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CONTEMPLATION AND RESISTANCE

as seen in the spirituality of
THOMAS MERTON

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In a paragraph which has become justly famous, Father Daniel Berrigan wrote (1):

"The time will shortly be upon us, if it is not already here, when the pursuit of contemplation becomes a strictly subversive activity...I am convinced that contemplation, including the common worship of the believing, is a political act of the highest value, implying the riskiest of consequences to those taking part".

The rediscovery of the necessary unity between contemplation and resistance, the mystical and the prophetic, is perhaps the central need of modern Christianity. Berrigan sees the need in the United States for a powerful upsurge of spirituality which will redeem a decayed civilisation. "The American psyche", he writes (2), "cannot become the fraternal instrument of world change until it has undergone its dark night of the soul." Americans have become alienated from spiritual values by technology and the pursuit of power and wealth, and only a renewal of contemplation can heal its sickness.

Yet, Berrigan wrote elsewhere, that

"...in the derangement of our culture, we see that people move towards contemplation in despair, even though unrecognised. They meditate as a way of becoming neutral - to put a ground between them and the horror around them...We have a terrible kind of drug called contemplation."

Such contemplatives, he says, are cut off from social prophecy, and so "they become another resource of the culture instead of a resource against the culture" (3). A spiritual quest which is concerned only with the private world of the individual, with the attainment of his own "enlightenment", can easily be absorbed by the culture. Capitalist society can make contemplation itself into a commodity.

To divide contemplation from prophecy is to damage and maybe destroy both. Berrigan's theme, that they are a unity, is a theme which recurs in many thinkers and writers. In an earlier age, Charles Peguy wrote that everything worthwhile "begins in mysticism and ends in politics". From Latin America comes the call for a "spirituality of liberation" (4). From a young radical pacifist in the United States, Theodore Roszak, comes the lament that the religious impulse has been exiled from our culture, but also the view that "it is the energy of religious renewal that will generate the next politics and perhaps the final radicalism of our society" (5). From some young radical Christians in Britain comes a search for the "spiritual dimensions to political struggle": "the re-examination required was not so much a cerebral critique of theology or politics, but a flesh and blood discovery of spiritual roots." (6) It is with this search for spiritual roots that Thomas Merton was concerned throughout his life.

Merton's significance is that he embodied in himself the spiritual currents and crises of our age. In the person of this contemplative

monk and prophet several worlds met: the worlds of the renewed Latin church, of the rediscovery of Eastern Christendom, of the non-violent movement, of the counter-culture, of Zen and the Eastern mystical traditions, of political disenchantment and political revolt. Merton's writings convey a profound experience of man's predicament in the modern world, and it was an experience which paradoxically he gained through monastic solitude. Like an earlier contemplative, Father Alfred Delp, a Jesuit who was in prison in Nazi Germany, Merton believed that solitude was a vital prerequisite for the awakening of the social conscience. Delp had written (7):

"Great issues affecting mankind have to be decided in the wilderness, in uninterrupted isolation and unbroken silence. They hold a meaning and a blessing, these great, silent, empty spaces that bring a man face to face with reality." Liberation always begins on the plot of earth on which one stands. "In solitude, in the depths of a man's own aloneness, lie the resources for resistance to injustice" (8) On the other hand, a resistance which has not been wrought out of inner struggle must remain superficial or degenerate into fanaticism.

Merton saw the "spiritual life" as the life of the whole person. He rejected the smug self-assurance of the devout ones who know all the answers in advance, know all the cliches of the inner life, and can defend themselves against all the demands of being truly human. He knew only too well the dangers of "bogus interiority" (9), the distortion by which self-study becomes merely the evasion of risk and struggle. Bogus contemplation, as evidenced in many of the fashionable - and profitable - meditation schools, was concerned to avoid conflict and reduce tension. But Merton emphasised that "Christian faith is a principle of questioning and struggle before it becomes a principle of certitude and peace ... The Christian mind is a mind that risks intolerable purifications" (10). The desert as the place of struggle and purification was a constant theme of his message, and he once defined contemplation simply as "the preference for the desert" (11). For the desert experience was the experience of solitude in which God appeared to be absent. It was the presence of conflict and struggle which distinguished true silence from false. True silence is "a repeated bending over the abyss", whereas "a silence from which he (God) does not seem to be absent dangerously threatens his continued presence" (12).

In Merton's writings there are marked changes from the period of his early works, such as The Seven Storey Mountain (1948) and Seeds of Contemplation (1949). The early Merton wrote from within and for the Roman Catholic community of the Counter-Reformation. His assumptions were those of traditional Latin monasticism, and his audience were probably for the most part from within the Christian tradition. It was much later that the work of contemplation was consciously related to the work of social criticism, and the crucial element in this was his philosophy of solitude. (12). He held that solitude was essential to the common good, for it was in solitude that man became fully awake. It is this wakefulness, this insight and enlightenment, which preserves religion from fanaticism, and Merton saw fanaticism as the greatest temptation of the modern age (13).

Merton's understanding of prayer is central to his social doctrine. He defined prayer as "a consciousness of man's union with God" (14) and as "an awareness of one's inner self" (15). Self-knowledge, as all the mystics insist, is essential to sanctity, but it is only the beginning. We need to pass beyond "introversion", beyond the self, to God (16). Prayer thus liberates us from self, and from

all ideas of self. Merton believed that the central concern with self led to the view of God as an object, and therefore eventually led to the "death of God" ideas. There must be a real transformation of consciousness.

"This dynamic of emptying and of transcendence accurately defines the transformation of the Christian consciousness in Christ. It is a kenotic transformation, an emptying of all the contents of the ego-consciousness to become a void in which the light of God or the glory of God, the full radiation of the infinite reality of His Being and Love are manifested". (17).

Spiritual progress involves the recognition of this false ego-consciousness, and Merton links this directly with individualism which has dominated Western theology and politics for several hundred years. "This individualism, primarily an economic concept, with a pseudo-spiritual and moral facade, is in fact mere irresponsibility". (18). In confronting this false self-consciousness, we begin the process of recovery of the Divine image which is in all men.

What is crucial here is that behind the account of prayer lies a view of salvation as a participation in God, theosis, a doctrine which is at the heart of Eastern Orthodox theology. Merton drew on the great theologians of the apophatic or negative tradition, and in particular on Gregory of Nyssa, in his understanding of man's sharing in God's nature. "God has made us not simply spectators of the power of God", wrote Gregory of Nyssa (19), "but also participants in his very nature". Through the Incarnation, man is led into a mystical union which is not exceptional but is the normal Christian life. It is ironical that Merton died on the same day as Karl Barth (December 10th, 1968) to whom such an idea would have been unthinkable. As a recent Eastern writer has commented (20), "A choice has to be made between early Barth or Basil and Gregory of Nyssa". Thomas Merton identified himself closely with the Eastern tradition in its stress on the taking of manhood into God through the Incarnation, the basis of all mysticism.

Monasticism therefore is not to be seen as a subtle escape from the Incarnation and the common life of men, but as a specific way of sharing in the redemption of the world. Monastic prayer is a deep confrontation with the alienation of modern man, and is thus particularly vital to the undermining of illusion and falsehood. "Merton understood that the unmasking of illusion belongs to the essence of the contemplative life" (21). "The monk", he wrote in a paper given at Bangkok on the day of his death (22), "is essentially someone who takes up a critical attitude towards the contemporary world and its structures". He saw the future of the contemplative life to be closely linked with this critical role. "The great problem for monasticism today is not survival but prophecy". So others, including many non-Christians, have looked to Merton and to the monastic tradition for a new perspective on political struggle (23). Berrigan himself was steeped in the theology of Merton and learned much from him (24).

Merton's view of the role of the monk in the modern world comes out clearly in his Contemplative Prayer, and in his Bangkok paper on Marxism and Monastic Perspectives. In the former work he argues that "this is an age that, by its very nature as a time of crisis, of revolution; of struggle, calls for the special searching and questioning which are the work of the monk in his meditation and prayer... In reality the monk abandons the world only in order to listen more intently to the deepest and most neglected voices that proceed from its inner depth." (25). The monk, he says, experiences

in himself the emptiness, the lostness of modern man, but he meets this at the point where the void seems to open out into black despair. But he rejects the way of despair, and through his prayer there comes healing. In his paper at Bangkok, he points out that the monk "belongs to the world, but the world belongs to him insofar as he has dedicated himself totally to liberation from it in order to liberate it." (26).

The unmasking of illusion and the liberation of man were to Merton essentially monastic tasks, and they drove him from contemplation to politics. Not in the sense that he modified his contemplative role, and began to campaign or to demonstrate: rather, his theological insight became political insight as an inevitable by-product.

"Christian social action is first of all action that discovers religion...in social programs for better wages, Social Security, etc. not at all to 'win the worker for the Church' but because God became man" (27). The Incarnation was central to his social and spiritual teaching, and from the Incarnation he derived a fundamentally optimistic view of man. Like Gandhi, whom he described, "he believed that in the hidden depths of our being, we are more truly non-violent than violent" (28). For Merton, the crucial question in the non-violent debate was whether evil was reversible. "In the use of force, one simplifies the situation by assuming that the evil to be overcome is clear-cut, definite and irreversible. Hence there remains but one thing: to eliminate it." (29).

Non-violence stands or falls on the view of evil. If evil is an irreversible tumor, then it must be cut out, and for this violence is necessary. Merton held that evil was reversible, and can be changed into good by forgiveness and love. But "only the man who has fully attained his own spiritual identity can live without the need to kill" (30). So solitude and the inner quest are vital if peace on earth is to be achieved. Yet non-violence is not merely a method of achieving a result. "Non-violence is not for power but for truth. It is not pragmatic but prophetic. It is not aimed at immediate political results, but at the manifestation of fundamental and crucially important truth." (31). Merton, following Gandhi, held that non-violence is part of the law of human society, and that violence dislocates the social order. Violence is the law of the beast, non-violence the law of redeemed man. So the commitment to a non-violent life-style is a spiritual commitment, for only the non-violent in spirit can practise the non-violent life.

The American pacifist writer, James Douglass, whose thought owes a great deal to Merton, has described the essential unity of contemplation and action in terms of the Chinese symbol of the Yin and the Yang. The earliest Chinese character for Yin was a cloud, while that for Yang was a pennant or banner. (32). In his later years Merton found much guidance and illumination from the Eastern spiritual teachers and especially from Zen. His concern with Zen was no mere fringe interest. It was in Zen that he rediscovered the need to transcend the Western divisions of matter and spirit, subject and object. In order to progress in God-consciousness, it is necessary to lay aside discursive reasoning and thought, and to go beyond the thinking process to the centre of Being itself. Merton, in a letter to William Johnston, a priest who had also found spiritual renewal through Zen, suggested that the apparent atheism of Zen was probably the rejection of the view of God as an object. (33). He linked the "void" in Zen with the "dark night of the soul" of St. John of the Cross. In the darkness of contemplation, the idols and limited concepts of God are dissolved, faith is purified, and one is led to a deeper level of knowing in which the individual is transformed and made whole. He is liberated through darkness and mystery from idols within and without.

Thus the truly contemplative soul is a soul who sees clearly, sees too clearly for comfort. In his dialogue with the Buddhist Nhat Hanh, Dan Berrigan suggests that in a society where the machine seeks to control man's consciousness, contemplation must become a form of resistance. Merton held this view. "A spirituality that preaches resignation under official brutalities, servile acquiescence in frustration and sterility, and total submission to organized injustice, is one which has lost interest in holiness and remains concerned only with spurious notions of 'order'" (34). There is a spiritual basis for human oppression, and there are bogus spiritualities which cry "Peace, peace" when there is no peace. The aim of Christian contemplation is not inner peace, but the Kingdom of God, and this involves struggle and spiritual warfare. Just as the spiritual attack on Nazism came from men who were committed to a deep prayer and ascetical discipline, so Merton held that only the contemplative who had begun to see, through love, with the eyes of God, was able to provide the necessary resistance to evil which could not be deflected. Certainly his own path showed an ever-deepening perception and insight. James Douglass is one of many writers who testify to that (35).

"It was early in 1965 and the war in Vietnam was coming home, though few really knew it. Merton knew it in his hermitage. He also knew that racism was stuck in the heart of America, when everyone else was singing 'We Shall Overcome'. Tom Merton prayed, listened, and wrote furious essays against the powers of destruction which he glimpsed first of all in himself. Merton seemed to know the way as no one else did."

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