Thomas Merton, the Monk of Civil Rights

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By

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For Jim Forest (1941-2022)

“In the end, it is the reality of personal relationships that saves everything.” – Thomas Merton

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements viii

Chapter One 1
Introduction

Chapter Two 9
Early Life and Education

Chapter Three 25
Early Views on Race and the Turning Away

Chapter Four 43
The Turning Back

Chapter Five 57
Vox Prophetica

Chapter Six 82
Later and Unpublished Writings on Race

Chapter Seven 106
The Lessons of Merton

A Note on Sources 117

References 118

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I would also like to thank the late Jim Forest. I spent three days with Jim when he visited our university during our celebration of the Merton Centennial. I learned from our conversations that in the decades following Merton's passing, Jim still used him as a barometer for how to live life. Although we will never meet again in this world, I will always live my life asking, "what would Jim do?"

Finally, I wish to thank my wife Jennifer and my children Kristopher, Scott, and Kate who, once again, patiently supported my work on this book. Unlike William James and Paul Tillich, Thomas Merton has long occupied a place in my life, and I appreciate your willingness to live with his "ghost." None of this would have been possible without your love and support. You are my treasures and I love you all.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

On March 18, 1958, Fr. Louis Merton, better known by his birth name of Thomas, had what might best be described as a mystical experience. It had been sixteen years since Merton had entered the Abbey of Gethsemani, a Trappist monastery some 40 miles outside of Louisville, Kentucky and nine years after he had been ordained a Catholic priest. He had said that his decision to enter the monastery was "nothing less than a civil, moral death" (Merton 1948, 412). The experience he had at the corner of Fourth and Walnut in downtown Louisville-about which we will have more to say later-would be vital in turning him back to the world he had abandoned in favor of a contemplative life.

Merton had come to the monastery via a most circuitous route. Born into a family of non-practicing Protestants, by his teenage years he had fully embraced atheism. As his college years progressed, however, he found himself drawn to Catholicism, and was baptized. Within two years of his conversion, he felt called to the priesthood. His first attempt to join the Franciscan order failed, and for a time he abandoned this vocation. He took a job teaching English at St. Bonaventure's College, a Franciscan institution in western New York State. Then, following a series of events, he left St. Bonaventure to join the Trappists at Gethsemani three days after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Shortly before entering the Trappist monastery, Merton spent some time in Harlem, a predominantly African American neighborhood in New York City. Although he made only two trips to Harlem, and was only there for a few days each time, the visits were important in two ways. First, they helped confirm his vocation to the Trappists. He had become obsessed with Christ's admonition to the rich young man and wished to give everything to the poor, something he could clearly do by living in Harlem and serving the people

there.[1] But somehow, he felt that such work, noble and useful though it may be, would not sufficiently fulfill his calling. With the Trappists, he could renounce the world and its preoccupations while having the ability to focus more on a contemplative, rather than an active, spiritual life. Second, and at the time secondarily, it gave him insight into the poverty inherent in those suffering from racial segregation. While he would not pursue this vocation and would join the Trappists only a few months after his initial visit to Harlem, the experience clearly helped in shaping his views on American racial issues at the time. It seems likely that his experiences there remained in the back of his mind long after his "civil moral death."

His experiences in Harlem, brief though they were, provide a context for what was to happen on that Louisville street some sixteen years later. If his vocational struggles in the summer and autumn of 1941 led to his turning away from the world, this mystical experience played a key role in his turning back. He had come to a realization that he needed to be more involved in the lives and concerns of others. If his religious vows would not easily allow him to do so in person, he had at his disposal perhaps his greatest weapons: his pen and his typewriter. His letters and articles on such topics as war and civil rights lent psychological and spiritual support to those on the front lines of those movements. Although he remained cloistered, he would no longer live a life completely sealed off from the outside world. Merton's body was in Gethsemani; his mind and his spirit would be wherever they were needed.

Thus, perhaps more than any other Catholic writer of the twentieth century, and almost certainly more than any other Trappist, Thomas Merton had much to say on important social issues of the day. He became a staunch opponent of the Vietnam War, nuclear proliferation, and, as we will examine, racial injustice. If his views often brought him into conflict with those to whom he made a vow of obedience, so be it. He would comfort the afflicted, afflict the comfortable, and any sufferings he endured would be his own cross to bear. It is noteworthy that his abbey, Gethsemani, referred

[1] Matthew 19:21.

to the biblical garden in which Jesus suffered his own agony in the last hours before his arrest and execution.

Although I had been aware of him for many years, I came to first read Merton in my mid-twenties. His books, particularly his spiritual autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*, were ubiquitous on the religion shelves of most bookstores. After graduating from college, I had gone through a period of religious stagnation in which I was, if not exactly lapsed, at least a not-quite-fully-practicing Catholic. After a childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood in which I had attended Mass every Sunday and holy day, I now allowed myself to be absent from time to time. If this seems like a not so terrible sin, perhaps that is so. However, although I still attended church more often than not, I did so with a sense of indifference and obligation. The gospels no longer spoke to me the way they once did and the sermons even less so. If I wouldn't go so far as to call it a falling away from religion, it was at the very least a malaise.

This changed for me when I discovered C.S. Lewis. Reading Lewis allowed me to consider faith in a more intellectually rigorous way but without slogging through pages of (to me anyway) incomprehensible theology. I began to purchase and read as many books by Lewis as I could. Soon after, I began to expand my reading by delving more deeply into other religious authors, and in so doing, I picked up my first copy of Thomas Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain*.[2]

Somewhat longer than most of the Lewis books in my collection, I initially contented myself to leave *The Mountain* on my shelf, only opening it after a considerable amount of time had passed. I was immediately enthralled. His opening paragraphs, I have come to believe, are among the finest in the English language and I reveled in his words throughout. As much as I loved Lewis, I related to Merton a bit better. Merton was a Catholic, as am I. Merton briefly ran on the track team (actually cross-country) at Columbia, as I did in high school. As a graduate school student who commuted to New York City, Merton's experiences and reflections on his Long Island Rail

[2] I have purchased this book several times over the years, but still possess the same copy that I bought more than a generation ago. Battered and dog-eared, highlighted and annotated, it will be the volume to which I will refer throughout this book.

Road commute were, in some ways, quite similar to my own. Most importantly, Merton wrote as I thought.[3] He articulated his ideas better than I could ever hope to, but here was a man whose life, in its broad strokes, might have been my own. In short, if Lewis remains my favorite writer, *The Seven Storey Mountain* became my favorite book. When I finished it, it immediately took its place among a handful of works that are in "heavy rotation" on my reading lists. I read it roughly every year.

But if *The Mountain* grabbed my attention, I was slow to warm up to Merton's other writings. As I waded into his books on the monastic life, spirituality, and contemplation, I struggled to find my footing. Though I could relate to his life up to the point where he entered the monastery, I could not easily do so after that point. The life of a monk, while intriguing, was not my life. Merton's mystical poetry, if that's even the correct word, was a mystery to me. Aside from purchasing a set of Breviaries to add variety to my prayer life, I was little touched by the "seeds of contemplation" that Merton attempted to sow within me.

More years passed, and I became a Professor at St. Joseph's University in New York. The University, is referred to as "a liberal arts college in the Catholic tradition." The nature of and reasons for this description need not detain us, but the ultimate benefit was that the school allowed me to be a part of a climate that could be both intellectual and spiritual.

Around the time of the Thomas Merton Centenary in 2015, St. Joseph's hosted a number of different Merton-related events, and it was through this, that I became more intimately aware of the breadth of his work. Jim Forest, a friend and biographer of Merton, spent two days with us speaking on various other aspects of Merton's work in the peace movement of the 1960s.[4] Other events at the college revolved around Merton's poetry, his photography, and many other aspects of his writing. For a time, Merton

[3] I once gave a copy of *The Mountain* to a friend who, upon reading the first few pages, remarked that it was rather similar to having a conversation with me. I very much took this as a compliment.

[4] Jim was a lay theologian who, in addition to being friends with Thomas Merton, was close with Dan Berrigan, Dorothy Day and Thich Nhat Hanh. Sadly, he passed away during the writing of this book.

seemed to be everywhere, and this near-constant exposure to him finally provided me with the key to unlock his writings beyond *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

It was around this time that I became aware of a book titled *The Man in the Sycamore Tree: The Good Times and Hard Life of Thomas Merton* written by Merton's college friend Ed Rice. It was in Rice's book that Merton's writings on social justice, racism and civil rights first entered my consciousness. Rice suggested that Merton's essay "Letters to a White Liberal" "should be read carefully in its entirety" (Rice 1972, 133), and I dutifully did so. These letters which, as we shall see, might be read as a companion piece to James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, were a step toward "recognizing the difficulty that whites have in understanding the message of the Black Americans" (Vinski, 2015, para 13). If Merton, perhaps, understood better than most whites the complaints and desires of African Americans, he also understood better than most whites themselves the reason behind white resistance to the necessary changes.

Merton brought a certain perspective to the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s – a white man's perspective, an outsider's perspective, a religious perspective. I believe he can bring that same perspective to the racial concerns plaguing the United States today. That he has been dead for over fifty years does not mean that we cannot benefit from his insight. The details may have changed, but the truths behind them remain. We must read him closely and carefully and extrapolate from his words so we can then apply them to our experiences today.

Whatever this book may be, it will not be simply another in the long line of Merton biographies. As in my earlier treatments of Paul Tillich and William James, Merton's biographical information will have its place, but mainly in the form of context. As I attempt to examine Merton's thoughts about racial inequality in the United States, there will be much that seems beyond and unrelated to that particular topic. I ask for patience. While I do not wish to add to the list of Merton biographies, certain elements of his life must be included to gain a fuller picture of how those thoughts came about. Merton, having removed himself from the world by entering a Trappist monastery, is an unlikely source for social commentary - not because he accepted

injustice, rather because his monastic vows placed him in a situation not typically suited to giving public voice to them.

Thus, following a brief and broad consideration of Merton's life up until shortly before his first failed attempt to enter religious life, we will examine some of his early reflections on race. These reflections, however, are intimately bound up in his wrestling with whether or not he was called to monastic life. Important though they may be, they were not thoughts on racial injustice for its own sake. Later, following his arrival at the Abbey of Gethsemani, we will see how he slowly turned back to the world he thought he had left behind. This includes his growing celebrity as a monk-writer not only of spiritual works and poetry, but also of one of the great spiritual autobiographies of the twentieth century.[5] As Merton was slowly brought back into contact with the world beyond the monastery, he could not help but become aware of the problems of racial injustice. Once aware, he could not remain silent, and his pen would be active throughout the 1960s. It is here that we will see his thoughts on racial justice develop into something beyond the personal and the anecdotal. Finally, we will consider the lessons taught by Merton and how we might heed these lessons. America continues to struggle with its racist past and its racist present in the hopes of avoiding a racist future.

It is here, however, that I must offer some words of warning to the reader. In the first place, there is the language that I will use. Merton wrote in another time; we are more than a half-century removed from his death and it has been nearly sixty years since his most famous essay on racial matters, the aforementioned "Letters to a White Liberal." I have never felt that it was my place to edit the writings of those who came before me, particularly those, like Merton, whose mastery of the craft is far superior to mine. Thus, I will quote Merton, and indeed all writers cited in this book, precisely as they wrote even to the point of using descriptors that are out of date. For instance, while I myself will use the more modern term "African American"

[5] In a private conversation I had with Boston College philosopher Peter Kreeft, he declared *The Seven Storey Mountain* as one of the three greatest such books. The other two were Sheldon Vanauken's *A Severe Mercy*, and C.S. Lewis's *Surprised by Joy*.

to refer to persons of color in the United States, when quoting Merton, I will use the terms that he himself used.

Additionally, following a convention I used in a previous book, *William James and the Birth of Modern Teaching*, I will jump back and forth in tense using the past tense when referring to things that Merton did or said in a particular episode of his life, but using the present tense when describing his works about racial matters. I have long believed that when one reads, one enters into a conversation with the author. Reading allows us to travel through time and space, to become part of the history about which we read. Merton has been dead for over fifty years, yet he continues to speak to us through his writings. In this instance, our need to listen to him is perhaps most crucial, for it seems clear to me that while significant changes have been made in society since the height of the Civil Rights Movement, there remains much work to be done. Merton describes the world as he knew it in his lifetime, but while the details of that world may differ significantly from that of our own, in its broader strokes things have not changed as much as he most likely had hoped. If we break through the surface content of his writing, we should have no problem seeing our own world in its latent content.

I should also note that throughout the book, I will refer to Civil Rights. This should not be interpreted as the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s-1960s. Rather, I will use this term to reflect the ongoing nature of the struggle. It was not accomplished once and for all with the passage of legislation in the 1960s. While certain matters were resolved, others remain.

Finally, we must always remember who Merton was and how his identity became manifest through in his writing. Merton the priest wrote the pieces upon which we will reflect, and his writings on race will be infused with a Catholic Christian perspective. In addition, Merton the monk wrote these works, and his writings are often from the perspective of one somewhat removed from the day-to-day tribulations of those on the “front lines”. In this case, what we give up in terms of direct contact with the movement - its struggles, its triumphs, and its dangers - we gain in having a certain objectivity. Merton the pacifist also wrote these pieces. His condemnation

of violence and his ardent desire for peace will permeate his reflections on the struggle for Civil Rights.

Most importantly for our purposes, we must always remember that Merton the white man wrote these works. In the closing lines of "Letters to a White Liberal", he admits that what he had written was a thought experiment, one in which he hoped to show that a white man was capable of even remotely understanding the world from an African American perspective. He will not always succeed, but he will never lose sight of his belief that equality for African Americans is the only path by which whites achieve their own salvation.[6]

One final reflection seems appropriate. On May 25, 2020, an African American man by the name of George Floyd died in Minneapolis, Minnesota after being arrested by police. In the months between his death and the conviction of Derek Chauvin, the white officer who killed Floyd by kneeling on his neck, the United States was once again forced to confront its racial past and present. Protests arose around the country and when one came to my hometown, my wife, my children, and I joined it. As we prepared to leave for the march, I went into my room and retrieved two objects I wished to have on my person at the protest. The first was a set of rosary beads, an unusual choice on my part as the rosary had never really been a part of my prayer life. The second, however, was one that, perhaps, meant something a bit more to me: a book of reflections by Thomas Merton.

I opted not to chant the slogans as we marched, choosing instead to recite the rosary to the best of my memory, but I found myself buoyed knowing that in my pocket was the Merton book. He had not, of course, marched on Birmingham, Selma, or Washington back during the civil rights movement of the 1960s, but as a white man who was, himself, trying to understand the African American perspective, I took comfort in the thought that he was with us that day. I hope he would have been pleased.

[6] It must be noted that I am also writing as a white man. Therefore, I will often use terms such as "we," "us," and "our."

CHAPTER TWO

EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION

Early Travels

Thomas Merton was born on January 31, 1915. His New Zealander father, Owen Merton, and American mother, Ruth Jenkins, had met in Paris, married, and gave birth to their oldest son, Thomas in Prades, France. But to describe his earliest days in such pedestrian terms is to lose the beautiful prose of what is, in my opinion, one of the great opening paragraphs of modern literature. Thus, we turn to Merton himself who describes the context into which he was born in the opening paragraph of his spiritual memoir, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (Merton 1948):

> On the last day of January 1915, under the sign of the Water Bearer, in a year of a great war, and down in the shadow of some French mountains on the borders of Spain, I came into the world. Free by nature, in the image of God, I was nevertheless the prisoner of my own violence and my own selfishness, in the image of the world into which I was born. That world was the picture of Hell, full of men like myself, loving God and yet hating Him; born to love Him, living instead in fear and hopeless self-contradictory hungers (Merton 1948, 3).

His parents' marriage and his own birth almost didn't happen. While still in New Zealand, Merton's father briefly considered joining an Antarctic expedition "from which no one returned" (Merton 1948, 5).[7] It is possible that his father's choice, if it did indeed happen, may have done much for Thomas beyond giving him the gift of life. It also gave him a context from which he could derive a sense of his having a purpose in life. As a result of Owen Merton's choice not to join the expedition, Thomas Merton was born, and would eventually become a Catholic monk. He would then come to

[7] I suspect, but cannot confirm, this was the Robert Falcon Scott *Terra Nova* expedition which stopped in New Zealand in the latter half of 1910.

profoundly influence the lives of countless people through his books, articles, and essays. This gift, however, was not one that he immediately seized upon. In the years prior to his entering the Monastery, he would travel the world, engaging in all sorts of questionable activities.

Both Owen and Ruth were artists. They were also political radicals in that they opposed the war that engulfed Europe at the time. They were, according to their son,

> captives in that world, knowing they did not belong with it or in it, and yet unable to get away from it. They were in the world and not of it - not because they were saints, but in a different way: because they were artists. The integrity of an artist lifts a man above the level of the world without delivering him from it (Merton 1948, 3-4).[8]

They did not stay long in Prades, however. As the First World War raged on, Merton's maternal grandparents in the United States worried about the family's safety. Thus, when Thomas was but one year old, he and his parents relocated to Douglaston, New York. Shortly thereafter they moved into a rental house in nearby Flushing. Two years later, Merton's younger brother John Paul was born. Since the family could not be supported by Owen Merton's art alone, he took odd jobs to make ends meet, working as a landscape gardener, a church organist, and a movie theater pianist.[9]

In 1921, Ruth Merton was stricken with cancer and died in October of that year. During her illness, young Thomas was sent to live with his grandparents in Douglaston. He learned of the seriousness of her condition by means of a letter she wrote to him from her hospital bed. "[T]he language of the letter was confusing to me. Nevertheless, one thing was quite evident. My mother was informing me, by mail, that she was about to die, and would never see me again" (Merton 1948, 16). He would not be permitted to see her in the hospital nor see her body before cremation. Although he was clearly grieved, he was, in some ways, glad that he did not accompany her to the crematorium.

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[8] This opposition to war would be passed on to Thomas himself.
[9] Ruth had given up painting at this point.

With the death of Ruth Jenkins Merton, Owen no longer needed to remain exclusively in New York. “He could go wherever he needed to go, to find subjects and get ideas, and I was old enough to go with him” (Merton 1948, 18). Thus, the peripatetic life of Thomas Merton began in earnest at around age six and would continue, more or less, until he entered the Abbey of Gethsemani nearly two decades later. Father and son first traveled to Provincetown Massachusetts on the tip of Cape Cod, then sailed to Bermuda. Thomas returned to Douglaston for a time while Owen traveled to France and North Africa. Soon, however, both he and his father relocated to France and to the town of Saint-Antonin-Nobel-Val (Merton 1948).

It was, perhaps, in France that the first seeds of religion were planted within young Thomas Merton. Owen had always possessed a certain spirituality, but it had never translated itself into any sort of formal religious practice. Before bringing his son to accompany him in France, Owen became seriously ill, and Thomas prepared himself for the immanent death of his father. Yet the father recovered, and it seems as if the illness produced some sort of religious experience in him. He began to pray and encouraged his son to do so as well. They prayed that Owen might paint well, that Owen would have good exhibitions, and that the paintings would sell (Furlong 1980).

It is possible that Thomas himself, albeit briefly or perhaps only in retrospect, felt the first hints of religious contemplation in that medieval town with its church situated at its center. In truth, this was almost certainly lost on nine-year-old Thomas at the time, but the mature Merton clearly appreciated this “all roads lead to God” experience.

When he began to attend schools at the Lycée, he received some formal religious instruction under the tutelage of a protestant pastor. He also spent some time with a local couple, the Privats, about whom he would later write “I have never met people to whom belief was a matter of such moment” (Merton 1948, 65). Still, it was his father’s religiosity and spirituality that seemed to have the greatest effect upon him.

What is perhaps most interesting about the Privats is the way they engaged Merton about his Protestantism, for they did so not through logical

argument, but rather through "a series of anxious questions. How could he live outside their faith? Wasn't he afraid for his soul?" (Mott 1984, 37). They were clearly concerned with young Thomas, and their concern clearly affected him. For perhaps the first time in his life, he gave some consideration toward his own soul. This was another turning point in the early life of Thomas Merton.

England

Time passed, until one day in 1928, Owen appeared at the Lycée to take his son to school in England. The following year, Thomas attended Oakham. His time there appears to have been happy, but later, Merton would become critical of the English public schools in that they often tied "the message of the Gospels and the Pauline letters to the English class system" (Mott 1984, 51). In fact, Merton recalls the school chaplain equating the terms "charity" and "love" of 1 Corinthians 13 with being a gentleman.[10] If this was counter-balanced by the emphasis of service to others, Merton felt that it also led to the patronizing attitude of the British upper class toward those perceived to be beneath them.

More significantly at the time, Owen Merton was dying (Rice 1972). The brain tumor that would eventually end his life first manifested itself in 1929, and Thomas seems to have known little of it except that his father was in a London hospital. One day, however, while staying with friends in Scotland, he received a telegram from his father saying "Entering New York Harbor. All well." Thomas initially feared for his father's sanity, and he felt a certain relief when he learned that there was an organic cause behind such an odd message. Later, Thomas would reflect on his father's last days in more spiritual terms. The tumor had robbed Owen of the ability to speak. Yet,

> If he could not talk, there were other things he could still do. One day, I found his bed covered with little sheets of blue-note paper on which he had

[10]Merton would "not accuse him of finishing the chapter with 'Now there remain faith, hope and gentlemanliness, and the greatest of these is gentlemanliness…' but it was the logical term of his reasoning" (Merton 1948, 81-82).

> been drawing […] they were unlike anything he had ever done before-pictures of little, irate Byzantine-looking saints with beards and great halos.
>
> Of us all, Father was the only one who really had any kind of a faith. And I do not doubt that he had very much of it, and that behind the walls of his isolation, his intelligence and his will, unimpaired, and not hampered in any essential way by the partial obstruction of some of his senses, were turned to God, and communed with God Who was with him and in him, and Who gave him, as I believe, light to understand and to make use of his suffering for his own good, and to perfect his soul. It was a great soul, large, full of natural charity. He was a man of exceptional intellectual honesty and sincerity and purity of understanding. And this affliction, this terrible and frightening illness which was relentlessly pressing him down even into the jaws of the tomb, was not destroying him after all.
>
> Souls are like athletes, that need opponents worthy of them, if they are to be tried and extended and pushed to the full use of their powers, and rewarded according to their capacity. And my father was in a fight with this tumor, and none of us understood the battle. We thought he was done for, but it was making him great (Merton 1948, 92-93).

While witnessing the death of his father, was Merton giving any thought to the state of his own soul? It seems unlikely - at least at the time. He was, of course, not yet sixteen years old and likely could make very little of his father's passing (Forest 2008). Retrospectively, however, he sees more clearly the spiritual condition in which he found himself. "[M]y soul," he remembered, "was completely dead. It was a blank, a nothingness. It was empty, it was a kind of spiritual vacuum […] I did not even care whether I lived or died" (Merton 1948, 110).

If Merton's conception of the soul is accurate, if his was awaiting a worthy opponent, it is clear he had not yet found one. His intellectual and spiritual stimulation seemed to take the form of modern literature and "hot jazz." These things, of course, are not necessarily evil unto themselves, and I am sure that there are people whose spirituality was somehow strengthened by

such pursuits. But it was simply not to be the case for Merton. He needed something more.[11]

Shortly after his father's death, Merton would begin to find his own worthy opponents in the works of Gerard Manley Hopkins, William Blake, and Bach's B-Minor Mass, although he was not yet able to engage with them fully. Instead, the likes of Hemingway, Picasso and Ellington-in other words, the modernists- held the most sway. Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of Owen's death, Thomas blossomed into his own image of what a modern man should be: "a true citizen of my own disgusting century: the century of poison gas and atomic bombs. A man living on the doorstep of the Apocalypse" (Merton as cited in Forest, 23).

His father's friend, Tom Bennet, became Merton's guardian following Owen's death.[12] Thomas completed his schooling at Oakham and sat for the entrance exams to Cambridge. He won a place at Clare College and hoped of one day entering the British diplomatic service. Before beginning his first term, he took a trip through Italy. There, he found himself moved not by the major landmarks of Rome, but by the most ancient sites: the icons that adorned those churches that were off the beaten tourist path. Was he engaging in the intellectual priggishness often associated with adolescence? That is, was his mindset the type that makes one proud and confident knowing that one possesses a secret knowledge? Almost certainly, but he was also engaging his mind and soul in a manner befitting his own unique personality. Thomas Merton was, it must be said, his own person. No one saw as he saw, and no one understood as he did. Although he would not dignify what he was doing by calling it a pilgrimage, it is clear, he writes, that "[w]ithout knowing anything about it, I became a pilgrim" (Merton in Forest 2008, 27). Not only that, but as the icons grew in stature to him, the

[11] Years later, jazz artists such as John Coltrane would use their music as a prayer. Coltrane's unconventional spirituality would eventually result in his "beatification" as a saint in certain African Orthodox faiths. Relatedly, and perhaps more importantly for this book, jazz musicians would also use their art as a prophetic voice for the Civil Rights movement (e.g., "We Insist! Max Roach's Freedom Now Suite").
[12] Bennett was also Thomas' godfather.

writings of those such as D.H. Lawrence and other modernists began to shrink in importance.

One night, in his room, he had the occasion for another experience.

> It was night. The light was on. Suddenly it seemed to me that Father, who had now been dead more than a year, was there with me. The sense of his presence was as vivid and as real and as startling as if he had touched my arm or spoken to me. The whole thing passed in a flash, but in that flash, instantly, I was overwhelmed with a sudden and profound insight into the misery and corruption of my own soul, and I was pierced deeply with a light that made me realize something of the condition I was in, and I was filled with horror at what I saw, and my whole being rose up in revolt against what was within me and my soul desired escape and liberation and freedom from all this […] [a]nd now I think for the first time in my whole life I really began to pray […] praying out of the very roots and life and of my being, and praying to the God I had never known (Merton 1948, 124).

One must be careful not to over-state this experience. Reflecting on it in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton himself recognizes that the causes of this experience may not have been, strictly speaking, supernatural, nor could it be said that it was a direct cause of anything that was to come. Merton was not fully converted as a result of this, although it signaled a movement in that direction. He began to pray, and he began to search for a religion in which his spiritual needs could be met. In the coming months, he would explore the Zion Church (Episcopalian) in Douglaston where his father had once played the organ, and a local Quaker congregation that his mother had attended. On a trip to the Chicago World's Fair, he picked up pamphlets on Mormonism. None of these, however, stuck with him. He remained spiritually adrift.

Rather, this astonishing experience of his dead father serves as a signpost of things to come. Its clarity is more evident in retrospect than it was to him at the time. But what it demonstrated, perhaps more than anything, is what it tells us of Merton's mental and spiritual self. Others might be content with simple affirmations of faith, and there is, of course, nothing wrong with those who accept God without question. In fact, there is something quite noble about it. But it was not the type of faith destined to take root in Thomas Merton. He would question, he would doubt, he would struggle, he

would re-examine, and he would re-evaluate. Though his faith in God was unwavering, at least following his baptism, his understanding of his vocation and what it meant in terms of his responsibility to the wider world would be a struggle for him throughout his life.

Following his stay at Oakham, he enrolled in Cambridge, but only lasted a year. If the state and nourishment of his soul had begun to change, his behavior, it seems clear, had not. Among his indiscretions, he had fathered a child out of wedlock[13] and as a result, his relationship with Tom Bennett, which had already become strained, was fully severed.[14] Finally, during a visit to America in the summer of 1934, Bennett wrote to Merton essentially saying that, since his youthful action effectively disqualified him from the British diplomatic services, there was little point in remaining in Cambridge. Thomas Merton would return to England one final time to settle whatever affairs he could, but from that point forward, America would be his home, and Columbia his university.

New York

Upon his return from England, Merton settled into life as a Columbia University student. He was immediately impressed with the informality of the Columbia classrooms as compared to the rigidity he had experienced at Cambridge (Mott, 1984). Among his professors was Mark Van Doren, whose use of Socratic questioning strategies brought forth from his students ideas that they did not know they possessed. Van Doren's refusal to fit his content to the Freudian and Marxist themes that had gained currency at the time helped to weaken Merton's enthusiasm for Communism.

Columbia certainly provided Merton with a chance to start over. Tom Bennett, his godfather in England, withheld the truth about why Merton had left Cambridge from his family in New York (with whom he would be living), allowing Merton to sever his contact almost completely. The

[13] The mother and child were killed during The Blitz.
[14] The break between the two began when Thomas had to wire Bennett for money during his Italy trip..

friendships he cultivated at Columbia, on the other hand, would last him the rest of his life. (Mott 1984).

He had not lost his energy as is evidenced by the sheer number of activities in which he took part. He looked at the Columbia course catalogue as would a child peering into the window of a toy store. He joined a fraternity, ran for the cross-country team, wrote and drew for campus publications, and edited the college yearbook. He also tutored rich children, drew for advertising cartoons (Furlong 1980), and acted as a guide for the observation deck at Rockefeller Center (Merton 1948). Yet he had not completely left his rakish life behind him. His free time was spent galivanting in speakeasies, pursuing women, and listening to and playing jazz wherever he could. (Furlong 1980).[15]

At this point, however, Merton's life was beginning to trend in another direction. Having felt his father's presence on his Italian trip some time before, Merton was slowly awakening to the spiritual side of his life. While progress had been slow in this area, he had advanced enough that when his grandfather died in 1936, he returned to the family home in Douglaston and

> a strange thing happened. Without my having thought about it, or debating about it in my mind, I closed the door and got on my knees and prayed. I suppose it was just the spontaneous response of my love of poor Pop […] and yet, I had seen other deaths without praying or being even drawn to pray […] now I only wanted to pray (Merton 1948, 178).

Not long after, Merton's grandmother took ill and eventually passed away herself. During the course of her illness, Merton prayed again, but this time "I prayed for her to live, although in some sense it was obviously better that she should die I was saying, within myself, 'you Who made her, let her go on living'" (Merton 1948, 179). This prayer shows not only how far he had come, putting in God's hands what was beyond his own control, but also how far he still had to travel. He prayed for his grandmother's life because "life was the only good I was certain of" (179).

[15] Merton acknowledged his deficiencies as a pianist remarking that his playing pleased no one's ears but his own.

A further shift in the direction of religion and God, and to Catholicism in particular, was his growing interest in medieval literature and philosophy. In 1937, he took a course in medieval literature and found himself "drawn gently back into the medieval Catholic atmosphere of which he had caught a glimpse in his boyhood at St. Antonin" (Furlong 1980. 71). Sometime later, he bought a copy of Etienne Gilson's *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*. There was a brief annoyance when his Protestant upbringing made him disgusted to find an Imprimatur on the book's title page. Although he was filled with an urge to fling the book out the window of the Long Island Railroad car in which he was riding, he kept Gilson's little volume and, more surprisingly, read many parts of it.

It was Gilson's description of *aseitas*, that is, "the power of a being to exist absolutely in virtue of itself, not as caused by itself, but as requiring no cause, no other justification for its existence except that its very nature is to exist" (Merton 1948, 191), that helped him begin to develop a better concept of God - one that he was able to connect with intellectually and that helped him see past the anthropomorphic, contradictory, and emotional God that he believed most Christians worshiped. Thus, the God who in Exodus 3:14 proclaims "I am" as his name is doing something more than simply identifying Himself. He is providing insight into His nature. As Merton noted in the margin of Gilson's book: "Aseity of God-God is being per se" (191).

Around the same time, Merton met a Hindu monk named Bramachari. In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he describes the fascinating story of how Bramachari came to America from India, as well as some of the more outlandish tales of his "powers" (e.g., taking on the form of a cat, making himself invisible) invented and perpetuated by Merton's friend Seymour Freedgood. Merton describes the monk as "a shy little man, very happy with a huge smile, all teeth in the midst of his brown face" (Merton 1948, 218).

On the occasion of their first meeting, Merton asked Bramachari, who himself had earned a Ph.D. in theology from the University of Chicago, about the colleges he had visited in the United States, and specifically which ones he liked best. The monk responded that they were all more or less the same as far as he was concerned. This insight led Merton to contemplate his

own attachment to places. Over the course of their friendship, Bramachari shared many of his experiences with the various forms of American religions. He seems, by and large, to have been somewhat bemused by what he witnessed. Although never unkind in his evaluations, he was amazed "that people should live the way he saw them living all around him" (Merton 1948, 217). He laughed at the absurdity he witnessed, unimpressed when told, for instance, of the expense of a church's stained-glass windows or a monastery's printing press.[16]

Bramachari never attempted to convert Merton to Hinduism, and according to Merton, "he never attempted to explain his religious beliefs to me" although "[h]e would no doubt have told me all I wanted to know, if I had asked him, but I was not curious enough to ask" (Merton 1948, 217). Still, Merton was interested in Bramachari's perspectives on American society.

Rather than playing the role of a Hindu proselytizer, however, "Bramachari played a Christian missionary role in Merton's life" (Forest 2008, 54), as evidenced by this remembrance from *The Seven Storey Mountain*:

> He did not generally put his words in the form of advice: but the one counsel he did give me is something I will not easily forget: 'There are many beautiful mystical books written by the Christians. You should read St. Augustine's Confessions, and The Imitation of Christ.'
>
> Of course I had heard of both of them: but he was speaking as if he took it for granted that most people in America had no idea that such books ever existed […] as if there was something in their own cultural heritage that they had long since forgotten: and he could remind them of it. He repeated what he had said, not without a certain earnestness:
>
> 'Yes, you must read those books'
>
> It was not often that he spoke with this kind of emphasis.

[16] Bramachari cited this sort of phenomenon as one of the primary reasons that missionaries had not been successful in converting India and other Asian countries to Christianity: "they lived too well, too comfortably. They took care of themselves in a way that made in impossible for the Hindus to regard them as holy" (Merton 1948, 218).

> Now that I look back on those days, it seems to me very probable that one of the reasons God had brought him all the way from India was that he might say just that. I was told that I ought to turn to the Christian tradition, to St. Augustine-and told by a Hindu monk! (Merton 1948, 219-220).

Perhaps being led to Christianity by this Hindu monk was, for Merton, a first step toward seeing the Christ in others. The recognition that we may learn from others, as he clearly learned from Bramachari, could easily lead to the further revelation that we may love one another, as he clearly loved Bramachari. Could this fortuitous meeting with a man much like himself, but from halfway around the world, have been a prerequisite for the Fourth and Walnut experience that would occur some two decades later?

It might also be the case that Bramachari widened Merton's perspective, allowing him to see the world - a world that Merton, perhaps, took for granted - through the eyes of another. This becomes clearer when one contrasts the way he moved blindly and without care through the world of his younger days with the much more critical eye of his later years. If his youth consisted of his enjoyment of life, his later writing clearly shows him asking whether things have to be the way that they are. Could they not, in fact, be different?

Following his graduation from Columbia in 1938, he began work on his Masters degree with the ultimate goal in becoming a college professor. Yet, having reconnected with his Christian roots, other events conspired to bring him closer to Catholicism specifically. Merton was preparing his Masters thesis on William Blake. He had read Blake during his time in England, and although he had read him too literally to truly understand him at the time, he was enraptured by Blake's poetry. This love was re-kindled as he worked upon his thesis, exclaiming in *The Seven Storey Mountain* "oh, what a thing it was to live in contact with the genius and the holiness of William Blake" (Merton 1948, 210). Through that "genius and holiness", Merton "became more and more conscious of the necessity of a vital faith, and the total unreality and unsubstantiality of the dead, selfish rationalism which had been freezing my mind and will for the last seven years" (211). He learned from Blake "that sociology and economics, divorced from faith and charity, became nothing but the chains of his aged icy demon Urizen" (226). His

reading of both Blake and Jacques Maritain taught him that his soul was torn between the mysticism of art (which, as the child of artists, he had always favored over rationalism) and the purely naturalistic life he had been leading. Specifically, it was Maritain's view of virtue that had, perhaps, the greatest effect on Merton. "Everybody makes fun of virtue, which now has as its primary meaning, an affectation of prudery practiced by hypocrites and the impotent" (226). But Maritain's conception of virtue was neither a hypocritical nor a prudish concept. "I was never a lover of Puritanism. Now at least I came around to the sane conception of virtue - without which there can be no happiness, because virtues are precisely the powers by which we can come to acquire happiness: without them, there can be no joy" (226).

In August, Merton, who had been visiting a girl on Long Island each weekend, was "filled with a growing desire to stay in the city and go to some kind of a church" (Merton 1948, 229). Although his first thoughts were to find a Quaker meeting house, his work and his reading drove him more and more towards the Catholic Church. He cancelled his plans with the young lady and, for the first time in his life, he attended Mass. The sermon about the Divinity of Christ and about how God's Grace was needed for the faith to believe in it moved him. He said it was precisely "what I most needed to hear that day" (233). He left during the Consecration of the Blessed Sacrament, as if he somehow knew instinctively that he did not yet belong there. But he walked out into the streets of Manhattan transformed. "All I know is that I walked in a new world. Even the ugly buildings of Columbia were transfigured in it, and everywhere was peace in these streets designed for violence and noise" (234).

Following this, "my reading became more and more Catholic" (Merton 1948, 234). He read Gerard Manely Hopkins and found himself vaguely attracted to the priesthood. He read James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, a work he had attempted before but abandoned. As he now picked it up again, he found himself most struck by the parts which had previously bored and depressed him. Although Joyce's Catholicism had lapsed, the Church was often present in his life and in his work. "I was moving in his Dublin," wrote Merton

> and breathing the air of its physical and spiritual slums and it was not the most Catholic side of Dublin that he always painted. But in the background was the Church, and its priests, and its devotion, and the Catholic life in all its gradations […] [a]nd it was this background that fascinated me now, along with the temper of Thomism that had once been in Joyce himself. If he had abandoned St. Thomas, he had not stepped much further down than Aristotle (Merton 1948, 235).

Around the same time, the Nazis invaded Czechoslovakia, and Merton's thoughts began to turn toward the implications of that event. A major war seemed to him inevitable. Equally inevitable was his sense that he would find himself drafted into the army.

One night, he was in his room reading a biography of Gerard Manley Hopkins when a thought entered his mind. It was almost as if someone was speaking to him directly. "'What are you waiting for?' it said, 'why are you sitting here? Why do you hesitate? You know what you ought to do? Why don't you do it?'" (Merton 1948, 239).

He tried to put the thought from his mind. He lit a cigarette to settle his nerves. He picked up the Hopkins book. Finally, he put on his coat and walked to the Church of Corpus Christi. When he arrived, he met Father Ford, the paster, and told him "I want to become a Catholic" (Merton 1948, 240). Merton left the rectory that night with the books that would prepare him to be received into the Church. Following his period of instruction, Thomas Merton, with his friend Ed Rice as his godfather, was baptized in November of 1938 (Merton 1948; Forest 2008).[17]

Shortly after his baptism, in November 1938, and his confirmation the following spring, he began to experience a new impulse. A desire to join the Catholic priesthood, and more specifically, entering a religious order now grew within him. With guidance from Dan Walsh, who taught a course on St. Thomas Aquinas that Merton was taking at Columbia (Forest, 2008), Merton examined the Jesuits and the Trappists before settling on the Franciscans.

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[17] Fr. Ford assigned Fr. Moore to prepare Merton for baptism. Coincidentally, Fr. Moore was the same priest whose sermon Merton had heard during his first Mass.