



Thomas Merton (1915–1968)

Trappist monk, mystic, writer, scholar of comparative religion

Thomas Merton was one of the leading Christian spiritual leaders of the 20th century. He authored more than 60 books and many reviews and essays primarily on spirituality, social justice and pacifism. His autobiographical account of his spiritual journey in *The Seven Storey Mountain* proved immensely inspirational to many and is listed as one of the 100 best non-fiction books of the 20th century by the *National Review*. In later life, Merton engaged in dialogue with major Eastern spiritual figures like the Dalai Lama, Thai Buddhist monk Buddhadasa, Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh and Japanese writer D.T. Suzuki. Merton wrote books on Zen Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism at a time when this was not common among Christian theologians.

Biography

Thomas Merton was born in Prades, Pyrenees-Orientales in France. His father, Owen, was a New Zealand painter. His mother, Ruth, was an American Quaker and artist. During World War I the family moved to the United States and lived in Queens and Douglaston in New York. His mother was diagnosed with stomach cancer soon thereafter and died in 1921 when Thomas was 6. Owen took Thomas to Bermuda where Owen fell in love with American writer Evelyn Scott <https://tennesseencyclopedia.net/entries/evelyn-scott/>

(who was in a common law marriage at the time). Thomas was deposited in New York to live with his mother's family while his father, Scott and her common law husband travelled through Europe and Algeria. After Owen recovered from a deathly illness in Algeria he took Thomas to Saint-Antonin, France to live with his household, a move that displeased Thomas because he had become quite fond of his grandparents. In 1926 Owen enrolled Thomas in a boy's boarding school which Thomas immensely disliked at first but to which he warmed over time. Thomas did not attend the Catholic mass arranged for the boys by the *Lycée* and took no interest in a protestant minister who visited the students that did not attend mass. At this time of his life Thomas believed that all religions lead to God in different ways. He also stated that his father's Catholic friends declined to discuss religion with him because he "did not believe in anything" and he knew they would see anything he said as "empty talk." Late in 1929 his father was diagnosed with a brain tumor and died in 1931 when Thomas was 16. In 1933, while living in Rome, Thomas became entranced by "Byzantine Christian Rome" and had a mystical experience of his father's presence that led him to face the emptiness of his life. He began to pray regularly

and visited the *Trappist* monastery *Tre Fontane* in Rome where he first thought of becoming a Trappist monk. However, in late 1933 he started at *Clare College, Cambridge University* to study *Modern Languages*. At *Cambridge* thoughts of religion disappeared and he began to spend money excessively, consume alcohol, and pursue women. Most scholars agree that he made a woman pregnant but the matter was settled discretely by the guardian appointed by his father. This led to his transference to *Columbia University* in January of 1935 where he had a brief flirtation with communism, but after attending one meeting of the *Communist League* he never went back. Instead, he joined a peace movement and announced his opposition to “all wars.” In February 1937 he read Etienne Gilson’s *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* and visited all the Catholic churches in Manhattan which jointly led him to embrace Catholicism. In the same period, Aldous Huxley’s book *Ends and Means* introduced him to mysticism. He graduated from *Columbia* with a B.A. in English in 1938. In that same year Thomas met a Hindu monk, Mahanambrata Brahmachari, who did not recommend Hinduism to him but advised him to ground himself in his own tradition by reading Augustine’s *Confessions* and Thomas á Kempis’ *The Imitation of Christ*. Merton began to study Catholicism more attentively and became fascinated with the spiritual symbolism in William Blake.

While reading an essay about poet Gerard Manley Hopkins’ conversion to Catholicism, Merton suddenly knew he should follow the same path. In 1938 he formally became a Catholic and received Holy Communion. In February of 1939 he received his M.A. in English from Columbia and decided to pursue a Ph.D. there. After a brief flirtation with Thomas Aquinas, he decided that Thomism was too rationalistic for him and decided to become a Franciscan. After being personally invited to join the order, Merton opened up to the Franciscan’s about his former sins and the invitation to join the Franciscans was withdrawn. As an alternative, in 1940 he joined the Franciscan *St. Bonaventure University* as a teacher in the English Department. During this brief period, Merton gave up drinking, smoking and indulgence in movies and entered into a period of lay purification. At one point, unsure about his future, he decided to open his copy of the Vulgate Bible and randomly point his finger at a passage. His finger landed on Luke 1:20 which translates as “Behold, thou shall be silent”. Merton immediately thought of the *Cistercians* (*Trappists*). He then worked for brief period with the *Friendship House* in Harlem where the scenes of poverty affected him greatly. However, he declined an invitation to join *Friendship House* permanently because he had decided to become a monk.

In December of 1941, Merton arrived at the *Abbey of Gethsemani* in Kentucky and was accepted as a postulant. In March of 1942 he was accepted as a “novice” there. Although Merton felt that writing would foster a prideful sense of individuality, his superior, Dunne, recognized his intellectual talents and encouraged him to translate religious texts and write biographies of the saints. In November of 1944 a manuscript Merton had given to a friend titled *Thirty Poems* was published by *New Directions*. In 1946 *New Directions* published another poetry collection of Merton’s titled *A Man in the Divided Sea*. These jointly brought Merton much recognition. In 1948 his much acclaimed autobiographical work, *The Seven Story Mountain*, was published by Harcourt Brace & Company. In 1948 Merton began to identify as an anarchist.

His *Seeds of Contemplation*, *The Tears of the Blind Lions*, *The Waters of Siloe* and a British edition of *Seven Story Mountain* titled *Elected Silence* soon followed. On March 19 of 1949 he became a Deacon of the Order and on May 26 (Ascension Thursday) he was ordained a priest and said his first Mass the following day. In June of 1949 the monastery celebrated its centenary which Merton commemorated with his book *Gethsemani Magnificat*. In November he began teaching mystical theology to novices, an assignment he much enjoyed. Although he was greatly prolific during this time, it is believed he suffered greatly from loneliness and stress and, possibly in a manic state while driving the monastery jeep, almost caused a head on collision. Over the next decades he transitioned from the inward-looking monk of *Seven Story Mountain* to an outward looking attempt at interfaith dialogue. During the turbulent 1960's he expressed his opposition to racism and support for pacifism and social equality. His personal radicalism was not based on any ideology but on the Christian "simplicity" expressed in his 1962 book *New Seeds of Contemplation*. In a letter to Nicaraguan "liberation theologian" Ernesto Cardenal that displays his opposition to the politicization of theology, he wrote: "The world is full of great criminals with enormous power, and they are in a death struggle with each other. It is a huge gang battle, using well-meaning lawyers and policemen and clergymen as their front, controlling papers, means of communication, and enrolling everybody in their armies."

Tour of Asia

Although Merton had by this time achieved the solitude he had long desired in a hermitage at the monastery he became frustrated with some of his superiors who denied him any opportunity to leave the monastery to correspond with the well-known leaders of the age. However, in 1968 the new abbot *Flavian Burns* permitted Merton to take a tour of Asia where he met the Dalai Lama in India three times and the Tibetan Buddhist Dzogchen ("utmost yoga") master Chatral Sangye Rinpoche, followed by a solitary retreat near Darjeeling, India where he became friends with medical doctor and writer Tsewant Yishey Pembra, a leading member of the Tibetan community there. In what turned out to be his final letter Merton wrote "In my contacts with these new friends, I also feel a consolation in my own faith in Christ and in his dwelling presence. I hope and believe he may be present in the hearts of all of us" – a sentiment that reminiscent of his youthful view that all religions lead to God in different ways.

Eastern Religious Influences

Merton studied Taoism, Confucianism Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism, and Sufism throughout his life. Although he was not moved to accept the doctrines from these religions or adopt their institutions, he did believe they offered a great insight into the depth of human experience that had been lost to traditional Christianity. Specifically, Merton held that, unlike many Eastern religions, Christianity had abandoned its mystical roots in favor of the Cartesian emphasis on the "reification of concepts, idolization of the reflexive consciousness [and] flight from being into verbalism, mathematics, and rationalization." In brief, Christianity had become infused with an excess of Western rationalist philosophy and lost touch with its authentic mystical roots. A dialogue with certain Eastern religions might help to restore these roots.

Of all the Eastern religions, Merton was most interested in Zen (although he distinguished between Zen Buddhism as expression of a particular history and culture and the pure essence of Zen that was not bound by history, culture, religion or belief). Merton's view of Zen was influenced by Graham's book *Zen Catholicism*. After completing *The Wisdom of the Desert* in which he argues that the early church fathers and early Zen masters had similar experiences Merton sent a copy to Zen Scholar D.T. Suzuki in order to provoke a dialogue between the two. The fruits of this dialogue were published 10 years later under the title "Wisdom in Emptiness" in his 1959 book *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*. However, in the Postface to that book he wrote that "any attempt to handle Zen in theological language is bound to miss the point" and described his earlier cross-cultural efforts as "an example of how not to approach Zen." One of the main aims in Merton's mature philosophical and theological endeavors was to combine the inexpressible insights of Zen with those of Christian theology as he understood it – an endeavor that he himself apparently eventually regarded as largely unsuccessful.

Later Romance

In April of 1966 Merton underwent surgery in Louisville for debilitating back pain. While recovering in hospital he fell in deeply in love with a much younger Catholic student nurse, Margie Smith, who cared for him and who already had a fiancé. He wrote poems to her and reflected on their relationship in "A Midsummer Diary for M". Merton struggled with his vow of chastity, but it is not known whether he violated his vows and consummated his relationship with her. Smith later married, had children, and never commented on the relationship.

Death

On December 10th, 1968, after giving a talk at a morning session at a monastic conference near Bangkok, Thailand, Merton was found dead in his rooms in the afternoon wearing only shorts, lying on his back with a short-circuited electric fan lying across his body. His associate Jean Leclercq stated that his death was very likely caused by heart failure induced by electric shock, but there was no explanation for a bloody wound at the back of his head. Merton is buried at *Gethsemani Abbey*. In 2016 theologian Matthew Fox claimed that Merton had been assassinated by the CIA because of his strong criticism of the Vietnam War. In 2018 Hugh Turley and David Martin published *The Martyrdom of Thomas Merton* in which they argue that it is not plausible that Merton's death was caused by accidental electrocution.

References

Primary Sources

A highly useful listing of Thomas Merton's most important works, chronologically ordered, can be found here: <http://merton.org/chrono.aspx#Biblio>

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A balanced critical discussion of Merton's discussion with Zen Buddhism from a Roman Catholic Perspective can be found here:
<https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2012/07/13/thomas-merton-and-dialogue-buddhism>

A more detailed analysis of Merton's discussions with D.T. Suzuki can be found here:
<http://merton.org/ITMS/Seasonal/31/31-3Serran-Pagan.pdf>

Official Thomas Merton website:

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