works written between 1949 and 1961.

In his journal *The Sign of Jonas* Merton wrote in 1951 that one of his problems on entering the monastery was that he had a false solution for his relationship to the world.

The false solution went like this: the whole world of which the war is a characteristic expression, is evil. It has therefore to be first ridiculed, then spat upon, and at last formally rejected with a curse. Actually, I have come to the monastery to find my place in the world, and if I fail to find this place in the world I will be wasting my time in the monastery. (*SJ*, p. 322)

In *No Man is an Island* (1955) he seems to vacillate in his attitude, as though he cannot make up his mind about the relationship of the contemplative to the world. "We cannot become saints merely by trying to run away from material things. To have a spiritual life is to have a life that is spiritual in all its wholeness" (*NM*, p. 98). In a later passage he continues in a different vein and seems to contradict his previous stand.

The essence of the monastic vocation is precisely this leaving of the world and all its desires and ambitions and concerns in order to live not only for God, but by Him and in Him, not for a few years, but forever. The one thing that most truly makes a monk what he is, is this irrevocable break with the world and all that is in it, in order to seek God in solitude.

(*NM*, p. 144)

13. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1958), p. 11. Hereafter referred to in the text as *TS*.

14. See Therese Lentfoehr, "The Solitary" in *Thomas Merton/ Monk: A Monastic Tribute*, ed. Patrick Hart (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1976), pp. 70-74, for quotations from Merton's letters indicating a problem with censors.

Finally, a few pages later, he comes round to his original pact with the world. "And then they will come to realize something of their mission to embrace the whole world in a spiritual affection that is not limited in time or space (NM, p. 155). A couple of years later, in *The Silent Life* (1957), he is more specific on what he means by the "world," and this clears up some of his previous ambiguity.

The meaning of the monk's flight from the world is precisely to be sought in the fact that the "world" (in the sense in which it is condemned by Christ) is the society of those who live exclusively for themselves. To leave the "world" then is to leave oneself first of all and begin to live for others.<sup>15</sup>

In this passage we see quite a significant change. An experience that Merton had in Louisville in 1958 was a confirmation of his new way of perceiving the world. He wrote about it in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.

In Louisville . . . I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers . . . The conception of "separation from the world" that we have in the monastery too easily presents itself as a complete illusion. (CGB, p. 156)

Later in the same journal he continued his reflections on the world and what it means.

I think the question of "turning to the world" is in fact a question of being patient with the unprepossessing surface of it, in order to break through to the deep goodness that is underneath. But to my way of thinking, "the world" is precisely the dehumanized surface. (CGB, p. 257)<sup>16</sup>

The insight Merton had on the street corner in Louisville had a great impact on his view of the world and its relationship to solitude. He had come a long way from *Seeds to New Seeds* -- from separation to embracing.

## Monastic Virtues

Some of the topics treated differently by Merton in *New Seeds* are what might be called "monastic virtues": poverty, study, and humility. In Chapter Thirty-five on "Renunciation" we find in *New Seeds* an added emphasis on the importance of contemplatives' accepting some degree of poverty. Although they need some security and the essentials of life in

15. Thomas Merton, *The Silent Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1957), p. 8.

16. See also Elena Malits, *The Solitary Explorer: Thomas Merton's Transforming Journey* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), p. 39.

order to pray, they should not require the satisfaction of every bodily and psychological need. They must be able to identify with the poor by actually experiencing some of the risks of poverty. However, destitution is not a virtue either, and prayer may be impossible if one must struggle just to survive.

And though it may be good for a monastery to be poor, the average monk will not prosper spiritually in a house where the poverty is really so desperate that everything else has to be sacrificed to manual labor and material cares. (NS, p. 253)

Merton continues with a paragraph from *Seeds* saying that an uneducated brother who does manual labor may be more of a contemplative than a scholarly priest. But in *New Seeds* he adds several paragraphs defending education and intellectual pursuits. He condemns a kind of pride that is sometimes found in contemplatives -- a pride in being unlearned. Contemplation should be based on a sound theology.

We must not separate intellectual study of divinely revealed truth and contemplative experience of that truth as if they could never have anything to do with one another. . . . Unless they are united, there is no fervor, no life and no spiritual value in theology, no substance, no meaning and no sure orientation in the contemplative life. (NS, pp. 254-255)

Was Merton perhaps defensive of his own intellectual curiosity and desire for learning? He had earlier begun reaching out to philosophies and theologies beyond the Roman Catholic tradition. Was he being criticized in the community for his study and extensive reading? Had he come to the awareness in his own life of a need for a broader base in theology to support his deepening experience of contemplation? In journal passages written during the intervening years in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, we find that Merton makes several entries with references to readings he has done in the ecumenical sphere, with such theologians as Barth, Bonhoeffer, and J. A. T. Robinson, as well as the much admired Gandhi.

Another observation is given on humility and sanctity. The saints are humble because they are themselves in God's sight. Not trying to imitate the holiness of others, they work out their own salvation by being true to themselves. Merton then adds a few paragraphs caricaturing the false holy person -- the one who conforms to the expectations of others, and thus satisfies the community.

It makes them all feel that they are "right," that they are in the right way, and that God is "satisfied" with their collective way of life. Therefore nothing needs to be changed. But anyone who opposes this situation is wrong. The sanctity of the "saint" is there to justify the complete elimination of those who are "unholy" -- that is, those who do not conform.

(NS, p. 102)



Merton was one of those not conforming to the typical mold of the Cistercian saint. He was a popular author, had friends with whom he exchanged letters, and desired to be a hermit. One wonders if there were "saints" in his community who were trying to eliminate, or at least discredit, him. In this context, Merton inserts a paragraph on art, which seems almost out of place.

So too in art, or literature. The "best" poets are those who happen to succeed in a way that flatters our current prejudice about what constitutes good poetry. We are very exacting about the standards that they have set up, and we cannot even consider a poet who writes in some other slightly different way, whose idiom is not quite the same. (NS, p. 102)

Merton was not considered one of the "best" poets by the critics and other poets. When he heard that T. S. Eliot said he wrote too much and revised too little, and was only a "hit or miss" poet, he was devastated and threatened to stop writing poetry (Mott, p. 242). One can detect in Merton a sensitivity to criticism, and even some alienation because he was a non-conformist, a truly unique poet and contemplative, one that did not fit the established mold.

## Relationships and Theological Clarifications

Some of the most eloquent additions to *New Seeds* are passages on the feelings of hatred, resentment, and fear. In the chapter "A Body of Broken Bones" four sentences on hatred from *Seeds* are expanded into three pages where Merton offers a psychologically enlightened analysis of hatred. We are born into isolation, loneliness, and insufficiency, and insofar as we feel unworthy and lonely we hate ourselves. This self-hatred results either in self punishment -- which does not cure the sense of unworthiness -- or in projection of the hatred onto others because they are unworthy. The one who hates others is blind to the unworthiness in self, but condemns it in others. This can lead to a nauseating hate of everything and everyone -- for there is no one who is worthy. What is the remedy for this tormenting sense of unworthiness that lies at the root of hate?

The beginning of the fight against hatred, the basic Christian answer to hatred is not the commandment to love, but what must necessarily come before in order to make the commandment bearable and comprehensible. It is a prior commandment, to believe. The root of Christian love is not the will to love, but the faith that one is loved. The faith that one is loved by God. (NS, p. 75)

The discovery that worthiness is irrelevant to God's mercy will deliver a person from the bondage of hate to true liberation of spirit. Bondage of the spirit may also be the result of resentment -- another emotion that Merton treats in *New Seeds*. Resentment arises when one has to live in "servile dependence upon a system, an organization, a society, or a person that one despises or hates" (NS, p. 109). Unable to escape this dependence, a person survives only by seeming to approve the oppressing agent or system, and then one hates oneself for succumbing. But rather than admit this pretense, a person claims that someone else has taken away their freedom.

But as long as you pretend to live in pure autonomy, as your own master, without even a god to rule you, you will inevitably live as the servant of another man or as the alienated member of an organization. Paradoxically it is the acceptance of God that makes you free and delivers you from human tyranny, for when you serve Him you are no longer permitted to alienate your spirit in human servitude. (NS, p. 110)

Another feeling related to hatred and resentment is fear, a topic Merton expanded from two pages in the first book to eight in *New Seeds*. He sees fear as being a cause of war. "At the root of all war is fear: not so much the fear men have of one another as the fear they have of *everything*. It is not merely that they do not trust one another; they do not even trust themselves" (NS, p. 112). Hatred of self which is not consciously faced becomes hatred of others. Evil not recognized in self is projected onto others. Then, by violence if necessary, one tries to get rid of the evil ultimately by annihilating the others who are at fault.

We have to destroy something or someone. By that time we have created for ourselves a suitable enemy, a scapegoat in whom we have invested all the evil in the world. He is the cause of every wrong. He is the fomentor of all conflict. If he can only be destroyed, conflict will cease, evil will be done with, there will be no more war. (NS, p. 114)

Thus the truth is bypassed that all of us are more or less wrong, that all must work together for peace. Merton remarks about the irony of postmarking mail with the stamp "pray for peace" and then spending billions of dollars on nuclear weapons. It is a mocking of God -- like drinking poison while praying for health. True peace must begin with love. "If you love peace, then hate injustice, hate tyranny, hate greed -- but hate these things *in yourself*, not in another" (NS, p. 122).

These expanded reflections on the feelings of hatred, resentment, and fear -- all dealing with human relationships -- would seem to be the fruit of Merton's additional years of community living since *Seeds*. It is quite well known that there were personal conflicts between Merton and Abbot

James Fox. Merton's private journals reveal some of his struggles with his Abbot over such issues as reception of visitors, confidentiality of written correspondence, censorship, the desire for a hermitage, and threats to transfer to another Order. The journal entries reveal feelings of mistrust and even rebellion in his relationship with the Abbot.<sup>17</sup> There is no doubt that such conflicts provided Merton with the opportunity to analyze the complex world of emotions. In the 1950s Merton also became more sensitive to the importance of social relationships and world peace. In 1960 he devoted the book *Disputed Questions* to that topic. The theme of the various essays is "the relation of the person to the social organization . . . . Every ethical problem of our day -- especially the problem of war -- is to be traced back to this root question."<sup>18</sup> In the years after *New Seeds* (not covered in this essay), Merton's writings turned more and more to the ethical questions of society.

As we have seen, omitted material in a revision of a work may be as indicative of a change or evolution in thought as added material. There are omissions in *New Seeds* which indicate a change in Merton's attitude toward the content and style of prayer. That contemplatives must reach out to other people was recognized by Merton even in *Seeds*. They cannot remain in their own enclosed, sanitized space because the perfection of the contemplative life is to be found in shared love. While admitting this, he still expresses a fear that thoughts about other persons could be a distraction in prayer -- a fear that later disappears.

*Seeds*

The silence of contemplation is deep and rich and endless society, not only with God but with men. Yet perhaps for the time being it is better to forget about it because it might upset our imagination. For if we remembered individuals and thought of them in our contemplation, that would tend to withdraw us from God and therefore from spiritual union with them. (p. 49)

*New Seeds*

. . . The contemplative is not isolated in himself, but liberated from his external and egotistic self by humility and purity of heart -- therefore there is no longer any serious obstacle to simple and humble love of other men. (p. 66)

The revision indicates that other people are no longer considered obstacles

17. See Mott for several journal entries, pp. 340-342.

18. Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1960), p. viii.

and distractions in prayer, but an integral part of prayer.

Merton's attitude also changed toward other religious traditions. In *Seeds* he is not yet open to the East; in fact, he claims absolute superiority for the Roman Catholic tradition.

*Seeds*

What one of you can enter into himself and find the God who utters him? If, like the mystics of the Orient, you succeed in emptying your mind of every thought and every desire, . . . yet you will not find God. (p. 31)

*New Seeds*

What one of you can enter into himself and find the God who utters him? If you succeed in emptying your mind of every thought and every desire, . . . yet you will not find God. (p. 39)

The negative references to the "mystics of the Orient" and the implied judgment on the spirituality give way to Merton's increased knowledge and interest in the religions and philosophies of the East. This is evidenced in a similar omission in the chapter on "Tradition and Revolution." He attempts to explain and defend the notion of Church dogma and tradition as a foundation for contemplation.

*Seeds*

For outside the *magisterium* directly guided by the Spirit of God we find no such contemplation and no such union with Him -- only the void of nirvana or the feeble intellectual light of Platonic idealism, or the sensual dreams of the Sufi. But the first step to contemplation is faith; and faith begins with an assent to Christ teaching through His Church. (p. 87)

*New Seeds*

[Omitted]

But the first step, etc. (p. 146)

Merton is on the way not only to respect the religious thought and prayer of the East, but to learn from it. In the period just preceding the publication of *New Seeds* he was "coming under the influence of Zen . . . He found himself attracted to the meta-synthetic and intuitive perspectives of Zen, to its delicacy and grace, and to the opportunities that it gave him to encounter Asian contemplatives" (Grayston, p. 169). In journal material from the late 1950s and early 1960s, published in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, he wrote that truth is not found by refusing to look outside one's own self or tradition.

If I affirm myself as a Catholic merely by denying all that is Muslim, Jewish, Protestant, Hindu, Buddhist, etc., in the end I will find that there is not much left for me to affirm as a Catholic; and certainly no breath of the Spirit with which to affirm it. (CGB, p. 144)

Although it is beyond the scope of this essay, Merton will come eventually to the point in his life where he identifies strongly with much of the spirituality of the Orient, and even seeks to incorporate aspects of it in his own life.

Other theological clarifications are also made in *New Seeds*. In Chapter Twenty-one on "The Mystery of Christ," he focuses on the place of Christ in contemplative prayer. Faith in Christ is the source of contemplation; the humanity of Christ is the entry way into the experience of God.

For the man Christ is the Word of God, even though His human nature is not His divine nature. The two are united in One Person, and are One Person so that the Man Christ is God. If you have discovered some kind of contemplation that gives you only one without the other you are a heretic. (S, p. 92)

In *New Seeds* the last sentence is omitted and replaced by two pages of exposition on the Nestorian heresy. There is a danger of separating the humanity and divinity of Christ in prayer, so that the contemplative relates to the human or divine nature of Christ, rather than with the person of Christ. "To love Him merely as a *nature* would be like loving a human friend for his money or his conviviality. We do not love Christ for what He has but for *Who He is*" (NS, p. 153). Merton also revised a passage in *Seeds* where he was guilty of such a separation himself.

#### *Seeds*

Yet at the same time the mere name of Jesus or the indistinct, unanalyzed notion of Christ is enough to keep their faith fully occupied in a simple awareness of Him Who is really present in our souls by His Divinity. (p. 93)

#### *New Seeds*

. . . Who is really present in our souls by the gift of His personal love and by His Divine Mission. (p. 155)

Four pages on Mary in *Seeds* were expanded into nine in *New Seeds*, mostly to explain the Catholic concept of devotion to her. Merton emphasized that Mary's role is completely dependent on and related to Christ's. That he had been over zealous in the first edition can be recognized in some of his changes.

*Seeds*

We believe that hers was the most perfect sanctity outside the sanctity of God. (p. 100)

.....

And all our sanctity depends on her will, on her pleasure. (p. 103)

*New Seeds*

We believe that hers was the perfect sanctity outside the sanctity of Christ her Son, Who is God. (p. 167)

.....

And all our sanctity depends on her maternal love. (p. 173)

In his ecumenical outreaches, perhaps Merton realized that many people misunderstood the Roman Catholic's love for Mary, so he attempts to clarify it. Hardly anything significant appears in print by Merton about mariology after *New Seeds*.

## Conclusion

By comparing *Seeds* with *New Seeds* we have been able to trace some of the most significant changes that occurred in Merton's thought from 1949 to 1961. Were the changes and developments only a normal process of spiritual growth, or were they indicative of a more profound conversion? That question cannot be objectively answered because any judgment made is based on the subjective experience of the one making it. But the process can be summarized as Donald Grayston writes: "Having fled from the world in anger, self-reproach and confusion, he had returned to it in love and compassion" (Grayston, p. 182).

Most of us have observed in contemporary spiritual writers, and in ourselves, a similar development of theology. However, there is this significant difference -- Merton's new and evolving insights traced here were all pre-Vatican II. And that would seem to be very important, perhaps more significant than the changes themselves. Following Vatican II most Catholics expressed a greater compassion and openness to the world, pursued an interest in traditions other than Roman Catholic, and made applications of psychology to spirituality. But not many can claim, as Merton could, that this development preceded Vatican II. Perhaps we could say that some of Merton's "Seeds" blossomed in Vatican II, and are even now bearing fruit, probably beyond what even he could have envisioned.