1973

Contemplation for Education: Its Value Shown in the Life, Education, and Writings of Thomas Merton

Edward Colman Cosgrove C.SS.R.
Loyola University Chicago

Recommended Citation
http://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss/1419

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses and Dissertations at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact ecommons@luc.edu.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.
Copyright © 1973 Edward Colman Cosgrove C.SS.R.
CONTEMPLATION FOR EDUCATION:
ITS VALUE SHOWN IN THE LIFE, EDUCATION,
AND WRITINGS OF THOMAS MERTON

by
Reverend Edward C. Cosgrove, C.SS.R.

A Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Loyola University in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
February
1973
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

With gratitude, however meager of the acknowledgment rightly due, this dissertation is dedicated to Mary, the Mother of God, under the title of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, the venerable Picture of which was an artistic source of contemplation to Thomas Merton, and so remains to this writer and legions of others.

The help of St. Jude, the heavenly patron of those with tasks that seem hopeless of completion, was sought and gained at the times when words to express thoughts were slowest in coming.

Dr. Gerald Gutek, the writer's faculty advisor, suggested that the thought of Thomas Merton in relation to Education might be worthy of a dissertation.

Dr. Rosemary V. Donatelli and Father Walter Krolikowski, S.J., the writer's other two readers, saved him from many mistakes in style and presentation.

The writer was moved to emulate the zeal for learning of the faculty and his fellow graduate students at Loyola University.

The writer's parents, Mr. and Mrs. John J. Cosgrove, his aunt, Miss Louise Hartnett, and his brother, Father Thomas
Cosgrove, C.SS.R. read some of the first draft and made suggestions for improvement. The kindly interest of his friends, of his Redemptorist confreres, particularly the students at Holy Redeemer College, Waterford, Wisconsin and of St. Alphonsus College, Suffield, Connecticut was a continual encouragement to the writer.

Mrs. Barbara Udelhoven and Mrs. Patricia Schneider, secretaries at Holy Redeemer College, in typing the first two drafts caught mistakes the writer had made.

Mrs. Ann Allworth of Chicopee, Massachusetts typed the final copy and met a deadline with determination.

Father Edward Hart, C.SS.R. of St. Alphonsus College read the dissertation before the final typing. His suggestions as to changes in style were nearly all incorporated.

Father Terrence McClosky, C.SS.R., head librarian at Holy Redeemer College, was ever generous in supplying material the writer needed.

Father William Emmett Collins, C.SS.R., President of Holy Redeemer College, whom the writer first met as his teacher twenty-five years ago, a role that he still maintains with the writer, gave him many hours of prudent direction in the writing of the dissertation.
# Table of Contents

**Acknowledgments** ........................................... ii

**Introduction** .................................................. 1

**Chapter**

I. The Education of Thomas Merton: The Making of a Christian Humanist ............................................. 9

II. Contemplation and Reason ..................................... 65

III. Zen and Contemplation ....................................... 96

IV. Contemplation and Humanism .................................. 134

V. Practical Implication of Contemplation for Education ................................................................. 170

VI. Toward Bringing Contemplation into the Curriculum ................................................................. 213

VII. Summary and Conclusions .................................... 227

**Bibliography** ................................................... 237
INTRODUCTION

The thesis of this dissertation is that education needs contemplation for its fulfillment. The proof offered is the education, life and writings of Thomas Merton (1915-1968), the well-known Trappist monk.

Contemplation is taken to include its widest definition, the simple intuition of the truth, up to its apex when the mind is allowed to enjoy a supernatural experience of God as He is in Himself. Contemplation is essentially intuitive. It is contrasted with the power of the mind for discursive, logical thought. Intuition is the simple vision that truth offers itself to the mind like a landscape to the eye. The knowing of the mind is both these things in one. Discursive thought is companion to the contemplative vision of the mind. The former is active and the latter passive, or receptive. The position taken in the thesis is that modern education needs to be reminded how essential contemplation is to the knowing of the mind.

The first chapter treats of the education of Thomas Merton, the making of a Christian humanist. The chapter relies mainly on The Seven Storey Mountain, a spiritual autobiography published in 1948, and on Merton's master thesis in English.
Literature at Columbia University in 1939, titled "Nature and Art in William Blake." Merton was blessed with remarkable recall of events, being most sensitive to them and the people who influenced his life. His true sense of art, which Merton gained from his father, holding that it must lead to contemplation, proved to be an avenue of grace to Merton while at Columbia. From feelings of near-despair, Merton progressed to the point of seeking to become a contemplative in the strictest order in the Catholic Church. In so far as they lend understanding to the education of Merton there are references to other works of Merton in the chapter. These include *Contemplative Prayer* (1969), *Seeds of Contemplation* (1949), *Seeds of Destruction* (1964), *The New Man* (1961), *The Sign of Jonas* (1953), and *Figures For an Apocalypse* (1947). Of other works cited Jacques Maritain's *Art and Scholasticism* (1947) is the most important. Merton used it to clarify some of his ideas for his master thesis on William Blake. Later, Maritain was to become a life-long friend of Merton's.

In his *The Ascent To Truth* (1951), Merton seeks to show contemplation as the act of a reasonable man. Relying mainly on this work of Merton, the second chapter seeks to show contemplation as the proper goal of any man who would live fully. Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas are quoted to support this claim. So as to give understanding to Merton's strongly stated commentary on the position of St. Thomas Aquinas that
teaching like preaching must flow from contemplation, it
seemed suitable to explain the purpose and the place of the
Trappists in the long history of Western monasticism. Three
works of Merton, *Cistercian Contemplatives* (1948), *The Waters
of Siloe* (1949), and *The Silent Life* (1957), offered suffi-
cient matter for this purpose. Other works of Merton's
cited to support the claim of the chapter were *No Man Is An
Island* (1955), *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966),
*Raids On The Unspeakable* (1960), *Emblems of a Season of Fury*
(1963), plus references made from some of the works mentioned
that pertained to the first chapter.

Even in his days at Columbia University, Merton had shown
an interest in the contemplatives of the Eastern World. In
the last decade of his life, Merton became a fervent student
of Zen. The third chapter relying primarily on Merton's
understanding of Zen seeks to show its valuable insights to
anyone who would be a contemplative. Happily joined to this
endeavor is an appreciation of the culture of the East.

A short history of Zen is taken from four works. First,
*A History of Zen Buddhism* (1963) by the Jesuit Father,
Heinrich Dumolin, *Zen Catholicism* (1963) by the Benedictine,
Dom Aelred Graham, and two works of Merton's *The Way of Chuang
Tzu* (1965), and *Mystics and Zen Masters* (1967). In *Zen and the
Birds of Appetite* (1968), Merton offered his keenest obser-
vations of Zén. The most valuable being that Zen, with its
vigilance not ever to mar experience with verbiage, can awaken Western education to its overemphasis on discursive thought to the neglect of the intuitive. To help clarify the understanding of this point, the work of the gifted German scholar, Josef Pieper, *Leisure, The Basis of Culture* (1963) is employed. While not claiming Mahatma Gandhi as a Zen-master, Merton felt that the great Indian leader had through his holy life arrived at the Zen notion of discovering the true self. Merton held that this was what made him so radically different from the world leaders of his time. The observation on Gandhi is pertinent to the chapter because Merton's speaking out strongly on racism and violence corresponds with his study of Zen. Nihilism must never again be lightly leveled at Eastern thought.

In his *Disputed Questions* (1960) Merton stated that contemplative life would be unthinkable if it lacked the perspective of Christian humanism. By this is meant a humanism that is enhanced by accepting Christ as God and man. H.J. Blackham in his *Humanism* (1968) holds by contrast a full-blown humanism would be weakened by a belief in God and a life beyond this one. Such is the position of Irving Babbitt and Sir Julian Huxley. The former in the first three decades of the century led the fight to return higher education to classical humanism. Huxley, prominent in the ranks of Humanists for the last three decades, in his *Evolutionary Humanism*, considers the role of
man as he steps into the space age.

Merton would be in agreement with many of the observations of these two gifted men. Babbitt and Huxley leave no doubt that they are contemplative in so far as they are intuitive. Each is a scholar honest enough to attempt to give his fellow men an answer to the mystery that each must face in the loneliness of his own death.

Since such an attempt lends itself to a speculation that could easily lead to contemplation, the fourth chapter contrasts the position of Babbitt and Huxley to that of Merton. It is paradoxical that some of the enlightening observations of Babbitt and Huxley could help a Christian humanist in his seeking to enjoy a supernatural experience of God as He is in Himself. It is Merton's position (and all believers), that one must believe that he can come to this vision of God, if he is ever to come to it.

The thought of Irving Babbitt was taken from his works, The New Laokoon, Democracy and Leadership, and Rousseau and Romanticism (1919), the latter being the most important of the three. Sir Julian Huxley was able to clearly present his position in The Humanist Frame (1961) of which he was the editor and principal contributor. Babbitt's life-long friend, Paul Elmer More, offered valuable insight toward the understanding of Babbitt in his On Being Human (1936). Besides the before mentioned Disputed Questions (1960), other works

In the fifth chapter the thought of Merton is brought more directly into the field of Education by relating it to two prominent educators, Carl Rogers and Van Cleve Morris.

Rogers in his *Freedom to Learn* (1969) held that learning could be facilitated by a healthy psychological climate amongst students, faculty, and administrators. Teachers should be free to be what they are before their students. Anger should not be suppressed. The cause of it should be explained to their students. This will allow the students to respect and deal openly with their own feelings. Rogers supported his claim scientifically. Merton held contemplation to be a sine qua non for one to avoid surrendering his personality to a faceless society. Contemplation, then, helping a person to be what he truly is, will facilitate the relationship that Rogers wants every learning situation to be blessed with.

Van Cleve Morris fits well the thought of Merton that non-religious existentialists are unconsciously oriented toward a religious view of life, in so far as they clear away the trivia and dare men to face the important questions of life.
Van Cleve Morris dwells on the most important of all—death. In his *Existentialism in Education* (1966), Morris offers both an educational theory and a pedagogy so that a youth might come to face his demise (everlasting as it seems to be), and still be a responsible person. The thought of Morris offers very much for concurrence with that of Merton. The final great difference between them is Merton’s hope of living after death. Add that to the curriculum proposed by Morris, and contemplation is, indeed, for education.

The sixth chapter proposes two possible ways of placing contemplation in the curriculum. The first being a graduate course in the field of education toward showing the value of contemplation to education. It would be based on some selected works of Merton. For a term paper each student would be required to write a history of his education, pointing out in it experiences that were of lasting significance to him. Its end being to awaken a reciprocal flow between education and contemplation.

The second proposal comes from the writer’s present experience in seminary education. The *Program of Priestly Formation* (1971) by the American Bishops, with its directives derived from the *Decree on Priestly Formation* from Vatican II, leaves no doubt that it wants College Seminaries to form Christian humanists. In the Spring Semester, 1972, this writer was joined with three other faculty members working...
with the dean of studies to have college sophomores integrate their studies in philosophy, history, literature, and art. The same students live a scheduled seminary life with definite times set aside for meditation. Suggestions were made whereby a dean of studies or a dean of men might come forth with a thesis in the field of education that would more clearly delineate the relation between contemplation and seminary studies.

The decrees of the American Bishops have been approved for a period of five years by the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education in the name of the Holy See. They are not to be considered as codified for many decades. Even the decrees themselves invite originality in their adaptation. The fresh groundbreaking in seminary education seems to offer many opportunities for dissertations in the field of Education.
CHAPTER I

THE EDUCATION OF THOMAS MERTON: THE

MAKING OF A CHRISTIAN HUMANIST

On December 10th, 1968, Father Thomas Merton O.C.S.O. while attending a meeting of monastic leaders in Bangkok, Thailand was killed when he accidentally touched a faulty wire of a fan. Twenty-seven years before to the very day Merton had walked through the gate of the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani situated in the lovely hills of Kentucky not too far from the old city of Bardstown. It was here, where Father Merton had written his books and poetry to lead modern man to God, that his final remains were brought back to be buried in the cemetery of the Abbey. ¹

Is there some special significance in Merton being called to his final reward in a great city of the East halfway around the world from his Abbey? Bangkok is a city filled with magnificent statues of Buddha. In his last years Merton had shown a great interest in Zen, a way of contemplation

common to the East. Merton felt that a Christian contemplative could be helped toward seeking God by a knowledge of Zen. Why Merton died in Bangkok remains a mystery known only to God. But his death there tends to give a deeper meaning to what Merton wrote on the last page of his spiritual biography in 1947. Giving thought to what he felt God was saying to him at that time Merton wrote the following about his death.

Do not ask when it will be or where it will be:
On a mountain or in a prison, in a desert or in
a concentration camp or in a hospital or in Geth-
semeni. It does not matter. So do not ask me,
because I am not going to tell you.

The education of Thomas Merton is not without mystery. Looked at on the surface, the places, time, and manner of his education would not seem to lend support to his becoming a Catholic, and then at the age of twenty-six to seek admittance to the strictest order of the Catholic Church. But that it did must be of interest to any educator, whether he believes in God or not.

Merton was born of artistic parents in France on January 31st, 1915. His father Owen Merton was a native of New Zealand and his mother was an American whose parents lived in Douglaston, a Long Island suburb of the City of New York. The young family was living there when Merton's mother died in

---

1921. Merton's younger brother John Paul had been born in 1918. From his father Merton inherited his way of looking at things and from his mother some of her dissatisfaction with the conditions of the world. \(^1\) These two factors are clearly seen as having come to a dynamic union with the publication of Merton's *Disputed Questions* in 1960. From then until his death he would cry out against the evils of modern society.

Merton's introduction to formal education was along the lines of the Progressives. When he was five his mother, always wanting perfection in her sons, sent away to Baltimore for a set of books and charts that she hoped would quickly lead Merton into the world of letters. They did. Merton loved his geography book best and used the maps, as vehicles for his imagination, that took him on long sea journeys. In keeping with this adventuresome spirit, Merton's second favorite book was a collection of stories about the heroes of Ancient Greece, which his father would often read to him. \(^2\)

Merton's mother wanted him to be independent, in no way cut to a common bourgeois pattern. Merton felt that if his education had continued in this manner that he would have grown up to become a polite, intelligent skeptic. As it was,

---

\(^1\) *Ibid.*, pp. 3-12.

recalling the effect on him of this first touch of a planned curriculum, Merton wrote:

I unconsciously built up the vague fragments of a religion and of a philosophy, which remained hidden and implicit in my acts, and which, in due time, were to assert themselves in a deep and all-embracing attachment to my own judgement and my own free will and a constant turning away from subjection, towards the freedom of my own ever-changing horizons.¹

As an infant Merton had been baptized into the Church of England, but his church going was never regular. His mother sometimes worshiped as a Quaker. His father was religious minded but not in a formal way. Merton remembered going to the old Zion Episcopal Church in Douglaston, New York and admiring a large anchor in one of the stain glass windows. But instead of being a symbol of hope, it furnished Merton with thoughts of travel and all kinds of possibilities of heroism. Merton became convinced that much human misery could have been spared him if he had some formal religious instruction at this time. It seemed strange to Merton that his parents who were scrupulous about keeping his mind uncontaminated by mediocrity, ugliness and sham should not have given him what they had received in their youth. He felt that his mother had strong views on the subject, considering any organized religion below the standard of intellectual per-

¹Ibid., p. 11.
fection that she would demand of her children.¹

Merton went to the local grammar school and had advanced to the second grade when his father took him to Bermuda. At this time Owen Merton was struggling to remain true to the artistic gift God had given him. Before his death in 1930 he would be recognized as an original painter. His father came to have the most influence on Merton. Merton's own struggle toward an integrity in his own life in certain ways paralleled that of his father. It was his father who first introduced Merton to the English poet William Blake, who in the latter eighteenth and early nineteenth century struggled to maintain his own idea of art from being swallowed up by the grossness he found in the false naturalists, such as Joshua Reynolds. We will see how Merton's master's thesis at Columbia University in 1939 enabled him to bring order and form into his personal life.²

In Bermuda Merton had his first contact with an English school. Here he was punished for his inability to deal with the principles of multiplication and long division. His father was reluctant to leave his son at the boarding house where the conversation was less than edifying. So Merton was allowed to live and be with his father when he went out to

---

¹Ibid., pp. 9-12.
²Ibid., pp. 85-86
paint landscapes. Merton was struck with the beauty of the sea and sun and sky. One day he took it in his head to worship one of the clouds whose shape struck his fancy. For a young boy with no spiritual direction to guide him it seemed a proper enough instinct.¹ Later in life when a young monk Merton would write the following about the saints:

Do you think that their love of God was incompatible with hatred for things that reflected Him and spoke of Him on every side? . . . It was because the saints were absorbed in God that they were capable of seeing and appreciating created things.²

Some educators might question the value of Merton missing the hard duty of early mathematics. Later at Oakham, an English preparatory school, the head master saw Merton to be very weak in mathematics and strong in verbal skills and allowed him to specialize in French and Latin.³ Among other things mathematics prepares the mind for philosophical thought.⁴ Despite his deficiency in mathematics, Merton proved himself a budding philosopher at Columbia, drawing

¹Ibid., pp. 18-19.


³Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, p. 74.

the praise of Dan Walsh who came there twice a week to lecture on St. Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus. Walsh, a true Catholic philosopher, gave the schools and individual philosophers as complementing and reinforcing one another. So it was by way of a compliment when he told Merton that he was more "Augustinian" than "Thomistic." By this he meant that the bent of Merton's mind was not so much intellectual, dialectical, and speculative after the manner of the Thomists, as it was spiritual, mystical, voluntaristic, and practical in the way of a Duns Scotus or a St. Augustine.¹

After deciding to become a priest, Merton sought the advice of Walsh as to what religious Order he might join. He suggested a few to Merton, but was enthusiastic about the Trappists. Walsh had made a retreat at Gethsemani and been impressed with the asceticism and prayer-life of the monks there. The more Merton heard about the Trappists, the more he felt he could not live such a life.²

In 1923 after his father completed his drawings in Bermuda, he brought Merton to live with his grandparents in Douglaston, New York, while he went to France to paint for the next two years. Merton never mentioned the formal names of any of his

¹Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, pp. 219-21.
²Ibid., pp. 262-63.
relatives, but next to his father his mother's parents were closest to him. They were good Protestants, though Merton never knew what denomination they claimed if any. But from his talkative grandfather, Merton developed a vague fear of anything Catholic. It was something to be despised along with Tammany Hall.\(^1\)

Merton's grandfather was connected with the then budding movie industry. Some of the scenes were shot on Long Island. Merton later showed a distaste for the cinema but he seemed to be amused with the antics of W.C. Fields who was called upon to fall down a flight of stairs more than once for the making of a comedy scene. His grandparents took Merton and his younger brother out to Hollywood in 1923. Merton could not understand the great thrill his grandparents had in visiting with Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford then America's ideal couple. Later he remembered the sadness in their home when this seemingly model couple were divorced. More important to Merton was belonging to a gang that built their own clubhouse. Later they issued a few verbal threats to a Polish gang a few blocks away. The challenge was accepted but Merton and his friends wisely chose discretion over valor. John Paul who had been rejected by Merton and his friends as too small for their gang walked right through the hostile crowd gathered outside

\(^1\) Ibid., pp. 20-25.
the house with no harm. Merton never forgot that and ever after held his younger brother in great esteem.¹

In the summer of 1925 Merton's father returned to New York and told him to prepare to depart for France. It was on the feast of St. Louis, August 25th, the patron of France, that Merton sailed away from a life that he had grown to love more than any he had known before. He resented the very name of France.² Later when he was given the religious name of Louis in an abbey steeped in French Cistercian traditions, he considered this day of heartbreak as a great blessing of God.³

The beauty of France soon healed the wounds of the young pilgrim. In time Merton became aware of a decadence in French society, but it never obscured the harmony of perfection that the French brought to everything from bridge building to contemplation. His own artistic soul found delight everywhere. Merton wrote:

How does it happen that even today a couple of ordinary French stone masons, or a carpenter and his apprentice, can put up a dovecote or a barn that has more architectural perfection than the

---

¹Ibid., pp. 21-26.
²Ibid., pp. 28-29.
³Ibid., p. 384.
piles of eclectic stupidity that grows up at a
cost of hundreds of thousands of dollars on the
campuses of American universities.\footnote{Ibid., p. 30.}

Merton's father chose the ancient city of St. Anton in
southern France as his dwelling place. Situated in the midst
of beautiful hills the town was so constructed that homes,
shops, and streets were united about the old church and its
spire reaching heavenward. Merton was struck with this
arrangement that lead one, even in spite of oneself, "to be
at least a virtual contemplative."\footnote{Ibid., p. 37.}

At Columbia University Merton would see architecture as
playing a strong influence in the life of William Blake. As
a young would-be artist, Blake was sent by his master, James
Baisire, to sketch the Gothic architecture of Westminster
Abbey. Blake was especially taken with the statues around
the tomb of St. Edward the Confessor. Merton held that "Blake
so understood and loved the Gothic that he came to understand
the Christian ideals underlying Gothic art."\footnote{Thomas Merton, "Nature and Art in William Blake" (unpublished Master's thesis, Department of English and Comparative Literature, Faculty of Philosophy, Columbia University, 1939), p. 6.} France would
offer Merton the same gift and he drankly deeply of it.

When Merton was near his twelfth year his father sent him
to the Lycee at Montauban, the French secondary school that
dates back to the school reforms introduced by Napoleon. The
Emperor had instilled a military spirit with a stress on mathe-
matics and science but not with any neglect of the classics.
Napoleon had ordered the teaching of the precepts of the Cath-
olic religion in the French schools. In part this was aimed
to strengthen the moral fiber of the youth so that they would
be better men to serve the state. The Church was not strong
in France when the Lycee was established.¹

When young Merton went to board at Montauban in the Fall
of 1926, he found the life terribly out of joint with the
France of old that he would love all his life. Merton owned
himself to be as much of a little animal as his classmates but
felt that the French were better at it. Young men, some just
on the verge of puberty, thrown together in a boarding school
are sometimes given over to small barbarisms. Thomas noticed
that outside the Lycee the students were mild and peacable but
living together changed them into a young wolf pack, with ob-

¹Adolphe E. Meyer, An Educational History of the Western
scenities and blasphemies abounding.¹

Merton struggled to fit the life he met there with his then budding, though obscure and inchoate, ideal of true French greatness in art and all the branches of study. For Merton the answer lay in the old axiom corruptio optimi pessima. Evil is a defect of good, so the greatest evil is where the highest good has been corrupted. The words of Merton need to be quoted at length:

The most shocking thing about France is the corruption of French spirituality into flippancy and cynicism; of French intelligence into sophistry; of French dignity into petty vanity and theatrical self-display; of French clarity into a disgusting fleshy concupiscence, and of French faith into sentimentality or puerile atheism. There was all this in the Lycee Ingres, at Montauban.²

On Sunday mornings a Protestant minister came in for religious instruction while some of the Catholics were marched off to hear Mass at the Cathedral. Merton was grateful for even this meager religious instruction but felt that it needed to be joined to something sacramental for it to be of any lasting value. Merton felt the need to worship God. He was struck with the neglected Catholic chapel on the Lycee grounds. It was falling into ruins and the glass was out of most of the windows. Nobody ever saw the inside of it. Merton learned

¹Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, pp. 48-50.
²Ibid., p. 51.
in miniature the history of the French way of life that had not managed to adjust its old values with the French Revolution and the aftermath played out in the nineteenth century.¹

Nearby was a college run by the Marist Fathers. The boys there were of the same age as Merton and his companions. Knowing some of them Merton found their true piety a welcome contrast to the vulgarity of his daily companions. Merton deplored the reasoning of Catholics who failed to see the value of strong religious and moral training at no great cost to themselves, for the students of the Lycee were usually from families of some means.²

The Lycee was not without a significant contribution to the education of Merton, while there he wrote a short novel—in French.³ It was in a novel written after the breakout of World War II that Merton showed concern for his former companions at the Lyceu. Entitled My Argument With The Gestapo, it was not offered to a publisher until a few months before Merton's death. Of the books Merton had written before becoming a Trappist this was one he would not abandon. Naomi Burton had read the novel in 1941 but could not convince the publishing world of its value. She was to become Merton's agent, helping

¹Ibid., p. 53.
²Ibid., pp. 50-51.
³Ibid., p. 52.
him to get *The Seven Storey Mountain* published. During the years Merton would occasionally refer to the novel mentioned, hoping that it would someday be published. In relating all this in a forward to the novel, Miss Burton thought that Merton's criticism of both England and France in 1941 had shied away any possible interested publisher. By 1968 Merton's remarks were objectively acceptable, and the novel was published with only slight changes. Merton contrasted his companions out in the gravel yards of the LyCEE taunting one another and pulling each other's ears, with their now being confined to German prison camps

... with their hands in their pockets, no longer talking, no longer sticking out their heads and their chins to one another with their clanging rhetoric. ... There was no more movement, no more argument, no more instability. Finished. ... It was as bad as being dead, but less comprehensible.

When Merton was fourteen his father suddenly appeared at the Lycée in May of 1928 and told him that he was going to England. Merton could not contain his joy at leaving the Lycée. But as the train sped him and his father toward the Channel, Merton began to have second thoughts, and he felt his heart tighten at leaving the beauty of the thirteenth century that still lingered in France despite the evils of

---

the time that so warred against it.\textsuperscript{1} The young Merton was sharing the sentiments of Henry Adams who felt a disharmony between the latter nineteenth century and the thirteenth century. Adams had visited the World Fairs of Chicago in 1893 and again in St. Louis in 1904. He was struck with the mysterious strength of the dynamos on display there, but could not fit them comfortably into his life pattern. He was glad later to return to France where he could yield himself up to the "mental and physical energy which had built up these World Fairs of the thirteenth century that turned Chicago and St. Louis pale."\textsuperscript{2} This similarity in the education of Merton and Adams is rather strangely contrasted with the fact that Merton found a personal integrity, finally, in America—based however in good part on the wisdom of the thirteenth century. Adams who wrote the last page of the book about his education while in Paris never quite convinces his reader that what he loved of the past had given dynamic purpose to his final years. Indeed he felt that the multiplicity of the early twentieth century was a disintegration from the unity of the thirteenth.\textsuperscript{3}

\textsuperscript{1}Merton, \textit{The Seven Storey Mountain}, p. 60.


Merton will in his last years deplore the evils of our time but always with hope of Christianity being able to overcome them. It is important for educators to see the kindred feelings of Henry Adams and Thomas Merton for the beauty of an age that still speaks to modern man.

Merton found love and security in the home of his father's Uncle Ben and Aunt Maud, an elderly couple but still with great interest in life. (Merton seemed reluctant to give the last names of his relatives.) Aunt Maud delighted in outfitting him for his new school called Ripley Court. Here Merton met Latin for the first time. Despite the humiliation of starting this subject in the lowest class he found Ripley a happy and pleasant place after the French Lycee. On Sundays the students went off to the village church. Merton felt that he acquired a little natural faith here at a time when he most needed it. But Merton began to see the Church of England as a religion that depended for its existence upon the solidarity and conservatism of the English ruling class. But as soon as Merton left this peaceful atmosphere, after he had gained enough knowledge in Latin, his piety, even though sincere, would soon be dissipated. Uncle Ben was a retired headmaster and would have liked Merton to have gone to Winchester which ranked with Harrow as one of the big schools. But Merton was not considered up to the scholarship examinations. Instead he
was sent to a respectable school in the Midlands called Oakham.¹

Off and on Merton had been with his father when he was out on his painting sojourns. In the Easter Vacation of 1929 from Ripley he joined his father then painting pictures of the famous Cathedral of Canterbury. He loved to watch his father work and from the quiet conversations they often had together, both in France and England, Merton felt he gained his sense of religion that finally would so strongly assert itself in his own life. Merton considered his father greatly akin to Leon Bloy in his hatred of materialism and of false spirituality. But his vocation as a lay-contemplative failed to develop because he never got the Sacraments. It was the following June that Merton's father was first taken abed with the brain tumor that would claim his life within two years. Seeing him this way Merton sensed the void that was already coming into his life.²

F.C. Doherty the young headmaster at Oakham was quick to recognize that Merton would eventually be able to pass the Higher Certificate but that his weakness in mathematics would cause difficulty with the School Certificate. But the former meant more anyway for it would prepare Merton for entry into Cambridge. Doherty had a great love of Plato but failed to

¹ Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, pp. 61-66.
² Ibid., pp. 55 and 68.
instill an appreciation of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful of Plato into Merton. Doherty allowed Merton to follow his own liking for Modern Languages and Literature. This meant that he spent a lot of time in the library by himself. The courses at Oakham were more along the classical lines. Merton later speculated why he had such a dislike for Plato and so too of Socrates and his friends. He did not have at this time any strong intellectual reason for his dislike of these philosophers, though he felt he had a congenital distaste for philosophical idealism. Later at Columbia, as was mentioned earlier, Dan Walsh would tell Merton that he was more Augustinian than Thomistic. This might seem to lend support to the fact that Merton would have some kindred feeling for Plato, or at least that he would be more at home with him than with Aristotle. But, of course, this would be too simple an approach to a person as complex as Merton. It was the artist in Merton that reacted against Plato's reduction of all reality to the level of pure abstraction. Concrete, individual substances were not allowed any essential reality of their own, being only shadows of some remote, universal ideal essence. So here Merton is far more Aristotelian than Platonist.

---

1 Ibid., pp. 74-75.
2 Ibid., p. 75.
This dislike of Plato is seen again in Merton's master's thesis concerning William Blake. Merton held that Plato was obsessed with the search of ultimate truth. Since art copied the world's deceptive beauty, then the philosopher, as Plato thought, could not go to art for his information. Blake spent his best years trying to convince his contemporaries that the imitation of natural objects was not the end of the artist. Further the mere imitation of nature was a form of idolatry. For Blake the true artist uses nature to go beyond it, finally, to contemplate God.¹ This study of Blake was to be of great importance in Merton's later life. It should be stressed that Merton clung tenaciously to what he had learned from his father concerning the true artist's approach to reality. Merton showed this same determination against this Platonic idea in a book published after his death. He wrote:

Very often, the inertia and repugnance which characterize the so-called 'spiritual life' of many Christians could perhaps be cured by a simple respect for the concrete realities of every-day life. . . . A false supernaturalism which imagines that 'the supernatural' is a kind of Platonic realm of abstract essences totally apart from, and opposed to, the concrete world of nature, offers no real support to a genuine life of meditation and prayer. . . . Without such roots, it can produce nothing but the ashen fruits of disgust, acedia.²

This is a helpful thought toward understanding Merton's ideas of contemplation, which never failed in the reverence due all being. The common definition of acedia as sloth is inadequate, for a man can be busy about many things and still be guilty of this vice. If he is urged to activity by a restlessness brought on by a refusal to give the consent of his will to his own being, then he is not at one with himself; leisure will pass him by. In more traditional teaching idleness is not mere non-working, but rather the lack of that deep-seated calm which makes leisure possible. Our society lacking this understanding allows a troubled activist to hide his inner turmoil and at the same time be praised as a virtuous worker; the calm leisurely man is open to the charge of idleness. It is the former that St. Thomas accused of acedia, seeing this vice as causing violations of the Third Commandment. Keeping the Sabbath holy can lead us back to the leisurely peace that Adam and Eve had with God before the Fall, back to contemplation.¹

At Oakham Merton met the Cogito ergo sum of Descartes, and after a first superficial acceptance of it came to reject it as totally as he had Plato's idealism. Merton considered a philosophy limited to Descartes' one self-evident principle as lacking in an adequate foundation. He could not accept

Descartes' second step that God must exist because Descartes had a clear idea of Him. Again Merton was too much the son of his artistic father not to see that there were much greater proofs for the existence of God than subjective experience.¹

In his last years Merton became a student of Zen. In the third chapter his understanding of Zen will be related to contemplation. Here it can be mentioned that Merton felt Zen would be a great help toward ridding modern man of his Cartesian cogito. In trying to reach God as object by starting from the thinking self, Cartesian thought led man inevitably to the so called "death of God." But in Zen (as with Christian mysticism) the self aware subject is not something final or absolute. Its existence has meaning because it does not become centered on itself as ultimate.² Merton's reaction to Plato and Descartes at Oakham will carry through into his writings when a Trappist monk. But first many storms would have to be weathered by our young student; these will leave their bruises.

As befits a young man turned fifteen, Merton, in 1930, began to assert his independence. Unfortunately, various events coalesced to give his individuality an unhealthy

¹Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, pp. 75-76.
egotistical bent. That summer his grandparents and his brother John Paul came to England. Merton's grandfather, aware of the impending death of his son-in-law, took him aside and told him that he need not have any financial worries. The Depression had hurt the old man's fortune but there was more than enough money to assure the education of the Merton boys. His grandfather wanted Merton to travel. In the following three years Merton visited France, Germany, Italy and came to America in the summer before entering Cambridge in 1933. The travel was beneficial to the education of Merton, but at the same time he was harmed by a lack of proper guidance.¹

That same summer, 1930, Merton was sent to the home of his godfather, an old friend of his father, and now a successful doctor. The doctor's wife was French, the daughter of a Calvinist patriarch of some influence. Merton did not identify them by name. A sophisticated couple, living in one of the better apartments in London, they generously opened their style of life to Merton. He was served breakfast in bed by a French maid, and then he might wander about the store on Regent Street where he listened to, and bought, the records of Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong.²

This couple was sincerely concerned for Merton's future hoping he would go into the English diplomatic service. Until

¹Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, pp. 76-77.
²Ibid., p. 78.
the time Merton went to Cambridge, they exerted the most influence on him. He enjoyed talking to them about modern novelists, and the current movies, whether from Hollywood, France, or even Russia. It was from them that Merton first came to know the baneful influences of the pages of D.H. Lawrence.

Merton's reflections on his relations with them offers valuable advice to parents and teachers. He wrote:

It was an unwritten law, and you had to be very smart and keenly attuned to their psychology to get it; but there it was, a strict moral law, which never expressed any open hatred of evil.

... The big difficulty and my failure was that I did not see, for instance, that their interest in D.H. Lawrence as art was, in some subtle way, disconnected from any endorsement of his ideas how a man ought to live. Or rather, the distinction was more subtle still: and it was between their interest in and amusement at those ideas, and the fact, which they took for granted that it was rather vulgar to practice them the way Lawrence did. This was a distinction which I did not grasp until it was too late.¹

The thought of Irving Babbitt, a humanist prominent in America in the early decades of this century, aids in understanding what the young Merton lacked in being able to read Lawrence with no moral harm to himself. In seeking to free man from oscillating between romantic naturalism and scientific naturalism, Babbitt offered him the strength to be gained from

¹Ibid., pp. 79-80.
the steadying influences of the Classics. In a later chapter the humanism of Merton will be compared to that of Babbitt's. Here Babbitt's notion of what he called the frein vital, that is, the will to refrain from the movement of impulse, as opposed to the elan vital, gives an added understanding of what Merton's godfather and his wife possessed.\(^1\) As a student at Columbia, Merton would slowly gain an asceticism from the study of literature and philosophy. But how foolish to expect restraint in a youth just feeling the first full surge of his budding manhood when exposed to the erotic descriptions of a gifted novelist.

In the summer of 1930 Merton visited his father frequently, then confined to a London hospital. He was deeply saddened with his father's helplessness, but Merton gained a deeper appreciation of his spirit. His father was using his still gifted hands to draw images of little Byzantine looking saints.\(^2\)

Merton spent a good part of his Christmas holidays in Strasbourg so as to improve his German and French. Here he was impressed by the holiness of a Protestant minister, a Professor Hering, who taught theology. He went to a Lutheran


\(^2\)Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, pp. 81-83.
Church in Strasbourg and sat through a long Lutheran sermon. But Merton admits to being more interested in Josephine Baker, a Negro singer from St. Louis, who came to town and sang the blues and jazz songs in one of the local theaters. In January, 1931, on his way back to Oakham, Merton visited his father just before his death. His guardian made the funeral arrangements. While they were carried out with prayerful dignity, Merton had to watch his father's coffin be rolled through the sliding doors at the crematory. His mother's last remains had been disposed of in the same way but Merton had been too young then to attend the services. He was sad for a few months but when this wore away he found himself stripped of anything that might impede the movement of his self will. What small trace of religion he had was soon squeezed out of him. It would take five to six years for Merton to awaken to his captivity to sin.¹

When Merton was ten his father had tried to explain to him the artistic importance of William Blake. He was too literal minded at this age and knowing that tigers did not burn at night in the forest he was not open to Blake.²

William Blake was born in London in 1757 and died in 1827.

¹Ibid., pp. 83-85.
²Ibid., pp. 85-86.
A poet and an illustrator, Blake lived a poor and obscure life partly because of his open opposition to the stilted classical manner of the Royal Academy. In fact his art was too adventurous and unconventional to be easily accepted in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Not until the twentieth century, when his remarkable modernity and his imaginative force, both as poet and artist, were recognized, was he fully accepted.

Merton was sixteen when he rediscovered Blake. The poet's words pleased him but puzzled him. Even though Blake is ranked as a Romantic poet, Merton found his thought to be beyond any facile classification. Merton found him detesting Voltaire and Rousseau and all they stood for. He abominated all materialistic deism and the agnosticism of the nineteenth century. On the other hand, Blake spoke out against the priests in black gowns that would bind his desires and joys in briars. Here Merton understood that Blake was reacting against false piety and religiosity. There was much in Blake he found confusing. Not to all minds seeking a deeper faith in God did Merton recommend Blake. For him the intellectual challenge of Blake

---


would in a few years (in his studies at Columbia) be instrumental in leading him to the Catholic faith.\(^1\)

In the summer of 1931 Merton sailed for New York and managed on the voyage to fall in love with a woman twice his age. His frustration at this was assuaged by the readings of the novels of Lawrence, Aldous Huxley and others like them all that summer in the old home at Douglaston. On the trip back to England he drank at the bar, argued for Communism which he read about only superficially, and strutted about in his new gangster-type suit with its padded shoulders. His grandparents were indulgent and bought Merton what he wanted. They truly loved him, though, and their deaths would leave a void in his life during his Columbia days. Arriving back at Oakham in the fall of 1931 Merton thought he was the only one who understood life as it was. Fortunately, Doherty the headmaster and his faculty were used to dealing with young snobs.\(^2\)

During the Easter vacation Merton went off for a hiking holiday in Germany. Walking down a quiet road in the Rhine Valley near Koblenz he was suddenly forced to jump into a ditch to avoid being hit by a car coming right at him. It was filled with young Nazis who filled the air with leaflets telling him to vote for Hitler that very day. When the quiet of the

\(^1\)Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, pp. 87-88.

\(^2\)Ibid., pp. 88-94.
country had swallowed their angry voices Merton felt that it was not the same road as before. It was a road on which seven men had expressed their desire to kill him.¹

Merton was trying to fathom Spinoza and read him a bit while in Germany but finally went back to his novels. On returning to Oakham he was terribly sick with blood poisoning from a blister on his toe gained from his hike in Germany. In reflecting upon this Merton considered that death at this time would have meant the loss of his soul. His words are revealing:

Death is something you see very clearly with eyes in the center of your heart: eyes that see not by reacting to light, but by reacting to a kind of chill within the marrow of your own life. . . . What a tremendous mercy it was that death did not take me.²

The headmaster gave Merton a copy of the poems of Gerald Manley Hopkins while he was recuperating. He accepted Hopkins with reservations and never altogether forgot him. Later in the very act of reading about Hopkins writing to Cardinal Newman about joining the Catholic Church, Merton felt the urge to seek out the priests in a church near Columbia.³ Merton was


² Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, pp. 96-97.

³ Ibid., p. 215.
intending to write his doctoral dissertation upon the works of the Jesuit Hopkins.¹

That summer of 1932 Merton passed the higher certificate with flying colors. The following December Merton passed the scholarship examinations for entrance to Cambridge. It was the following September that Merton would enter Clare College.²

In January of 1933 Merton was traveling through France and Italy and eventually came to Rome. He had spent a week there once before on a holiday but now the Eternal City was to make a lasting impression on the eighteen year old Merton. At first he visited the ruins of Rome but after a week he found himself caught up with the art in Rome's many churches, many being those that the ordinary tourist never visited. As mentioned before, William Blake contributed by his studies and sketchings of Westminster and its various statues to his own sense of true art. And Merton's father had spent some of his last active days painting around the famous Cathedral of Canterbury. In Rome Merton awakened to a deeper appreciation of the gift of the true artist that he received from his father and would find that he shared with William Blake. He felt

¹Ibid., p. 235.
²Ibid., pp. 102-103.
that the art he discovered in church after church, so full of spiritual vitality, was too sacred to be compared to the vapid, boring, semi-pornographic statuary of the Empire.¹

But Merton was not taken with Michelangelo's works nor with anything heavy with baroque melodrama. When he began reading the Gospels to seek a better understanding of what he found implied in the works of the earlier artists, Merton found himself wanting to pray. One of his favorite shrines was that of St. Peter in Chains which he liked in spite of Michelangelo's Moses. He was glad that it could not speak.² This same dislike for Michelangelo was expressed in a letter Merton wrote to a Rabbi in the early 1960's. He felt that the Christ in the Last Judgment of Michelangelo "whipping sinners with his great Greek muscles" was a kind of Prometheus.³ Just prior to this letter Merton had written in his The New Man that the Promethean instinct was in keeping with modern man's weakness. Prometheus stole fire from the gods and then was punished for it. Not being able to achieve a real victory, he tried to make a victory out of defeat and bring glory from despair. Merton held

¹Ibid., pp. 103-108.
²Ibid., pp. 108-110.
that this instinct was as deep as man's weakness, that is, almost infinite. In a later chapter Merton's view on the malaise of the twentieth century man will be considered at length. Here it should be noted that Merton felt at ease with the earlier Christian art that made itself subservient "to higher ends, architectural, liturgical, and spiritual." Merton felt this to be especially so of the Byzantine mosaics.

In his study of Blake at Columbia Merton would write that it "is most important for the would-be artist...to possess an infallible critical judgment." Admirers of Michelangelo might hold that Merton lacked this gift, but the judgment he showed at this time was to help him spiritually all through his life.

Two incidents give evidence of a spiritual awakening during this visit to Rome. One night he was reading D.H. Lawrence's poems about the Four Evangelists. Suddenly struck with Lawrence's falseness and futility, which seemed so much a lie to what he had experienced through his reading of the Gospels inspired by the mosaics he had admired, he threw down the book in disgust. A few nights later Merton was alone in his room when suddenly it seemed that his father, who had been dead

---


2 Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, p. 108.

more than a year, was in the room with him. The whole thing happened in a flash, but in that instant Merton was overwhelmed with the misery and corruption of his own soul. Then for the first time in his life he felt he prayed with all the strength of his being so that he might struggle loose of the terrible things that held his will in slavery.¹

Merton returned to New York later that winter. He continued to read the Bible surreptitiously lest someone make fun of him, or perhaps worse, show approval. He went to the Zion Church but then fell to criticizing the minister and the congregation unduly. He liked the Quaker meeting house better where the people sat in common meditation. But in reading the works of William Penn which he found to be as supernatural as a Montgomery Ward catalogue he lost interest in the Quakers.²

The summer of 1933 he went to the Chicago World's Fair. For a lark he took a job as a Barker in front of a side-show called the Streets of Paris. In a little more than a year after this Merton would leave Europe forever and find his personal salvation in America. Later in life he became a citizen of the United States and felt proud to do so. His later actions give a deeper meaning rather than a contradiction to what he

¹ Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, pp. 110-111.
² Ibid., pp. 113-115.
recalled about the Fair. He wrote:

The absolutely open and undisguised and non-committal frankness of the paganism of Chicago and of this Fair and of this particular part of the Fair and, apparently, of the whole country which it represented amazed me after the complicated reticences of England and the ornate pornography of France.¹

When Merton returned to New York he had lost most of his temporary interest in religion. With his friends in New York he discovered a new one: a cult of New York itself. The city does teach. Merton fell in with Reg Marsh an old friend of his father. With him he went to the Irving Place Burlesque, hung around Fourteenth Street and enjoyed the noisy crowd on Coney Island. In September he sailed for England to enter Cambridge. It would be the year of his lowest ebb.²

In recent years, more deeply aware that man functions as a person, education has seen the importance of guidance and counseling. An important aspect of counseling is to lead a person to use guilt in a healthful way. Father Charles Curran shares the view of Otto Rank who broke with Freud on the point of guilt. Rank held that guilt and a feeling of responsibility went together. Successful counseling can lead a person to turn his attacks away from himself into a positive urge to cope with reality and bring with it a decrease of self-rejection. The

¹Ibid., pp. 116-117.
²Ibid., pp. 117-118.
person now able to conform his actions to what is, begins to know some peace and security.\textsuperscript{1} This concurs with the thought of Aristotle that virtue, a habit and not just an act, enables a man to keep in custody that part of a man that is irrational. This gives the rational part a better chance to seek wisdom.\textsuperscript{2}

Merton had no such guidance. At Oakham he had secretly read a few things on psychoanalysis. Now he took to reading Freud, Jung and Adler in earnest. His chief trouble was that all his faculties were going to seed because there was nothing to control his appetites, yet Merton came to the conclusion that sex-repression was the cause of his unhappiness.\textsuperscript{3} In his book about Merton, Edward Rice, a friend of his Columbia days and his godfather when he joined the Catholic Church, relates that Merton often talked both boastfully and regretfully of a girl in England. He thought about going back to see her. She and her son were killed in the Blitz. Rice seems to imply that the son was Merton's.\textsuperscript{4}

\begin{flushright}

\textsuperscript{2}Meyer, \textit{An Educational History of the Western World}, pp. 36-37.

\textsuperscript{3}Merton, \textit{The Seven Storey Mountain}, p. 124.

\textsuperscript{4}Rice, \textit{The Man in the Sycamore Tree}, p. 19.
\end{flushright}
Once again it is in literature that Merton found truth of lasting value he will keep all his life. The one great benefit he got at Cambridge was the study of Dante under the guidance of a Professor Bullough, an ascetical scholar that Merton liked. In the fall and early winter the class traveled with Dante and Virgil through the icy heart of hell. By the time of Lent the students had climbed with them out to the peaceful sea at the foot of the seven-circled mountain of Purgatory.\(^1\)

However, it would be a few more years before Merton would even come out of hell much less start climbing his own seven storey mountain of Purgatory. He was willing to accept what this greatest of Catholic poets had to say about Hell and Purgatory but only because he had an esthetic sensitiveness to them. Merton blinded by the seven capital sins which only the fires of Purgatory could burn away, kept away from the attack of these flames by averting his will from them: He felt his mind was too coarse and too lazy to absorb anything as clean as the lines of Dante. What remained in him was a sort of an armed neutrality in the presence of all these dogmas. But this thin line of light never moved him to command his mind to open wider to it. Unhappy in his indecision where no salvation could be found, Merton began to drift down a path to a deeper

\(^1\)Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 122.
Hoping to escape his misery he turned to psychology. In his later reflections upon this time Merton thought that Providence worked in a funny way. It was the devil, he believed, that made him think being an introvert was the worse thing in the world. Sex-repression was one manifestation of this, and Merton made sufficient efforts to escape this imagined evil. Meanwhile he examined all the feelings and thoughts which made him become just what he wanted to avoid being, an introvert. 2

One of Merton's friends in the following year (a bully of a lad that he remembered as being loud and jolly, a chaser after the girls, prone to shove his fist through window panes) was discovered by the porter down in the showers of Old Court at Clare hanging by his neck from a rope slung over one of the pipes, his big hearty face black with strangulation. 3 Certain events intervened to deliver Merton from Cambridge and the possibility of a similar fate.

In April he was called to London by his godfather and made to give an account of his immorality. He mumbled in weak defense that he had not wanted to hurt anyone. His conduct did

---

1 Ibid., pp. 122-123.
2 Ibid., pp. 123-124.
3 Ibid., p. 127
not improve. In the summer of 1934 he went back to New York and his guardian wrote him to forget about the British Diplomatic service, that it would be better for him to stay in America. Merton quickly agreed but it was necessary for him to return to England in the fall and then come back to America on the quota with the intent of remaining permanently.¹

In November he sailed from Europe never to return. The November before, in 1933, he had gone from Cambridge to attend the funeral of his Aunt Maud at Ealing near London. His Uncle Ben was quite feeble and this occasion was the last time Merton would see any blood relatives of his European side of the family. The burial of Aunt Maud was a sign to him; he wrote:

they committed the thin body of my poor Victorian angel to the clay of Ealing, and buried my childhood with her. In an obscure, half-conscious way I realized this and was appalled. She it was who had presided in a certain sense over my most innocent days. And now I saw those days buried with her in the ground.²

Gone too was the lovely England of country churches, quiet villages, and fair play that Merton had seen through the clear eyes of her simplicity. The fragile web of these charmed associations had been blown away. Merton felt that an unhealthy vacuum now hung over England as if a purge of its sins would

¹ Ibid., pp. 125-126.
² Ibid., pp. 121.
come hurling out of the sky.¹

In his 1941 novel, *My Argument With the Gestapo*, unpublished until after his death, Merton came to this same contrast of the England he had known. He wrote of London beautiful in the bright skies of summer, and subdued under the kind fogs of winter with the bright lights of the shops giving promise of Christmas.

But this first London vanished when Merton (the novel is written in the first person and Thomas Merton is the central character) walked the streets of the second and learned to listen to the gaiety of the taxi drivers turn to ashes, and the walls of houses, from street to street, echoing the harlot's curse. The first city only existed in the minds of the innocent, but the second city that at a definite time was revealed in Merton's life was dark as chaos.²

Now in late November of 1934 Merton saw the English shore slowly vanish from sight, as his ship sailed quietly out of Southampton. He felt his mortal sins were enough to bring destruction to Germany and England. But he was glad to be leaving the infection that he felt hung all about Europe rotting it, especially in high places. He felt that Cambridge and all

¹Ibid., pp. 121 and 128.
of England was acting as if it were alive, a complicated charade that was intolerably dull. He was not yet a Catholic at this time but in recalling this meaningful day Merton considered the Mother of God as preparing the way for his moral recovery as he left the Island that was once hers.¹

But Merton never stopped loving England and the splendid people he had known there. The inscription on the front page, a quotation from John Donne, shows this sentiment of Merton.

I sacrifice this Island unto thee,
And all whom I lov'd there, and who lov'd mee;
When I have put our seas 'twixt them and mee,
Put thou thy sea betwixt my sinnes and thee.²

Merton remembered coming out of the subway at 116th Street and seeing the big ugly buildings of Columbia surrounded with dirty snow. Quickly he caught the spirit of this city campus—and loved it. The students were poorer and humbler than those he knew at Cambridge, but perhaps smarter. There was a genuine intellectual vitality in the air. In 1938 Merton earned his B.A. and in 1939 an M.A. in English literature in this big sooty factory of a university that he found so friendly and open to receive him.³

¹ Thomas Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, pp. 126-128.
² Thomas Merton, My Argument With the Gestapo, front page.
³ Thomas Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, pp. 136-138.
He was struck with the wide curriculum and found himself interested in geology, economics, the works of Daniel Defoe, but did not care for a vague course in current events called "Contemporary Civilization" that was imposed on all the sophomores. Right off in this semester of February of 1935, just after Merton had turned twenty, he met the teacher and friend who would play a vital role in his eventual decision to enter the Trappist Monastery. Merton felt that for a teacher to be absolutely sincere with generation after generation of students required either supernatural simplicity or a kind of heroic humility. Mark Van Doren was one such man to Thomas Merton.¹

Merton was delighted with his classes. Van Doren taught literature as literature and never got off into sociology or economics or any other related subject. Van Doren did not have to fake and cover up a gulf of ignorance by teaching a lot of opinions and conjectures. He would come in and start asking questions. Merton found himself saying excellent things because the questions had "educed" them from him. His classes were literally "education." Far from priming his students with thoughts of his own, Van Doren communicated to them something of his own vital interest in things. He honored the vocation of teaching and this in turn ennobled him. He prepared the mind of Merton for the good seeds of scholastic philosophy,

¹Ibid., pp. 137-138.
for not only was Van Doren acquainted with the modern scholastics like Maritain and Gilson, he also knew the American neo-Thomists, Mortimer Adler and Richard McKeon, personally. His clear mind looked directly for the quiddities of things. Poetry, for Van Doren, was a virtue of the practical intellect, and not merely a vague spilling out of the emotions, which failed to perfect the essential powers of the soul. It was fortunate for Merton that he met a man like Van Doren, for in his new reverence for Communism which offered him an escape from his personal failure at Cambridge (for he could now blame society more than himself), he was in danger of docilely accepting any stupidity that seemed to pave the way for the classless society.¹

Merton was not really concerned about the masses. He preferred to join those who shouted for books instead of battleships lest their intellectual improvement be impeded. Columbia was not as Communistic as the New York Hearst newspaper made it out to be, but there were enough youth interested to have a National Students League group on campus. Merton went to a meeting and soon found himself carrying signs at various public gatherings protesting the evils of the Capitalistic society. Once at a Red party held in a Park Avenue apartment, after a

¹Ibid., pp. 138-141.
few drinks, he signed up as a member of the Young Communist League and took the name of Frank Swift. Communism could not hold a man of Merton's temperament. He found most of the members to be noisy, shallow and violent and lacking in intellectual stability. Merton went from a card carrying member back to a "fellow-traveller" and then to complete rejection of the Communist position. ¹ In November, 1951, Merton became an American citizen. Dressed in a roman collar he had to stand up in a court room crowded with applicants like himself (and members of the Daughters of the American Revolution awaiting the chance to congratulate them) and explain why he had once belonged to the National Students League. ²

In the fall of 1935 Merton filled with enthusiasm found himself signing up for courses in Spanish, German, Geology, Constitutional Law and French Renaissance Literature. He started to work for the school newspaper The Spectator, and the literary magazine, The Columbia Review. Eventually he became art editor of The Jester. These contacts brought him into touch with the brightest young minds on the campus. Some of them became life long friends. Bob Lax, a Jew, followed Merton

¹Ibid., pp. 141-148.

into the Catholic Church. Merton always looked up to this man and it was Lax who told Merton that his final calling was to be a saint, when after his baptism Merton was unsettled about his future. Mark Van Doren, a Protestant, agreed and told Merton that he must strive for this to be worthy of his Christian calling. Besides these two men and Edward Rice who became his godfather, Merton became friends with Seymour Freegood, a Jew, who came to Gethsemani for Merton's ordination in 1949. Freegood had been kind enough to take care of an Indian monk who had come to America with no money, having been sent to represent his monastery at the World Congress of Religions at the Chicago World Fair of 1933. Doctor Bramachari, a Hindu, was the first formal contemplative Merton ever met. Bramachari told Merton and his friends that the Christians working in his country would not be effective until they practiced asceticism. He was not a man to give unsolicited advice, but Merton always remembered Bramachari telling him that he must read St. Augustine's Confessions, and The Imitation of Christ. Bob Gerdy and Bob Gibney, both interested in Scholastic Philosophy in their Columbia days, and others not mentioned here remained friends of Merton after his entering Gethsemani.¹

There were days of trouble for Merton at Columbia. One of his fraternity brothers was found floating in the Gowanus

¹Ibid., pp. 150-156 and pp. 179-184.
canal in Brooklyn after having disappeared for two months.  
Merton over extended himself and suffered a physical collapse.  
He recalled feeling faint on the train coming into the city  
and wisely took a room in the Pennsylvania Hotel where the  
doctor examined him and told him to rest there. Merton felt  
the blood pounding in his brain and far away in his mind was  
a little voice that said: "What if you threw yourself out of  
that window. . . . " Now a new thing came openly into Merton's  
life: fear. Up to this time he had managed to avoid it with  
his bluster and excessive activity.  
Fortunately he was taking  
Mark Van Doren's course on Shakespeare at this time. All that  
year the class was talking about the deepest springs of human  
desire and hope and fear as seen in the terms of Shakespeare  
and occasional intuitions of another order. Van Doren had a  
sensitive and clear way of seeing things, which was fundamen­  
tally scholastic, though not necessarily and explicitly Chris­  
tian. Merton held that this course was his only health until  
in February he bought Etienne Gilson's book The Spirit of Me­  
dieval Philosophy.

A course in French Medieval Literature, which brought back

---

memories of his boyhood days in Saint Antonin, was now leading him into Catholic literature. But he felt disgust and deception when he saw the "Nihil Obstat... Imprimatur" on the first page of Gilson's book. This little Latin indicating that the book had passed the Catholic censors brought to Merton's mind the real and imaginary excesses of the Inquisition. He was more a Protestant than he realized and he felt cheated at having bought a Catholic book. But he began to read it on his way back to Douglaston on the Long Island train. It was on this train that Merton had first felt the effects of a strange malaise; now despite all his contrary feelings he found himself taken up with the thought of Gilson. The one big concept that Merton got from him, which was to revolutionize his whole life, was the word aseitas. It is a word that can be applied to God alone, and means the power of a being to exist absolutely in virtue of itself. Prior to this Merton had thought that Christians taught a concept of God which was simply impossible, having Him infinite and finite at the same time. Now God had been vindicated in his own mind. Merton felt that in every intellect there is a natural exigency for a true concept of God. He was enough of a philosopher to know that God cannot be contained in the concepts of man, no matter how many and all being true, but he now had one that he could ponder all his days. From then on he had a deep respect for Catholic phi-
osophy and for the Catholic faith.  

In 1967 Merton wrote of Columbia University with the reverence of an ideal alumnus.

The thing I always liked best about Columbia was the sense that the University was on the whole glad to turn me loose in its library, its classroom, and among its distinguished faculty, and let me make what I liked out of all I did. And I ended up by being turned on like a pin ball machine by Blake, Thomas Aquinas, Augustine, Eckhart, Coomaraswamy, Traherne, Hopkins, Maritain, and the Sacraments of the Catholic Church.  

He felt that Columbia had educated him in the best sense of that word, holding that the purpose of education was to lead the student to "define himself authentically and spontaneously in relation to his world." Merton's own college experience is the basis of his saying that the University should help the student to save his soul from the "hell of meaningless, of obsession, of complex artifice, of systematic lying, of criminal evasions and neglects, and of self destructive futilities."

The primary task of the University is to help the student discover himself.  

1Ibid., pp. 171-172.


3Ibid., pp. 15-16.
Merton's greatest discovery of himself comes in the writing of his master's thesis which he began in the summer of 1938. At first he had half decided to study an unknown novelist of the eighteenth century called Richard Graves. His most important work was a novel called *Spiritual Quixote*, which was a satire on the more excited kind of Methodists. He would have worked under Professor Tyndall, an agnostic and rationalist, who took an amused interest in the strange perversions of the religious instinct, so this would have been Tyndall's kind of subject. Merton remembers Tyndall being amused at the miracles of Mother Cabrini who had just been beatified. Being a good rationalist it was an article of faith with Tyndall that miracles could not happen. But Bob Lax had told Merton in November of 1937 that he should read Aldous Huxley's book *Ends and Means*. Merton had read some of his novels when he was sixteen and seventeen and from them had built up an ignorant philosophy of pleasure. Now Huxley was saying that modern man was using means that made good ends impossible to attain. It was the material and animal urges in men that made them blind and crude so that they could not use proper means. How would Huxley free man from this affliction? By prayer and asceticism which he proved from Christian writers like St. John of the Cross as well as the sound thoughts found in Oriental mystical literature. This did not bring Merton to immediately mortify his inclination to gluttony and lust but Huxley's position did make
him face these evils in his life. In a way that Merton could not understand his new religious reading did play a part in delivering him from writing a thesis that would have in no way helped him spiritually. Suddenly one day in early spring of 1938 when Merton was running along the wire fences by the tennis court, in the sun, the thought suddenly came to him that there was only one possible poet of the eighteenth century for him to work on, the one poet who had least to do with his age, and was most in opposition to everything it stood for. That was William Blake.¹

In his youth Blake was put to work by his master sketching the Gothic architecture of Westminster Abbey. It was his love and appreciation of this art that lead him to an understanding of the Christian ideals that underlay it. Various circumstances shut Blake off for twenty years from the inspiration of Christian art through his contact with the neo-classicists who for the most part were skeptics. In 1803 Blake, at a considerable loss of position and fortune which kept him poor the rest of his days, returned to the Christian art that he so loved and understood.²

Blake's successful struggle to maintain his integrity is

¹Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, pp. 184-189.
clearly reflected in his writings wherein he makes up his own mythology. Merton in his thesis considered Blake's *Book of Urizen*, *Four Zoas*, the *Songs of Los* and *Night IV*, and from these explained the theme that Blake continually developed. All of them show the fall of the spirit from eternity which corresponds to the fall of the individual from innocence into experience, but eventually a redemption takes place with a return to the state of innocence. Art is allowed to play its legitimate role in the struggle of the spirit to find its original state of bliss.¹

In the *Four Zoas* it is the conflict between Urthona and Urizen that make up the major action of the myth. The other two zoas have the names of Thermas and Luvah. Urizen manages to dethrone Urthona and as a result wisdom is replaced by rationalism, imagination by blindness, and knowledge by doubt.² As a result the zoas are lead to the state of Ultra, almost complete materialism, and for Blake this was equal to hell.³ Here Merton saw Blake with a touch of Gnosticism in so far as matter is bound up with the fall of man. But Merton is quick

to point out that Blake was in no way a hater of nature, but ever insisting that nature must lead man to God. Pure naturalism in art which so copies nature and only arouses the same sensation that the eye gets from nature was for Blake an act of idolatry.\(^1\) It was mentioned before that Blake accused Plato of seeing this as the end of the artist and as a consequence rejecting art as an aid to the man seeking wisdom; Blake saw art as playing a most important role in the everlasting search by man.\(^2\)

After being dethroned, Urthona, looses Los, which is art, and what remains to Urthona is his own spectre, or metaphysics. Los, or art, in turn looses part of himself, an emanation that is called Enitharman or inspiration. Los then pursues Enitharman, inspiration, and when Los is exhausted in the chase, she, Enitharman revives him with her song and tells him that matter is still transfigured with form and the radiance of spiritual beauty, and that even God Himself will descend into the flesh as Christ. Now Los can remember eternity where good and evil do not exist, and Los and Enitharman, by the virtue of artistic vision, enjoy nature sub specie aeternitatis and not merely as it is in itself.\(^3\)

\(^1\) Ibid., p. 71.
\(^2\) Supra, p. 22.
\(^3\) Ibid., pp. 59-61.
It is this vision that Blake saw as the most important need of the would be artist. It is an infallible critical judgment. How does an artist come to it? Through asceticism. As pointed out Merton saw Blake living ascetically in his choosing a life of poverty as the price of maintaining his own feel for art. From the Fall of 1940 until he went to Gethsemani in December, 1941 Merton taught at St. Bonaventure's College in Olean, New York. It was here that he began to write some of his first poems, an achievement that had eluded him before. But now

My mouth was at last clean of the yellow, parching salt of nicotine, and I had rinsed my eyes of the gray slops of movies, so that now my taste and vision were clean. And I had thrown away the books that soiled my heart. And my ears, too, had been cleansed of all wild and fiery noises and had poured into them peace, peace. . . .¹

Merton had seriously considered entering the Franciscan Order. But the thoughts of his past sinful life held back his entrance. In Holy Week of 1941 he made a retreat at Gethsemani. It was love at first sight. Finally all the vectors of his life came together to lead him to join the Trappists. But Merton was always grateful to the Franciscans of St. Bonaventure for affording him a life of seclusion and a chance to practise asceticism.²

¹ Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, pp. 304-305.
² Ibid., pp. 250-350.
So Merton at this point in his life had brought via asceticism inspiration into his poetic soul. This corresponds with Los regaining Enitharman. But more is yet to be done. Los is now able to build the City of Art, creating forms which the spectres behold, and love and then become. This is called giving error a form that error may be cast out. Merton had been told by Dan Walsh to read Jacques Maritain's book *Art and Scholasticism* toward understanding Blake. Merton was struck with the following of Maritain's.

Form, that is to say the principle determining the peculiar perfection of everything which is, and completing things in their essence and their qualities... is above all the peculiar principle of intelligibility, the peculiar clarity of everything.  

It is with Urizen that Los has his greatest struggle to lead him to accept a form to redeem him from the crass materialism he has been imbedded in. Urizen is always setting up codes and laws to make the other spectres correspond to his narrow view. Blake here clearly saw his own enemies of art, the neo-classicists. Merton will show this same aversion to the law-making of the modern forms of totalitarianism, whether of Communism or its manifestations in the West. He looked to the Catholic University above all to arm modern man spiritually.

---

against this peril.¹ But finally Urizen is converted and does not seek to lord it over the others and accepts his proper position. Urthona is now united to Los who of course has regained, Enitharman, or inspiration. All together they make the perfect intellect. The last judgment has taken place and the world is accepted back into Eternity, or heaven.²

For the sake of clarity Merton pointed out that the Thomists made a further distinction that Blake did not. The Thomists saw beauty as distinguished from truth; that is beauty is related to truth but is not itself a kind of truth. To see a beautiful object is, in a sense, to know truth and added to this knowledge there is a delight. But if in beauty there is delight, that is why it appeals to our desires, causes love and becomes an object of the appetite, however, only truth can illuminate, and Blake was not interested in truth as a matter of analysis and concept. All intellectual distinction was forgotten in the ecstasy of the mystic who surely knows God. Blake saw that the artist and the mystic seemed to have the same kind of intuitions, for he himself did. The artist sees the very essence of things. How is he to communicate that to others? If logical concepts are employed then the purity of


concept that the artist has initially conceived is blurred. But the Thomists would agree with Blake that in the presence of claritas, the intellect is spared any effort of abstraction and analysis and can enjoy beauty directly and intuitively. The beauty that it thus enjoys is that which is connatural to man. For the Thomist clarity and connaturality are completely worked together.¹

No matter the limitations of Blake, for with the help of the Thomists, Merton gained from him the need to make virtue connatural in his life. It is one thing to have a knowledge of chastity in a logical sense, but when one knows it and possesses it then he has it connaturally. Merton had learned from his father that it was almost blasphemy to regard the function of art as merely to reproduce some kind of sensible pleasure, rather it should involve the highest faculties of a man and lead him to contemplation.² A clearer understanding of what Merton means came in the volume of his first collection of poems published in 1947. He wrote:

A genuine esthetic experience is something which transcends not only the sensible order (in which, however, it has its beginning) but also that of reason itself. . . . In the natural order, as Jacques Maritain has often insisted, it is an analogue of the mystical experience which it resembles

¹Ibid., pp. 84-86.
and imitates from afar... So close is the resemblance between these two experiences that a poet like Blake could almost confuse the two and make them merge into one another as if they belonged to the same order of things. And yet is an abyss between them.¹

Merton who had always been anti-naturalist in art now was keenly aware that being a pure naturalist in the moral order, which he still was at this time, was a dichotomy in his soul that could only be drawn together by the notion of Christian virtue, ordered to the union of the soul with God.²

It was a struggle but in November of 1938, Merton (to continue the thought of Blake) was ready to receive a new and lasting form into his life. He was received into the Catholic Church. Within a year there came the call to receive a higher form, to be a priest and a monk. The son of Owen Merton had fought and won the long hard battle of personal integrity. In this he was like his father and William Blake. The education of Thomas Merton could never be called common. In its beginning it had lead young Merton to consider the anchor of hope in the stained glass window of the old Episcopal church of Zion in Douglaston as a symbol of travel and adventure.

² Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, p. 203.
Now there was security in his life, but as the world was to discover within ten years the "mental sails of this gifted man would never be reefed or trimmed."
CHAPTER II

CONTEMPLATION AND REASON

Is contemplation an act of a reasonable man? Merton held it to be so, when he stressed the distinction between reason, a faculty of the soul, and reasoning, the act of that faculty. Reasoning proceeds from one truth to another, and usually involves the mind in labor and complexity. But the end of reason is not reasoning, rather it is the mind's embracing the truth without labor in the light of a single intuition. Both by nature and predisposition the mind of man is intuitive, for seeing the truth in one glance. Reason is a light, reasoning is a process. Contemplation, then, which either lightens the burden of reasoning or simply bypasses that effort altogether, and brings the mind to know, is not just a reasonable act, it is the final act of reason.¹

Merton believed that man should strive to come to this one act of the reason even though in this life he would never reach it. For the soul now bound up with the senses of the

body and dependent upon them for knowledge proceeds slowly from one sensible reality to another. The mind all the while is capable of intuiting certain truths, though frequently, especially in the first experiencing of such knowing, these will be meager in content. Patient with its limitations, the mind slowly acquires other knowledge that enables it to behold some of the profound truth contained in the intuition with which it began the process.¹

An example of this is seen in Merton's discovery of the word aseitas when he read Etienne Gilson's *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*. Aseitas means the power of a being to exist absolutely in virtue of itself, having no other justification for its existence except that its very nature is to exist. It is a concept applicable only to God. Writing ten years later, Merton felt it had revolutionized his life.²

Another example of an intuition that remains for the mind ever to ponder and continue to give a deeper and wider significance, one greatly appreciated by Merton, is when the mind of a man comes to an understanding of his own being. Merton held it to be an enthralling experience for a man to realize the value of his own being. Tasting some of the inborn liberty due to it as a thing of the spirit, the soul may even pass from

¹Ibid.
an appreciation of its own being to an intuitive knowledge of the Absolute Being. Not that the intelligence enters into an immediate vision of the Infinite Being, for if God is realized, He is still realized by inference from created being. So when a man can reflect upon the vital depths of his own spirit, a creature of God, but one that reflects the image of God better than anything else in creation, then he has discovered the end of his existence and a lasting light to lead him to it.¹

Man seeks what pleases him; most of all that which satisfies his mind. A man cannot come to an appreciation of the Absolute Being of God without his speculative thought being tinged with an affectivity, arising from the intense vitality and joy which the soul discovers in itself as His creature. This pleasure is accessible to man. It is an intellectual fulfillment which is a partial answer to the deepest need of man's spirit, his need for contemplation.² Merton finds support for his position in the words of Aristotle.

We assume the gods to be above all other beings blessed and happy; but what sort of action must we assign them? Acts of justice? Will not the gods seem absurd if they make contracts and return deposits. . . ? If we were to run through them all, the circumstances of action would be found trivial and unworthy of gods. . . . Still everyone supposes they live and therefore they are

¹Merton, The Ascent to Truth, pp. 197-98.
²Ibid., p. 197.
active. Now if you take away from a living being action, and still more production, what is left but contemplation? Therefore the activity of God, which surpasses all blessedness, must be contemplative; and of human activities, therefore, that which is most akin to this must be most of the nature of happiness.¹

Merton bemoaned that there is so much in the way of modern man, in his continual living on the level of sense experience, that prevents him from grasping the abstract notion of being, truth, and beauty as they are proposed by the philosophers. What too often rates for "being" is a big billboard lit up all night showing a beefy young man about to gulp a cold bottle of beer. Merton wanted men to be temperate in their use of material things, for the less they are distracted by them, the better chance they will have to taste the happiness that comes from contemplation.²

Merton believed that the natural contemplation of the artist, the poet, and the metaphysician enabled them to be less tempted than the ordinary man to reach out for sensible satisfactions and imaginary thrills. Their native good taste keep their senses uncloyed, allowing a religious experience to take

¹Richard McKeon, (ed.) The Basic Works of Aristotle (New York: Random House, 1941) Ethics, 10, 8. (Quotations from Aristotle will be from this source.)

Merton's early spiritual advancement, as seen in the first chapter, owed much to the artistic taste he gained from his father and the eighteenth century writer and artist, William Blake. In his turn Merton offered the same kind of help to his readers. His sensitive appreciation of nature inviting a man to contemplate is seen in his feeling for rain. What a thing it is to sit absolutely alone, in the forest, at night, cherished by the unintelligible, perfectly innocent speech, the most comforting speech in the world, the talk that rain makes all over the ridges, and the talk of the water courses everywhere in the hollows. Nobody started it, nobody is going to stop it. It will take as long as it wants, this rain. As long as it talks I am going to listen.2

The reader either shares the feeling of Merton for rain or he does not. Any attempt to explain it would only mar the repose the mind enjoyed in sharing the feeling of Merton. 3

Merton gave support to this thought when he reminded his readers that when they are aware of being strongly influenced by the Holy Spirit, then they must remain peaceful and receptive. It is not the time for the mind to confine itself in


3 In Chapter III it will be seen how the Zen masters are ever wary of using words lest they mar experience.
the small yard of its own reasoning. Contemplation is essentially intuitive, and the intuition of the simplest truth can become too sublime for explanation. The lives of some men have been thrown into a revolution by the sudden experience of the world being real.¹ St. Thomas Aquinas supports this thought of Merton when he defines contemplation as *simplex intuitus veritatis*—the simple intuition of the truth. Reason is at rest when it embraces truth. Aquinas borrowed the thought of Richard of St. Victor, who considered cogitation as a glance of the mind that can easily give way to distraction. A higher function of the mind to this writer was meditation, the survey of the mind while occupied in searching for the truth. Contemplation was the end of the search by the soul, leading it to rejoice in the object possessed through its clear vision. St. Thomas clarifies this further when he said that an angel perceives the truth in a simple apprehension, but man must proceed to the perception of the truth through several premises. The contemplative life then has one act when it is finally completed, but many acts whereby it arrives at this final act, the act from which it derives its unity.²

¹Merton, *The Ascent to Truth*, pp. 204-205.

²St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 11-11, Q. 180, a. 3 and 5, translated by the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947). (Quotations from St. Thomas Aquinas will be from this source.)
While contemplation is the final act of the intellect, Merton held that the mind would never come to it without an act of the will. Here he is speaking of the contemplation of the man who has accepted a creed as opposed to the natural contemplation of the artist or the philosopher, allowing however that the gift of the latter is a great help to supernatural contemplation. A man may have many good reasons for believing, but when he does believe he goes beyond reasons, beyond his own "seeing." Why finally does any man believe? Credo ut intelligam, Merton replied, I believe that I may know. For the mind of man is made finally for knowing, not believing.¹

Merton stressed the fact that it is impossible for a man to live without some kind of faith. The tragedy of our time is that men who cannot believe in the revealed word of God, believe everything they read in the newspapers. They find it impossible to believe the Pope, when with extreme caution and reserve, he makes a guarded statement on a matter he should know something about, and then only after long study, but with alacrity accept the dogmatic remarks of a celebrity on any subject, especially one involving sexual morality. The final

¹Merton, The Ascent to Truth, p. 48.
irony is that most men have no intellectual right to their theological disbelief.¹

When a miraculous cure is reported by reliable medical authorities as has happened at Lourdes, the objectivity of it is rejected by unbelievers, because they hold, a priori, that miracles cannot happen, and they hold it as an article of faith. The Church, on hearing of a supposed miracle proceeds in a slow and careful a posteriori investigation of the facts. Which position, Merton asked, is the more rational?²

Merton held that a person who rejected the revelation of God was in danger of submitting to a false mysticism. Instead of the mind being lifted by faith beyond its own reasoning it could become subjected to powers below its nature.³ False mysticism is often viciously anti-intellectual. It promises man a fierce joy in the immolation of his intelligence. Reason is regarded as an usurper that must be discredited. One proposal by those who would lead men into darkness was to regard reason as only a complexity of psychophysical reactions to environment, which must be renounced in order that supposedly

¹Ibid., pp. 30-31.
²Ibid., pp. 34-35.
³In the Fourth Chapter the impasse that the non-believing neo-humanists comes to will illustrate this point.
more vital and fundamental impulses may find expression. ¹

Jacques Maritain, a faithful friend of Merton from the
time he first met the famous Frenchman at Columbia, lends sup­
port to Merton's above position in what he called Voluntarism.
He wrote that a voluntarist trend, developed since

. . . the time of Schopenhauer, has contributed to
upset the internal order of human nature, by mak­
ing intelligence subservient to the will and by ap­
pealing to the virtue of irrational forces. Accord­
goingly, education was intended to concentrate either
on the will which was to be disciplined according
to some national pattern or on the free expansion
of nature and natural potentialities. ²

A more vulgar expression of this false mysticism is seen in
the current rise of Satan worship, and in seeking of occult
knowledge. The following quote may be too journalistic, but
it is indicative of a present trend.

In California, police report youths are carrying
ritual bags that contain drugs, potions, animal
bones, and occasionally human fingers. Residents
near Western mountain areas have claimed to hear
eerie ceremonial chanting at night. . . . In a
small New Jersey town, high school members of an
uncovered Satanist cult were arrested on charges
of murder. ³

Merton held strongly that mysticism could have nothing to

¹Ibid., pp. 60-61.


do with occultism, magic or spiritualism. Religion is the
virtue whereby man gives expression to his complete dependence
upon God. But the characteristic feature of all occult prac­
tices is a claim to give man a natural command over the super­
natural world, and this in a way independent of God. Such
practices debase the religious instinct of man and replace it
with a morbid obsession with preternatural phenomena. The
saints were usually embarrassed when in the Providence of God
some preternatural gift was granted them. After experiencing
levitation at morning meditation, St. Francis Xavier Cabrini
told her sisters not to mention it. The saints were aware that
grosser spirits fall upon such happenings and end up making an
obscene caricature of religion and of mysticism. 1

So far it has been shown that contemplation is the con­
summate act of the mind of man. Reason is made to know; rea­
soning is the effort to arrive at that end. Contemplation is
intuitive knowing. Merton believed that no man ever escapes
the need to believe. But the reason he believes is that he
might know, for the mind is made for knowing, not believing.
For Merton believing in the Revelation of God spares a man from
the horror of believing in someone or something that perverts
any chance of his mind contemplating God.

1 Merton, The Ascent to Truth, pp. 63-64.
Merton understood that great prudence was needed to lead a soul to contemplation and to direct it after it had experienced the life of God in infused contemplation. He relied upon the wisdom of St. John of the Cross, a saint of the Sixteenth Century, who directed no less a mystic than the great St. Teresa of Avila. He was a gentle man but firm in his convictions of how to help a soul arrive at contemplation.¹

Fortunately Merton looked carefully at the thought of St. John of the Cross concerning the relation of intellectual activity to contemplation. Unlike the Quietist Molinos, St. John did not demand that a man first seeking to advance in the spiritual life abandon all intellectual life. Rather he must put his mind to use in order to grasp spiritual and philosophical principles. Once a soul has experienced a union with God through infused contemplation, then intellectual activity presents a serious problem. The mind of man acquires knowledge in concepts, ideas, and judgments. The mystical knowledge of God is a judgment, but it is above concepts and registers itself in the soul without an idea. The reason for this is that nothing, created or imagined, can serve as a proper means of union with God. Contemplation obscures the clear knowledge of creation, yet it is in this obscurity of darkness that God

¹Ibid., pp. 78-80.
communicates with the soul. The natural desire of the intellect, seeking light, finds this unsatisfactory. The soul must not give into this natural desire, for then it will only fill the mind with obstacles to contemplation.¹

Is this anti-intellectual? No, but it does recognize a time when the intellect must be receptive. The power of the intellect to arrive at scientific, philosophical, and theological conclusions is not looked down upon. On the contrary, there are times when this knowledge helps bring us to God. For even the knowledge of God that is beyond concepts depends upon the existence of concepts. They are its starting point, the diving board from which it springs into the abyss of God. The only time a conflict occurs is when a soul entered upon contemplative prayer would cling to concepts.²

The contemplative appreciates concepts for themselves, yet at the same time sees their limitations when it comes to experiencing the life of God in contemplation. The last days of the life of St. Thomas Aquinas illustrate this point. The story is told that he returned to his desk after saying Mass on the feast of St. Nicholas, December 6, 1273, but neither wrote nor dictated anything, but simply remained silent.

¹Ibid., pp. 80-84.
²Ibid., pp. 86-88.
When his friend Reginald of Piperno (who most likely was the one who later rounded out the *Summa Theologica*) asked him why he could not continue his great work, St. Thomas replied: "All I have written seems to be nothing but straw... compared to what I have seen and what has been revealed to me." On March 7, 1274 he died. His last "word" to us is silence.¹

In one of his poems Merton gives an added insight to the idea of contemplation being beyond concept. The mystic Ibn al Arabi comes to the Arab philosopher Averroes after having seen truth clearly through contemplation. Immediately Averroes senses a hidden truth, the cause of the brilliance in the face of his young friend. He is not jealous; he only desires to know this truth himself. Averroes says to Ibn al Arabi.

... So you have learned the answer: but how?
By the spirit? By His light? What answer?
Is it perhaps the same answer that we have learned from reason?

I answered: Yes and No.
Between the 'yes' and the 'no' spirits fly forth from matter.
Between 'yes' and 'no'
The living neck bone is set apart from flesh.²

The "yes" and "no" of the poem hint at the vast difference that exists between what is learned by reasoning alone compared


to that which is granted the soul in contemplation. It also shows the necessary relation and continual relation that must exist between reasoning and contemplation. There are two ways to God, a way of affirmation and a way of denial. We must take both ways. It can be stated that God exists, an affirmation. But right away we say that the existence of God is not like the existence of man. When our minds make this step they are relinquishing the level on which our concept of existence is acceptable to us as positive. In doing this our minds are like a plane that cannot fly unless it "renounces" its contact with the ground. It is our affirmations about God that give our minds the impetus to move down the runway. But we only take off from these affirmations and ascend into the sky of our denials by recognizing that no concept of existence can delimit the Existence of God.¹

Overstressing either the positive or negative aspects of concepts can lead us to error. Just holding to clear ideas tends to lead the mind to think it has possessed God. Eventually God is justified not by what He is, but by what he should be according to the concepts that the mind of man has of God.²

¹Merton, The Ascent to Truth, pp. 93-95.
²Ibid., p. 96.
The other extreme is the more common error, because of its appeal to intellectual and moral inertia. Since none of our conceptual knowledge of God is objectively capable of grasping his full reality, they do not attain Him at all, so it is useless to inquire whether they are true or false. The only value of such ideas is "that they make people nice."¹

It is an interesting paradox that these two positions, one claiming too much for positive concepts, and the other not enough, end up in the same practical atheism. For in both of these heresies God is the creation of man, and depends for existence on man's idea of good and evil, right and wrong. Once these pragmatic values lose their value they must be discarded or changed.²

In the next chapter it will be shown that the philosophical position of Descartes helped lead man to this philosophical impasse in which God is only the creation of man. Eventually this led to the so-called "death of god" doctrine. Merton held that one reason for the popularity of Zen in the West came as a healthy reaction against the thought of Descartes.³

¹Ibid., p. 97.
²Ibid., p. 89.
The prudence needed to direct a soul who is being blessed with contemplative prayer is evident. It is not our purpose to discuss such a delicate undertaking. In passing it needs to be said that even a soul that has begun to receive graces of mystical contemplation should return to active meditation, that is positive concepts, when the soul is not occupied with mystical knowledge. Quite often meditation is an ordinary means of disposing a soul for mystical prayer, or infused contemplation.¹

If contemplation can give man an experience of the life of God while still on earth, a taste of what he is made to possess forever in heaven, then his education enriching him with concepts capable of giving rise to wonderment, can help him come to this experience. In his The New Man, published in 1966, Merton saw Adam before the Fall as combining perfectly action with contemplation. The early Fathers of the Church used the word parrhesia, which can best be translated as "free speech," toward understanding the intimacy of man with God in both work and contemplation. The word in fact represents the duty and honor of a citizen of the Greek city state to speak his mind in the civil assemblies. The parrhesia of Adam with God before the Fall is implied in the Book of Genesis by

¹Merton, The Ascent to Truth, p. 89.
telling us the relation of Adam to God after the Fall.¹

Before the Fall Adam conversed familiarly with God in flashes of mystical intuition that arose from his own spiritual depths or in the reality of objective creation. Man knew himself, was in complete communication with all created things which he commanded, and he was always in constant and unimpeded contact with the Spirit of God.²

If parrhesia expresses man's perfect actualization with the Spirit of God, then at the same time it expresses all the natural, preternatural, and supernatural gifts which God bestowed on man. "Parrhesia then symbolizes the perfect communication of man's intelligence with God by knowledge (gnosis) and contemplation (theoria)." As a result of this harmony Adam's body was in perfect subjection to his soul, so that as a result his body could not be separated from his soul, as long as his soul was not separated from God.³

Adam was first of all a contemplative, though the Book of Genesis seems to place the stress on his active life in Paradise. The work that Adam did before the Fall was always

²Ibid., p. 74.
³Ibid., p. 75.
impregnated with the light and significance of his union with God, giving it an essentially contemplative character. Adam worked not because he needed it to live but because his soul desired it. Since God had given Adam muscle then he should use it. His body and soul were joined in their dialogue with God.¹

The work that men do because they are driven to it by ambition or love of money has an orientation exactly opposite to that of Adam before the Fall. His work was worship, but the work men do because of cupiditiy is not worship but struggle. How can work become contemplative? Man must be free enough from things to be able to respect them instead of merely exploiting them. Like Adam modern man must look at creation, recognize it, and give it a new spiritual existence within himself. Adam imitated and reproduced the creative action of God, when from within the silence of his own intelligence he named all God's creation.²

In a later writing Merton returned to man's relation to God's creation, stressing again his need to accept it, which results in man being opened to the mysterious creative power

¹Ibid., pp. 77-79.
²Ibid., pp. 80-83.
of God's will. The power to destroy, like sin itself is only seemingly a power; it is a metaphysical illusion, though destruction itself can be very objective and real. Due to original sin the power to destroy seems to be more of a power because it seems to be uniquely ours. Man destroys in order to affirm his freedom and "reality." The more he doubts his freedom and his identity, the more he will be inclined to destroy. The problem for modern man is realizing that his concurring in God's creation is real and creative, even when it does not affirm him clearly in his own eyes as possessing autonomy. Too often man prefers the appearance of power when he stands apart from God's creation, refuses it, and finally seeks to destroy it.¹

What Adam had, man can still have in part because of the redemptive act of Jesus Christ. While the personal and direct grasp of sacred realities cannot be passed on from father to son, the aptitude for that vision, the capacity to sense the Holiness of God in His creation, and to respond to Him with worship, more or less, is always there. It can be awakened by the proper signs and symbols, provided the soul of a man has sufficient sensitivity for symbolism. While this sensitivity is not too hard to acquire, it is unfortunately something that

¹Merton, Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, pp. 315-16.
Merton's appreciation for symbolism is seen in what he wrote, in his early days as a Trappist, about Gregorian chant used in saying of Office and the Mass. He wrote:

It is an austere warmth, the warmth of Gregorian chant, it is deep beyond ordinary emotion, and that is one reason you never get tired of it. It never wears you out by making a lot of cheap demands on your sensibilities. Instead of drawing you out in the open field of feelings where your enemies, the devil and your own imagination and the inherent vulgarity of your own corrupted nature can get at you with their blades and cut you to pieces, it draws you within, where you are lulled in peace and recollection and where you find God.

While the majority of men are not called to be monks by God, yet the hope of any monk to return to "paradise" and seek parrhesia, "free speech" with God, gives hope to other men toward keeping their work, their active life, as worship of God through contemplation. Merton, in turn, was ever impressed with the long, long line of monks who had gone before him.

The remaining part of this chapter will briefly consider the place of the Trappists in the history of monasticism. This will give understanding to the strong view of Merton concerning the relation of the active and contemplative life.

In the history of monasticism the name Trappist is young.

---

1Merton, The New Man, p. 87.

2Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, p. 379.
In the seventeenth century Jean Armand de Rance began a revival of the Cistercian way of life at the famous abbey of La Grande Trappe. From this monastery came the word Trappist. The French Revolution dispersed the Trappists and eventually some found their way to Kentucky in 1858. An earlier adventure into Kentucky in 1806 had failed and the party returned to France.¹

The Trappists, then, are of the Cistercian family of monasticism. The Cistercians can rightly date their beginning to 1098 at Citeaux, France. From this foundation came the name Cistercian.²

St. Stephen Harding, an Englishman, brought about an adaptation of the Rule of St. Benedict to twelfth century conditions. This saint, called the jurist of the Cistercians, as well as their founder, had an extremely well developed sense of law and right. He was considered a mystic of the law who arrived at almost a miraculous synthesis of law and charity. It was on this solid foundation that St. Bernard, when he came to Citeaux in 1112, built the loftiest mystical structure that

has risen from the Benedictine enclosure. 1

The Cistercians were trying to escape the encumbered life of the monks of the great Cluniac movement and to get back to the simple rule of St. Benedict. Cluny had had a great day. In the year 910 St. Berno and twelve monks had founded Cluny in the woods of Burgundy. In time Cluny had two thousand abbeys and priories scattered all over Europe. The Cluniac movement pulled the Church out of the perils of its darkest age, yet by the end of the eleventh century men began to look back with regret to the simplicity of the old monasticism. 2 For one thing the Cluny monks let their serfs do the manual work, while they spent far more hours in liturgical prayer than St. Benedict had originally planned. Even Peter the Venerable, a saint remembered for his stringent ascetical practices, admitted that the Cluny Office was tedious. 3

The Cistercians wanted to follow closely the orare et laborare of St. Benedict. But for St. Bernard and his contemporaries, the true fulfillment of the Cistercian life was something more than the literal observance of the Rule of St. Benedict. The best modern historians of the matter, and among

3 Merton, The Silent Life, p. 103.
these Merton listed Etienne Gilson who was so influential in
his life, agree that the truly characteristic note of the Cis­
tercian calling is that it understands the Rule of St. Benedict
as a preparation for the mystical life. The Cistercian Order
is essentially contemplative, and this in the purest and strict­
est sense of the word. The hard work of the monks eventually
made the Cistercians one of the most powerful economic forces
in the Middle Ages. The monks may not have become rich, but
their monasteries were. "If the Cluniacs had been implicated
in worldliness by their feudal estates, the Cistercians suf­
fered the same disaster in the marketing of great supplies
of wheat and wine and oil and wool." They continued to do a
lot of good, but the contemplative spirit was lost.¹ Then
came the Trappists.

The Cistercian family today is divided into two large
groups. The Trappists, known formally as the Cistercians of
the Strict Observance, are a homogeneous, unified religious
Order. The other descendants of St. Stephen Harding and St.
Bernard are called the Cistercians of the Common Observance.
While amongst this second group many interpretations of the
Cistercian way of life may be found, in recent centuries there
have been reforms resulting in flourishing monasteries in

Europe and the New World.¹

Merton would not want to see any Trappist raise a spirit of rivalry with their cousin Cistercians of the Common Observance. He reminded them of the words of St. Bernard who chided any Cistercian of his day who tried to belittle the observance of the monks of Cluny as soft and relaxed. For to do so, would result in regarding fasts, vigils, labors, and such like as glorious things in themselves and not as means toward seeking union with God. A monk who glorified in his penance was doing it "in order to be seen by men." He already had his reward.²

In one of his very last writings Merton gave a similar warning to monks today. "Nothing is more foreign to authentic monastic... tradition in the Church than a kind of gnosticism which would elevate the contemplative above the ordinary Christian..." It is a monk's duty to lead the way in contemplative prayer that brings each man to face the shame and indignity of the false self. But it is this very discovery by the monk of the darkness within him that binds him more closely to his fellow men in the friendship of Christ.³


²Ibid., pp. 106-107.

Merton's knowledge of the history of monasticism and of the thought of St. Bernard gives understanding to his views about the active life needing a continual relation to the contemplative life if it is to do any good in the world. He joined with St. Thomas Aquinas in the view that vita contemplativa est melior quam vita activa (the contemplative life is in itself, by its very nature, superior to the active life). The more delicate question that Merton felt the need to comment upon at length was the position of St. Thomas that the active life which flows from the contemplative life is a higher vocation than a life that is only contemplative.¹

Merton felt that the bare statement of St. Thomas that religious orders which are ordered to the work of teaching and preaching hold the highest rank in religion can be misleading. Left to itself the thought conjures up the mental image of a pious and industrial cleric bustling from the library to the classroom. Actually St. Thomas is teaching that the so-called mixed vocation is only superior to the contemplative life if it is more contemplative.²

Merton considered St. Francis of Assisi as the ideal example of the relation of the active to the contemplative life.

¹Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, pp. 414-15.
²Ibid., pp. 415-16.
He never thought of himself as either a contemplative or an apostle. In not joining one of the religious Orders of his time he even sacrificed the thought of a "vocation" in a limited sense of the word. He never concerned himself with comparing the active and the contemplative life. He stayed in solitude when the Holy Spirit so led him; he was led back to the towns and villages by the same Spirit.¹

Merton held that in reality there is no religious Order that is strictly contemplative. In some way or other, contemplata tradere, the sharing of the fruits of contemplation, which St. Thomas considers the greatest perfection,² becomes manifest. Merton did not see the need to restrict this vocation, as St. Thomas did, to the teaching and preaching Orders. They only happen to be the best equipped to pass on the knowledge of God after having acquired it in contemplation. Merton shared the view of St. Bernard that it was a comparatively weak soul that arrives at contemplation and does not overflow with a love that must communicate what it knows about God to other men.³

²St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, 11-11, Q. 188, a. 6.
³Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, pp. 415-17.
Merton himself was called to do this in his writings but also as teacher of his fellow Trappists studying for the priesthood. In 1951 he was appointed Master of Scholastics. In 1955 he was given the even more important assignment of Master of Novices which he held until 1966. After that he was allowed to become a hermit, living apart on the property at Gethsemani.¹

It was in 1951 that his widely acclaimed The Ascent to Truth was published showing his great respect for intellectual life. In it he clearly presented the relationship of the intellect and the will of the soul of man. He held the intellect to be the highest faculty of man and superior to the will. The function of the intellect is to show man the essence of goodness, which the will seeks. In actual practice the intellect is not always superior to the will, since the will can often attain to a higher and more perfect object than the intelligence is capable of reaching. The intelligence acts upon what it has received into itself, but the will goes out of itself into another. The objects of understanding, truth and falsity, have only an abstract existence in the mind, but the will reaches out to good and evil in their actual, concrete reality, in existing things.²

²Merton, The Ascent to Truth, p. 284.
From this distinction follows two consequences. First, a being below the human level exists more perfectly in man's intelligence than it does in itself, for in us its existence is spiritualized. Hence, when men deal with objects on their own level or below it, then the intellect is superior to the will. The will in turn is superior to the intellect when the good we seek is found above the human level. *Melior est amor Dei quam cognitio,* the thought re-echoed everywhere in the teaching of the mystics, that it is better to love God than to know Him, makes the will superior to the intellect. Of course, this only applies in this life. In heaven God will be formally and immediately possessed by the intellect, but the extent of that possession is measured by the love of the soul.¹

Perhaps this can be understood better when it is recalled what was written earlier that our concepts of God are never adequate to convey God as He is, but God can be loved as He is. Recalling too the idea of *parrhesia,* "free speech" with God, a gift that redeemed man still possesses in part, we can understand how man who knows all creation in relation to himself, spiritualizes all things by giving a name to them.²

Contemplation maintains man in the hierarchy of creation

---

¹Ibid., pp. 13-14.
just below the angels. Tragedy comes, as we saw earlier from the thought of Merton, when man refuses to believe in God and ends up instead believing in a creature, a form of idolatry. Man then becomes subject to something below him.¹

The teacher who would help each of his students understand his subject matter in its proper position of creation related to man and man related to God must be a man who has seen the beauty of this Divine Plan in his own contemplation. This is why Merton was so insistent that religious Orders that preach and teach must be contemplatives. He held with St. Thomas Aquinas that teaching like preaching must flow from contemplation,² but wanted it clearly understood that he did not think that the Orders called to the active and contemplative life were contemplative enough.³

Merton loved silence and solitude. Some particular words he wrote of its value need to be related to those of St. Thomas Aquinas concerning teaching. St. Thomas wrote that:

The act of teaching has a twofold object. For teaching is conveyed by speech, and speech is the audible sign of the interior concept. Accordingly

¹Ibid., p. 80.
²St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, 11-11, Q. 181, a. 6.
³Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, p. 416.
one object of teaching is the matter of the object of the interior concept; and as to this object teaching belongs sometimes to the active and sometimes to the contemplative life. It belongs to the active life when a man conceives a truth inwardly, so as to be directed thereby in his outward action; but it belongs to the contemplative life when a man conceives an intelligible truth, in the consideration and love whereof he delights.  

There is no teacher worthy of the name who does not have memories of such delight. At such moment he would agree with Aristotle that the contemplative life is more delightful than the active, for "it offers pleasures marvelous for their purity and their enduringness, and it is expected that those who know will pass their time more pleasantly than those who inquire."  

Merton's thought of man being silent so that he might say the right word when it is most needed fits the above and its application to a teacher is obvious. He wrote that:  

... if our life is poured out in useless words, we will never hear anything, will never become anything, and in the end, because we have said everything before we had anything to say we shall be left speechless at the moment of our greatest decision.  

... Yet we are bound to some extent, to speak to others, to help them see their way to their own decision. ... In teaching them Christ, our very words teach them a new silence.  

---

1 St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, 11-11, Q. 181, a. 3.  
2 Aristotle, Ethics, 10, 7.  
Merton's words on silence as a need for keeping a man from being either dumb or trivial when truth is expected of him lends itself as an introduction to the next chapter on Zen and Contemplation. There is a Zen-saying that suits the above quotations from St. Thomas Aquinas and Thomas Merton: "Those who say do not know; those who know do not say."\(^1\)

CHAPTER III

ZEN AND CONTEMPLATION

In his final years Thomas Merton believed that the contemplatives of the East possessed a wisdom that could greatly enrich contemplative life in the Western world. In view of the position that we have taken that contemplation is necessary for education, then Eastern thought, especially Zen which was of particular interest to Merton, can in turn make a contribution to education. Necessarily joined with the consideration of Zen in its connection to Western contemplation is a fresh approach to the Eastern world. The charge of being pantheistic or nihilistic has been too lightly leveled at Eastern religions. Zen is neither of these; then, without in any way saying it, (a Zen characteristic as we shall see) Zen shows Western man as adrift from his own heritage. As we saw in the first chapter Merton during his Columbia days began to read about Eastern mystics, and was impressed by their asceticism. He met Dr. Bramachari, a religious from an Indian Hindu monastery, who told him that the East would never be converted to Christianity as long as Western Christians continued to show so little value
for contemplation. On his trip to the East Merton tried to locate his old friend Bramachari. Before coming to Bangkok for the meeting of religious leaders Merton attended another religious meeting in India. But at the time Bramachari was confined to East Pakistan due to the political disturbances.¹

But Merton came slowly to the appreciation of Zen and only after he had been thoroughly schooled in the thought of the mystic writers of the West. In his early book The Ascent to Truth, published in 1951, Merton could write that millions of people of the Orient had a view of the Universe that was pantheistic.² But Merton was in no way being derisive of Eastern religions. He always had a respect for them. In his master's thesis on William Blake he wrote of the Hindu artist who would first practise asceticism, and thereby purge himself of all distracting influences. Then he was free to contemplate the ideal model, become one with it, and then draw it.³ This same thought appears in 1960 when Merton considered the artists of Zen. He saw the Zen artist as losing sight of himself as a knowing subject, and then coming to know true existence, or "isness," with his response to it being an act of creativeness.⁴

¹Rice, The Man in the Sycamore Tree, p. 131.
²Merton, The Ascent to Truth, p. 111.
Later, we shall see Merton using art as a means toward understanding Zen.

Zen is a Japanese word; our word meditation comes closest to a definition of it. While the word Zen is derived from the Chinese word ch’an, its philosophical origin lies in India. Buddhism sprang from Hinduism in reaction to the speculations and ritualisms which were the chief occupations of India’s ancient priestly class. Later a type of Buddhist faith called Hinayana, meaning "lesser career," took root in a major part of what is now Indochina. The native Taoism of China was fused with Manhayana, "greater career," to give rise to Ch’an. In Japan Zen Buddhism reaches back to the twelfth century.¹

Some historians hold that the actual founder of Zen was the Chinese, Tao-Sheung (ca. 360-434), with the development of the doctrine of instantaneous enlightenment. An understanding of it is gained by contrasting the Chinese preference for intuitive comprehension with the Indian way of gradually ascending toward enlightenment. As regards the object, gradual stages of perception are impossible. But from the subjective point of view, there is the possibility of graduations in comprehension. Tao-Sheung’s doctrine applies to the attainment of the goal in both its objective and subjective aspects. The

¹Graham, Zen Catholicism, pp. 12-16.
Jesuit Father Heinrich Dumoulin, a Western authority on Zen, admits that other students of Zen would look to other Chinese sages as the founder of Zen.¹

Merton respected the scholarship of Father Dumoulin, but relying on the authority of the late Daisetz T. Suzuki, the Japanese Zen master, Merton looked to an earlier Chinese sage, Chuang Tzu, who wrote in the fourth and third century B.C., as the ancestor of Zen. Merton wrote:

There is no question that the kind of thought and culture represented by Chuang Tzu was what transformed highly speculative Indian Buddhism into the humorous, iconoclastic, and totally practical kind of Buddhism that was to flourish in China and Japan in the various schools of Zen.²

Merton's words help us to understand how a land of ancient culture like China was able to accept a higher religion from India with its authoritative dogma and cult. China's acceptance of Buddhism must be ranked as a major event in the history of religion.³

From the middle of the twelfth century on, with a steady exchange of Japanese and Chinese monks, Zen began to thrive in


³ Dumoulin, A History of Zen Buddhism, p. 65.
Japan. Dogen, a monastic name, (1200-1253), considered the zen master in Japanese history, simplified Buddhism. He introduced Zazen, a meditation in which the disciple sits upright with legs crossed. While certainly akin to Indian Yoga insofar as it sought to bring repose to the body, it did not seek to imitate Yoga regarding the emphasis on breathing. For Dogen, Zen was a way of perfect unity, and the first and basic Zen experience concerned the unity of body and mind. His rule of life is still observed in Zen monasteries in Japan.\(^1\)

Merton credited Dumoulin for giving a simple yet complete historical outline of Zen. Merton's words could act as a summary of the above paragraphs when he wrote:

Zen was not suddenly "introduced" to China by any one man. It is the product of the combination of Mahayana Buddhism with Chinese Taoism which was later transported to Japan and further refined there.\(^2\)

Even to this day, despite the current Americanization of Japan, Zen cannot be separated from the various arts and disciplines in Japanese life. These "doing" things offer to those who can perform one or several of them an opportunity to manifest the inner essence of Zen. Here would be included judo,

\(^1\) Ibid., pp. 162-68.

kendo, the tea ceremony, and archery.¹

An example of this is seen in the appreciation of Yukio Mishima, the late Japanese intellectual, for kendo, ceremonial swordsmanship. In November 1970, Mishima, forty-five and in the prime of life, committed seppuki, a grisly and ritual act of suicide, in order to move Japan politically to the right. Mishima was not strong in his youth during the war years. He found kendo, with its barbaric threatening cries as a threat to culture and civilization. But after his intellectual career as a writer was well launched, Mishima at the age of thirty took up sports. He felt that since as a writer he had often to dwell on unhealthy things he needed a body strong enough to withstand the pressures of the mind. Here we can see the thought of Dogen that the first basic Zen experience is the union of mind and body. Despite his late start in sports Mishima had at his death a strong and supple body. He first tried boxing but in his last years kendo came to be for him the true expression of the Japanese spirit. He wrote:

This sound is the cry of Nippon buried deep within me. . . . It is the cry of our race bursting through the shell of modernization. . . . When I hear the kendo cry. . . . I sometimes look out the window of the small drill hall in downtown Tokyo where I practice. And as I look up at the new elevated freeways cutting across the sky, I say

to myself that there lies mere phenomena while here below, the substance of things cry out, and I am happy.

Mishima was a militarist yet sensitive enough to see that kendo recalls the flow of new-shed blood, and that the happiness that it evokes is fraught with danger.¹

Kendo may now be bound to the militaristic spirit of Japan, but it does have roots in Zen in trying to teach the body "awareness without tension."²

The remark of Mishima about the freeways being "mere phenomena" as contrasted with the "substance of things" he felt in the kendo drill hall can be better understood with the observation of Merton that Zen enables one to distinguish between the "empirical ego" and the "person." He wrote:

There are in Zen certain suggestions of a higher and more spiritual personalism than one might at first sight expect. Zen insight is at once a liberation from the limitations of the individual ego, and a discovery of one's "original nature" and "true face" and "mind" which is no longer restricted to the empirical self... and that "I" am no longer my individual and limited self.³

Mishima in kendo seemed to have had this very experience. It gives us some inkling of Zen in modern day Japan, though

---

² Ross, Three Ways of Asian Wisdom, p. 144.
³ Merton, Mystics and Zen Masters, pp. 17-18.
like the history of Zen itself it remains partly in obscurity. One reason for this is that Zen is free of all form and structure. If it were just Zen Buddhism, then Zen would have an expression with a special kind of structure and thereby be opened to scientific investigation, and so have a definite character to be grasped and understood.¹

Regarding Zen exclusively as Zen Buddhism is to falsify and betray it. There are Zen Buddhists, yet these Zen-men will be keenly aware of the difference between their Buddhism and Zen. In fact, they would admit that Zen is the purest expression of their Buddhism.²

It might be asked what is the purest expression of Christianity?

It could be what St. Paul says in his letter to the Philippians when he speaks of the "mind of Christ"; Paul wants his readers to be one with Christ Jesus. Merton recognizes that this "mind of Christ" may be theologically worlds apart from the "mind of Buddha." But the utter "self-emptying" of Christ, who "did not cling to his equality with God," and the self-emptying that makes the disciple one with Christ can be understood in a very Zen-like sense as far as psychology and exper-

²Ibid., p. 4.
ience are concerned.\(^1\)

Why is this so? It is commonly held by philologists that a "people's distinctive use of words points to a distinctive way of seeing the world."\(^2\) Merton held that when Christians speak of the "vision of God" and Buddhists of "enlightenment" that the two share a psychic "limitlessness." This is shown by the fact that they tend to describe it in the same language. Zen would speak of "emptiness" and St. John of the Cross of "dark night." Christianity has "perfect freedom" and the Zen "no mind," and both Master Eckhart and D.T. Suzuki use "poverty" for helping the mind understand man coming to God.\(^3\)

Merton, writing in his early years as a monk, long before his interest in Zen, expressed himself in a way, however, that is helpful in understanding the use of concepts in seeking an understanding of God. Merton saw acquired conceptual knowledge of God as needed by a man seeking union with God. Meditating on these is an ordinary means for disposing oneself for mystical prayer. If the soul should be blessed with the mystical

---

\(^1\)Ibid., p. 8.


\(^3\)Merton, Zen and the Birds of Appetite, p. 8.
experience of God, then the original acquired concepts of God must not be allowed to interfere with this greater action. It is not so much the presence of concepts in the mind that interferes with the mystical illumination of the soul as "the desire to reach God through concepts."¹

Merton saw three obstacles that hinder an open approach to Zen. The first is the Cartesian affliction still in the Western mind. Secondly some Christians, notably Catholics, have rejected contemplation as being a static Middle Age groping, and so a hindrance toward finding the purity of the Christians of the first century. Thirdly, some conservatives, while holding to the great value of contemplation, have continued to look upon all Eastern thought with suspicion of it being pantheistic.

Rene Descartes, 1596-1650, has an influence in the world today, for "from him flowed all philosophy initiated in modern times."² For, insofar as he is Cartesian, the one indubitable reality for Western man is his own self-awareness as a thinking, observing, and measuring self. The more modern man is able to develop his consciousness as a subject against objects, the more he can understand them in their relations to him and

---

¹Merton, The Ascent to Truth, p. 89.
to one another. This enables him to manipulate these objects for his own interest, but at the same time he tends to isolate himself in his own subjective prison. All reality is held in the form of purely subjective experience. The ego-self becomes imprisoned in its own consciousness, isolated and out of touch with other people insofar as they are all "things" rather than people.\(^1\)

Merton held that Cartesian thought that began with the attempt to reach God as object by starting with the thinking self led inevitably to the so-called "death of God." For when God becomes object he sooner or later "dies," because God as object is unthinkable. God is beyond the grasp of the mind. For a long time man was able to hold this idol of a God in existence by an act of the will. But the mind of man grew weary of this and so it let go the God-object, with a conscious "murder" of the deity resulting.\(^2\)

This position of Merton concerning the influence of Descartes can be better understood by considering the thought of Kant concerning knowing with that of the Middle Age thinkers. Immanuel Kant, 1724-1804, may deserve the praise that Robert

\(^1\)Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, p. 22.

\(^2\)Ibid., p. 23.
Ulich gives him in calling him the "great bridge builder" insofar as he established a "synthesis between Descartes' over-optimistic belief in the universality of reason and Hume's radical skepticism."¹ But he still left man with a philosophy that was never sure what it knew corresponded to the true world. For Kant held:

... that there is an external world that causes our experience, but he insisted that we cannot prove it and therefore we cannot know it. We can only know our impressions and perceptions as ordered by the mind.²

Kant would not allow the mind of man to intuit anything. He would allow it the act of comparing, examining, relating, distinguishing, abstracting, deducing, demonstrating, all of which are forms of active intellectual effort. The thinkers of the Middle Ages were not so limiting, for they:

... drew a distinction between the understanding as ratio and the understanding as intellectus. Ratio is the power of discursive, logical thought, of searching and examination, of abstraction, of definition, and of drawing conclusions. Intellectus, on the other hand, is the name for understanding insofar as it is the capacity of simplex intuitus, of that simple vision to which truth offers itself like a landscape to the eye. The faculty of mind, ... is both these things in one. ... and the process of knowing is the action of the two together.³

Kant's stingy view of the mind is allowed some mitigation. For the philosophers of antiquity, and this sometimes means the Middle Ages besides the Greeks, held ratio as distinctively human, while intellectus was regarded as belonging to man, yet in a way more than human.¹

Kant's reason for the existence of God can be seen as related to the object-God of Descartes. For Kant:

... argued that we cannot prove the existence of God, or the immortality of the soul, or the freedom of the will. But he accepted their existence on faith, because he believed that morally they should exist: therefore, he was morally certain that they did exist.²

Theology is commonly held to be faith seeking understanding. So a man may accept the revelation that there are Three Persons in One God. In the face of this greatest mystery in Christian revelation, man is led to speculate. But Kant held that the only theology of reason which is possible is that which is based upon moral laws. "Kant wanted to prove God's existence from moral law so as to get a moral God—and with Kant morality was more important than God."³

Kant postulates God's existence as necessary to insure justice and morality. The basis for it lies in man's sense of

¹ Pieper, Leisure: The Basis of Culture, p. 27.
³ Neill, Makers of the Modern Mind, p. 212.
social obligation. But obligation requires justice without which it would be meaningless. Since justice exists then Kant held that he can postulate, as necessary consequences, both the existence of God and the immortality of the soul. As a result Kant reduced religion to mere morality, for his critical philosophy ruled theology and all religious doctrine out of bounds for speculative reason. Kant dealt a death blow to metaphysics, "and it is only within the past twenty-five years that philosophers are beginning to tire of this metaphysical agnosticism and to look for certainty again."¹

Merton held that modern man can be freed from this weariness by a consciousness of Being that goes beyond reflexive awareness. Not only in Christian mysticism but in Oriental religions is this found. With both, the self-aware subject has meaning insofar as it does not become fixated or centered upon itself as ultimate, and learns to function not as its own center but "from God." Here the individual is aware of himself as a "self-to-be-dissolved in self-giving."²

Dr. Daisetz T. Suzuki, the late master of Zen, whom Merton met and exchanged views with, in his essay "Knowledge and Innocence," showed an understanding of the Western fixation of seeing religion and ethics as one and the same thing. The

first question he was usually asked by a Western audience was what constituted the Zen concept of morality. Dr. Suzuki held that all Zen-men just because they are men have the obligation to be moral. Making use of the idea of the state of Innocence as opposed to the state of Knowledge as they are found in the Book of Genesis, Dr. Suzuki wondered if the very positing of the need of being ethical, of being good, implies a loss of the state of Innocence. While later we will look more closely at the thought of Dr. Suzuki, what is expressed here points up the need for Western man to see that man does not have a God because of his moral sense of justice; rather he has a God and proves his worthy relation to Him by doing to others as he would have them do to him.¹

The view of Merton, supported by the thought of Neill and Peiper, is that Descartes' rationalism as carried through by Kant led to the "death of God" theology. If God is dead so is contemplation. With a Zen-man, contemplation is very much alive because he is not his own center. Zen, unlike Christianity or Judaism, is not based on supernatural revelation. In Christianity the objective doctrine always retains priority both in time and eminence over subjective (or metaphysical) experience. Zen, discarding any idea of revelation, seeks to

¹Ibid., pp. 103-105.
penetrate the natural ontological ground of being. While in Zen there is, in a sense, doctrine, which is prior in time to experience, it is never more important than experience. But knowing the experience of the Zen-man (insofar as this is possible) can help the Western man in his contemplative life.¹

Currently among some Christians, notably Catholics, there is a reaction against contemplation. The thesis of this group is that the mysticism that developed in the Middle Ages, which was justified philosophically and theologically by recourse to Hellenic and Oriental ideas, is now a hindrance to returning to the experience of the first Christians. They expected the return of Christ in their own time. When the coming of Christ was put off to the future, then there resulted instead a seeking after a "new nature," an ontological status. So the original eschatological ideas were given a metaphysical dimension, with the result that the truths of Christian belief were experienced "statically" instead of dynamically. Personal contemplative union with God and deep mystical experience is considered a substitution for God's saving word, a pagan invasion, an individualistic escape from community.²

Merton contends against this opinion by asking its

¹Ibid., p. 45.
²Ibid., pp. 20-21.
proponents to prove that the "static" or metaphysical outlook is really a rupture of the original Christian awareness. Further, just what was the experience of the first Christians? Granting that this could be clearly known, is the seeking to recover it going to be "mystical" or "prophetic?" Then, perhaps the most telling question, must we choose between them? Is mysticism, an experiencing of God-life while still in the body, necessarily a holding back from wishing to see the world completely consummated by the redemptive act of Christ? Merton held that these questions are not fully answered, though they are discussed.¹

Protestantism was in part a reaction against Monasticism. Luther's doctrine of justification by faith held, as a practical corollary, that religious vows were invalid. While the Anglicans always held to their monasteries, in recent years there has been revival of Protestant monasteries. Merton was impressed with the one in Taize, France, and held it was no longer universally taken for granted by Protestants "that the monastic way is a purely man-made invention superimposed upon the Gospel of Christ, and diverting attention from the true message of salvation." Merton would have the progressive Catholics to face and deal with this revival which Father Biot,

¹ Ibid., pp. 21-22.
a Dominican calls a "theological awakening." Further Karl Barth always esteemed monasticism because it was a protest against the secularization of the world and the need of every age for those who live a solitary life.¹

While dialogue is a "progressive" thing yet these progressive Catholics shy away from an exchange with Oriental religions and especially Zen. While they can hide behind the word "ecumenism" which explicitly means dialogue with other Christians and not non-Christians, yet they ignore the "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions," which wants Catholics and all Christians to study other mystical traditions that strive to penetrate "that ultimate mystery which engulfs our being, and whence we take our rise, and whither our journey leads us."² But since Eastern religions are considered by the progressive Catholics to be "metaphysical" and "static" or even "mystical" then it is assumed that they have no relevance for our day.³

Some conservative Catholics who would staunchly defend contemplation as needed today, still consider all Asian reli-

¹Merton, Mystics and Zen Masters, pp. 188-191.


igious thought as "pantheistic and incompatible with the Christian belief in God as Creator."¹ Not only do they ignore the above words of Vatican II but they overlook some interesting history of the Church's first attempt to convert the Orient to Christianity. For it was a shallow generalization about Eastern thought being by nature opposed to Christian doctrine that slowed down the efforts of the Jesuits (and others after them) from the sixteenth century on to introduce Christianity in the East.²

St. Francis Xavier became friends with the Zen monks of the temple near Kagoshima, Japan. In a long letter that he wrote to his brethren in Goa in 1549, Francis told of his admiration of these holy men, especially one named Ninshitsu, which in Japanese means "heart of truth." The missionaries who continued in the spirit of St. Francis always sought to maintain friendly relations with the Buddhists.³

After the death of St. Francis Xavier, other Jesuits managed to make entry into China. For fifty years for various reasons the Jesuits had this mission field to themselves. Priests like Matthew Ricci felt free to adopt the robes of a

¹Ibid., p. 16.
²Merton, Mystics and Zen Masters, pp. 83-84.
³Dumoulin, A History of Zen Buddhism, pp. 198-204.
Confucian scholar and other customs and attitudes of China that they found good and therefore godly. Like true missionaries, these Jesuits distinguished between what was essentially Christian as opposed to that which just belonged to the culture of Europe. For a while the Jesuits were allowed a Chinese vernacular for the Mass and the prayers of the Office. Later in 1704 for complicated reasons this privilege was taken away. The accommodations that the Jesuits made and the reaction to them is known in Church History as the Chinese Rite Controversy. Not until December 8, 1939, through one of the first acts of Pope Pius XII, were these accommodations allowed again. Perhaps the most momentous consequence of the loss of the accommodations, especially for educators like the Jesuits, was that a Confucian scholar could not become a Christian without abandoning his office and position in Chinese society, nor could a Christian become a member of the Chinese intellectual elite.¹

Merton was not to be bound by the narrow viewpoint of some conservative Catholics. He wrote:

If St. Augustine could read Plotinus, if St. Thomas could read Aristotle and Averroës (both of them a long way further from Christianity than Chuang Tzu ever was!), I think I may be pardoned for consorting with a Chinese recluse who shares the climate and peace of my own kind of solitude, and who is my own kind of person.²

¹Merton, Mystics and Zen Masters, pp. 82-88.
²Merton, The Way of Chuang Tzu, p. 11.
If a Western mind can be free of any of these objections, whether singly or in combination (for the progressive Catholics and the holders with Descartes' thought would touch in part), then he still has the difficulty of coming to an understanding of Zen. For while the Kantian mind would set aside the intuition of the mind, the Eastern mind, or more particularly the mind of Zen-men is not inclined to the ratio, discursive thought, of the mind. The Western mind has never been stranger to it. While the Greeks were open to intuitive thought, they still sought to give a word to things. Thinking in terms of the noun and predicate is essential to Western thought. But Zen is the ontological awareness of pure being beyond subject and object, and immediate grasp of being in its "suchness" and "thusness." It is in some sense beyond the scope of psychological observation and metaphysical reflection. For want of a better term, Merton called it "purely spiritual." In order to preserve this purely spiritual quality,

... the Zen masters staunchly refuse to rationalize or verbalize the Zen experience. They relentlessly destroy all figments of the mind or imagination that pretend to convey its meaning. They even go so far as to say: "If you meet the Buddha, kill him."¹

Edith Hamilton, perhaps partisan to the Greek way, held that the way of the East to the supremacy of the spirit was

¹Merton, Mystics and Zen Masters, p. 14.
gained by an abnegation of the intellect. Greek art is still a living proof of their great spirit, but the Greeks would never have slighted intellectuality in order to come to it. "What marked the Greeks off from Egypt and India was not an inferior degree of spirituality but a superior degree of mentality."¹

Whether Edith Hamilton is correct or not is a question beyond the scope of this treatment. A Zen-man, with no attempt merely to avoid the contest offered by such a statement, but seeing that such a crossing of words would in no way lead to wisdom, might very well reply in the before mentioned dictum of the Buddhists: "Those who say do not know; those who know do not say."² The least we can say is that there is a difference in the Greek and Zen-way.

In some way a rather striking example of that difference is shown in the opinion that Mahatma Gandhi had for St. Paul. While Merton did not claim Gandhi as a Zen-master, he did regard him as a contemplative who changed the course of history, especially the relationship between the East and the West. Gandhi said:

Paul was not a Jew, he was a Greek, he had an oratorical mind, a dialectical mind, and he distorted Jesus. Jesus possessed a great force, the love force, but Christianity became disfigured when it went to the West.¹

While one may differ with Gandhi about the Apostle who claimed that Christ lived in him and then proved it by his martyrdom, it is true that "Paul was a Jew with a Greek cultural background. . . and which was certainly reinforced by repeated contact with the Graeco-Roman world."² Granting that, the remark of Gandhi is startling when his honesty and openness to the West is considered.

Merton pointed out that Gandhi's whole concept of man's relation to his inner spirit and the world about him was informed with the contemplative heritage of Hinduism joined with the principles of Karma Yoga "which blended, in his thought, with the ethic of the Synoptic Gospels and the Sermon on the Mount."³

The thought of Merton on the psychological causes of war (culled from the thought of Erich Fromm) when related to his views on Gandhi's policy of non-violence, show us the value of

the contemplation of Gandhi. Fromm sees our present conquest of matter resulting in our total subjection of our self to matter. We now expect happiness from things which are outside of us rather than from our own spiritual center. This causes frustrations and self-contradictions because the possession of our abundance has been depersonalized. The real spiritual depths of man's being are stifled. When frantic and useless activism is joined to this, then Merton believed, a death-wish arose which he saw expressed by our warfare economy and culture.¹

It could be charged that Merton overstated the case; but that he had a case seems to be certain. Merton believed that matter could be made subject by man's returning to his inner spirit, an idea dominant in the life of Gandhi. Merton pointed out two aspects of that vast, mysterious area that is called the unconscious. First, there is the psychosomatic area which is rooted in man's biological substratum,

... but there is the infinitely more spiritual and metaphysical substratum in man's being, which the Rhenish mystics called the "ground" or the "base" of the soul, and which the Zen masters continually point to, but which they refuse to describe except by incomprehensible and paradoxical terms like "your original face before you were born."

Merton believed that this spiritual unconscious had to be

explored if man were ever to rise above the level of mere empirical individuality and discover his true self.¹

Merton felt that Gandhi had come to this possession. He felt the need to fast, be in solitude on occasion, to pray so that he would not passively submit to "the insatiable requirements of a society maddened by overstimulation and obsessed with the demons of noise, voyeurism and speed."²

In 1906 Gandhi, with the permission of his wife, vowed himself to a life of celibacy. In 1924 reflecting upon his action, Gandhi saw it as a help toward his search after Brahma, or God. He had fathered four sons, when, after long thought, Gandhi made his decision and took his vow. He believed it would help him "jump from the solid ground of his old self into the unknown where, by some unfathomable endowment, he knew he could find a shelf from which to move the world."³

Merton, as was mentioned, did not claim Gandhi as a Zen-master, but his policy of non-violence had a relation to Zen. The aim of Zen is the aim of Buddhism, the ultimate emancipation from Duality. By this is meant that there is no exterior


buddha to whom the disciple is to conform himself. The disciple does not become like Buddha or even transformed into buddha. What does take place is "an ontological awakening of the ultimate ground of being, or the 'Buddha which one is.'" ¹ Gandhi was a Hindu, not a Buddhist; but it is not easy to distinguish Buddhism from Hinduism and the relation between them "continues to be a matter of debate among scholars." ²

The determination of the Zen-masters to be always free of any exterior standard finds a likeness in the metaphysical doctrine of Hinduism which holds that the transcendent self alone is absolutely real, and that the empirical self must be sacrificed to it. On this doctrine Gandhi based his doctrine of non-violent political resistance. ³

Merton thought that Gandhi effectively opposed the political evil he saw through the goodness that came from his seeking his transcendent self. He differed sharply with the British, the Moslems, and even his fellow Hindus without ever slipping into a hatred that would wound him spiritually. In the judgment of Merton none of Gandhi's contemporary world leaders were able to understand and control events as he did. ⁴

¹ Merton, Mystics and Zen Masters, p. 282.
² Graham, Zen Catholicism, p. 12.
³ Merton, Faith and Violence, pp. 15-16.
Louis Fischer's claim that Gandhi's politics were indistinguishable from his religion,¹ seems substantiated by the above. So far the origin of Zen and the obstacles that Western man need to overcome in order to approach Zen have been considered. The thought of the late Yukio Mishima was shown in proof that Zen is still present in Japan today. Mahatma Gandhi's doctrine of non-resistance was shown as related to Zen. The Middle Age distinction between ratio, logical thought, and intellectus, simple vision of the mind, was brought forth to help us understand the reluctance of a Zen-man to predicate about Zen. Such an effort could be the very obstacle that prevents a person from coming to Zen.

Merton made one approach to Zen through art. Recalling the liking of Merton for William Blake, who wanted the "doors of perception" cleansed so that man can face reality as it is, one can understand why Merton would have chosen art. He liked the unusual quality of Chinese and Japanese art that is able to suggest what cannot be said. It uses a bare minimum of form to awaken in the viewer the notion of the formless. The painter tells him just enough so as to alert him to what is not there, which, of course makes him aware that it is there.²

¹Fischer, Gandhi: His Life and Message for the World, p. 35.
²Merton, Zen and the Birds of Appetite, p. 6.
One example is the so-called "one-corner style" in which the important central space of the painting is left unoccupied. This is done to release the imagination and quiet the mind. In Japanese homes the guest room is never cluttered by the host who is aware of the meaningfulness of empty space.\(^1\)

It is this strange quality of openness that enables Zen art to lead a person to contemplation. Merton thought this was beautifully shown by the "art of tea," which manages to depict a monastic and contemplative style of life. Some Westerners have thought it to be a stilted social affair. Formality does guide the tea ceremony but much room is still left for originality, spontaneity, and spiritual freedom. Uplifted by a spiritual union, guests and host are enabled to give artistic expression in executing the ceremonies of the tea. Ideally, each participant is led to become a soul in the form of art. Merton saw the art of tea as something in the manner of the "liturgy of a monastery."\(^2\)

Zen does not fit any category that a Western mind can bring to it. It is not theology, revelation, or mysticism. But there is a need to grasp the implicit Buddhist metaphysic which it, so to speak, acts out. While it is an interpretation of ordinary experience, such a statement is easily misleading,

---


For there is the logical tendency to conceive the facts of ordinary experience as reducible to certain foolproof propositions. For Zen, it is inconceivable that the basic facts of experience should be stated in a proposition. No sooner is fact transferred to a statement, than it is falsified. Zen does not generalize, it does not try to make absolute statements about existence. It wants to come to direct grips with reality without the mediation of logical verbalization.¹

In this we see Zen facing the problem that confronts all men. The mind of man can never adequately know itself. Frank Kafka's play, The Trial, shows the frustration we all experience in various degrees in lacking a logical explanation for our actions. Facing the mystery within himself, a person can better appreciate the theology about the Triune God: God the Father fully begets and knows Himself in the Person of the Son; the love between them is the Person of the Holy Spirit.

In one of his earlier poems titled "Freedom as Experience," Merton gave expression to what God had and we lack. He wrote:

When, as the captive of Your own invincible consent,
You love the Image of Your endless Love,
Three-Personed God, what intellect
Shall take the measure of that liberty?²

¹Ibid., pp. 34-37.
²Merton, Figures for an Apocalypse, p. 82.
Zen's interest is not in words but in things. The enlightenment which is the goal of Zen is not something to be gained by working at it. But it does come to those who are disposed to receive it. Better, it is already there but our self-conscious egos must be cleansed of distracting thought and cloudy emotions, so that we might see things as they are. Dr. Suzuki once gave an example of the non-word that gives action its freedom, when he said: "When I raise the hand thus, there is Zen, but when I assert that I have raised the hand, Zen is no more there."¹

But Zen does aim at certainty, but not the logical certainty of philosophical truth, nor the certainty that comes from accepting revelation. It is the certainty that goes with an authentic metaphysical intuition.² Perhaps the closest example of this kind of knowing in Western thought would be that of the "disciplined educated taste" of the classical humanists. This is the tradition of the belles-lettres, which refined its students to appreciate the balance and subtle nuances of classical thought.³ But since such knowing comes from rhetoric,

¹Graham, Zen Catholicism, p. 19.
²Merton, Zen and the Birds of Appetite, p. 38.
granting it to be the most refined, it is obviously not Zen. An example of this kind of knowing which in turn is an example of the Western mind being wordy to the point of non-meaning is seen in a book review by Merton of J.F. Powers' *Morte d'Urban*, a novel that showed the foibles of American Catholic priests. Merton wrote:

The statement of a Powers' character always mean at the same time less and more than they are intended to mean. The words are not quite accurate in saying what they want to say, and at the same time they speak infinitely damaging volumes of implication, thus confirming the words of Scripture: "A fool's mouth is his ruin, and his lips are a snare to himself." The dialogue of Powers' characters is then always shot through with absurdity, and the cumulative effect of a few pages of it is to leave us convinced of the irrationality and fatuity of their attitudes and folkways.¹

It was said that Zen seeks a certainty beyond the given word of God. This is understood when we realize that the precise and clear ideas that a Christian holds from Revelation, particularly those framed in the dogmas of the Catholic faith, are given that a person might go beyond the merely logical to a living experience of Christ which far transcends all conceptual formations. Christianity should be a taste and experience of eternal life.²


Keeping in mind what Catholic dogma would lead us to, will allow us to appreciate why the language of Zen is sometimes anti-language. Ordinarily we need words and signs to communicate, but even ordinary experience can be falsified in part by our habits of verbalization. For often we see things and facts not so much as they are but as reflections and verifications of the sentences we have previously made up. Zen uses language against itself to destroy the specious reality in our minds so that we can see directly.¹

In the spring of 1959 Merton began an exchange with the Zen-master, the late Dr. Daisetz T. Suzuki of Japan that was reminiscent of the dialogue between St. Francis Xavier and the Buddhist monk Ninshitsu in the sixteenth century.²

Merton found that Suzuki's writings were pretty much about the same thing. But this fixation was not indicative of a limited mind, but the wisdom of a person who has sought truth in its essence and has in part come to it. Merton compared the writings of Dr. Suzuki to the motus-orbicularius of Pseudo-

¹Ibid., pp. 48-49.
²Ibid., p. 99.
pionysius. It is the wisdom of the contemplative that moves in a circling and hovering motion like that of an eagle above some invisible quarry. The man who is not settled into truth is given to linear flight. He goes far, takes up distant positions, abandons them, and then forgets what it was that made him so concerned. ¹ It was shown that Kant wanted to reduce religion to morality. In contrast Dr. Suzuki approached morality from religion, or more precisely, Zen. He wrote:

All of the moral values and social practice come out of this life of Suchness which is Emptiness. If this is so, then 'good' and 'evil' are secondary differentiations. What differentiates them and how do I know what is 'good' other than 'evil'? In other words, can I - and if so, how can I - derive an ethics from the ontology of Zen Buddhism?

So that a Western Christian mind might better understand what he was saying here Dr. Suzuki recalled the old axiom of St. Augustine: "Love God and do as you will." Here, morality flows from love. It is akin to the state of Innocence before the Fall of man. ²

With this in mind we can better understand what Suzuki meant when he said "that the Judaeo-Christian idea of Innocence is the moral interpretation of the Buddhist doctrine of Emptiness which is metaphysical." Where the Buddhist would go from

¹Ibid., p. 65.
²Ibid., p. 104.
Ignorance back to Original Light (Emptiness), the Judaeo-Christian concept would be a moving away from Knowledge, that is, the knowledge of evil that could be a source of temptation to him, or at least part of the burden that goes with living in this vale of tears, back to Innocence. The more evil there is, and evil is often devious, the the more the just man needs moral sense to discern evil from good.¹

The hope of any monk is to regain this Innocence as Merton pointed out in his reply to the thought of Dr. Suzuki. Retiring from ordinary life where law must be strongly asserted so that men might be able to function properly, he seeks a return to Innocence if he is a Jew or a Christian, or Original Light if he is a Zen-man. Merton made clear by paradise he did not mean heaven but rather an approach to that state where a man can have "free speech" with God.²

Both Merton and Suzuki pointed out the serious error of anyone thinking that he could all alone bring himself back to the state of innocence. In original innocence man had wisdom without the encumbrance of knowledge. But in seeking to return to wisdom man must work on the level of knowledge. A monk would pervert his calling if he were to sink back into a sort of narcissistic baby-like ignorance. His true innocence must

¹Ibid., pp. 105-106.
²Ibid., p. 116.
be a reflection of God which he ever seeks to clarify. Knowledge is not cast out by this innocence, it simply is bent to its proper purpose of seeking wisdom.¹

What can Zen give the busy American teacher? The teacher as we saw in the thought of St. Thomas should be a contemplative, but he must be a man of words. However, it is the right word that conveys the teacher's thought, and this is what the Angelic Doctor wanted the teacher to come up with.² The true teacher knows that his words never quite express his thought; then, his listeners never catch fully the meaning of his words. What Zen gives is the proper emphasis. Zen by being non-wordy is really patient with words. It recognizes their limitations. But the Zen-masters, and other leaders of Eastern religions like Gandhi, never lost sight of the main objective, namely, to bring their disciples to an authentic metaphysical intuition. Western thought has been pulled away from this emphasis. Merton spoke of it as a "flight from being into verbalism," with its origin lying in Cartesianism. Merton sees the taste for Zen as a healthy reaction of people exasperated with Descartes and his thought which "made a fetish out of the mirror in

¹Ibid., p. 121.
²St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, 11-11, Q. 181, a. 4.
which the self finds itself. Zen shatters it.¹

This emphasis of Zen can help bring man back to the thought of the Middle Ages. Then, ratio, logical thought, and intellectus, the simple vision to which truth offers itself like a landscape to the eye, were both seen as belonging to the faculty of the mind. While Zen in its long history knew times of decline, it is still paradoxical that the thought of the East can help bring Western man back to the point in its history before Western thought was fragmented.

Christopher Dawson, who always sought to bring the Western world back to its heritage, impressed Merton with his views on the "religious vacuum" in Western education. Merton wrote:

> It is absolutely essential to introduce into our study of the humanities a dimension of wisdom orientated to contemplation. . . . For this, it is no longer sufficient merely to go back over the Christian and European cultural traditions.²

Merton seemed justified in saying this when it is placed next to the words from the ninety-eight year old Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, written the day before he died.

> Let us not forget that Zen always aspires to make us directly see into Reality itself, that is, be Reality itself so that we can say along with Master Eckhart that: 'Christ is born every minute in my soul' or that 'God's Isness is my Isness.' Let us

¹Merton, Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, p. 260.
²Merton, Mystics and Zen Masters, p. 80.
keep this in mind as we endeavour to understand Zen.

Western man has always and rightly been proud of his cultural heritage, even when certain of his life patterns were not in harmony with it. Despite the bitterness brought on by the disunity of Christendom, both Catholics and Protestants held to the same humanist culture. While Dr. Suzuki never experienced a disunity of faith and culture in his own milieu, which would seem to be a favorable factor in his being open to another culture, still his clearly seeing Christ as the same Reality as the Zen Isness, demands in fairness from a scholar who believes in the Divinity of Christ to wonder just what Zen is. Thomas Merton gave Zen the study of his last years; he wrote:

... the cultural heritage of Asia has as much right to be studied in our colleges as the cultural heritage of Greece and Rome. Asian cultural traditions have, like our ancient cultures, been profoundly spiritual.

Merton's old friend from Columbia days, who was his Godfather when he became a Catholic, wrote rather flashily that he

1Ibid., p. 290.


3Merton, Mystics and Zen Masters, p. 45.
... was writing a book about an Englishman who became a Communist, then a Catholic, later a Trappist monk and finally a Buddhist, at which point, his life being fulfilled, he died.¹

Some good Catholics that this writer has met thought that this meant Merton had left the Catholic Church. This was not so. The words that Merton spoke at the end of his address given at the meeting of Bangkok give assurance of his being a Catholic who appreciated Eastern thought. John Moffitt, art editor for America magazine, who attended the meeting wrote:

Near the end of his talk, Thomas Merton said: "For the Christian there is no longer Asian or European. Both Buddhism and Christianity point beyond all difference."²

These last words of Merton do not mean that he no longer valued Christian concepts, of Christian beliefs. All his life he had meditated upon the Creed; it made him a contemplative. It was just at the end Merton and Suzuki had come to a point where seemingly there was no difference between them.

¹Rice, The Man in the Sycamore Tree, p. 139.

CHAPTER IV

CONTEMPLATION AND HUMANISM

Since man is always a mystery to himself, humanism is necessarily related to contemplation.

Even if one takes the position of H.J. Blackham that a full-blown humanism should be based on the assumption that man is on his own (Divine Providence being ruled out) and that this life is all that there is, then man does not escape mystery. For life is always an untidy and risky business. ¹

Perhaps a broader view of humanism, one that would include those who hold man is responsible to God, would be the thought of Robert Ulich that humanism means man's interest in man. Ulich recognized that the term humanism has been historically joined to the Renaissance, with its hunger and thirst for the cultural of the Ancient World, though earlier scholars such as St. Thomas Aquinas were conversant with Greek thought. The latter would have been inclined to make such learning a servant

of theology, while the former would have attempted "to enter into its original spirit."¹

Blackham shares the historical view of Ulich. He sees humanism as derived from Greek sources. In the West it was married to Christianity. With the coming of the Renaissance, followed by the Enlightenment, there was a movement away from Christianity, but not a clear repudiation of the Christian tradition.²

Blackham would have humanists be committed to his views that man is on his own and that this world is all that there is. But he is honest enough to admit that the mainstream of humanism still lies in a Christian tradition, even though the dominant pattern for this prevailing humanism is far more Greek than Christian.³

Blackham is willing to incorporate into his humanistic camp a "Christian humanist" who finds inspiration for his humanism from the "myth, symbol, and ritual" of Christianity. Such a Christian would share the assumption of Blackham that man is not responsible to a God but only to himself.⁴

² Blackham, Humanism, p. 102.
³ Ibid., p. 20.
⁴ Ibid., pp. 15 and 20.
Blackham admits that most Christians do not limit their "creed" to being nothing more than a servant to their humanistic goals. To most followers of Christ a Christian humanist means a person who gives full value to human life, allowing it a relative autonomy, and does so because he believes that God made the world. Sometimes this view is contrasted with a more fundamentalist Christianity, so occupied with salvation that it is inclined to forget this world.¹

In allowing the above as the more commonly held view of Christian humanism, Blackham expresses what Merton concurred in. Writing in 1951 Merton defined contemplation as "simply the supernatural experience of the truths about God contained in the deposit of Christian faith."² In the seventeen years still to be granted him, Merton had much to say about contemplation, but his basic view expressed above would prevail in all of it. In a book published posthumously, Merton spoke of Christian contemplation giving "a certain intuitive appreciation or savor of the divine life itself in so far as it is a personal participation, by grace, in that life itself."³

¹Ibid., pp. 20-21.
²Merton, The Ascent to Truth, p. 259.
By 1960 Merton clearly saw his life as a Trappist as humanistic. He wrote that without the "perspectives of true Christian humanism and personalism, ... the contemplative life would be, to me, completely unthinkable." At the same time he held that if a Christian did not hold fast to the basic beliefs of the Incarnation and the redemptive act of Jesus Christ then he was completely lacking in his mission to be a Christian humanist. It was imprudent, not to say heretical, for a Christian to allow his own belief in the Divinity of Christ to be in doubt with the hope that he might find a common ground with those who openly reject Christ as God. Merton held that a believer had to be what he really is if he hoped to have an honest approach to a non-believer.

Merton's idea of a non-believer would correspond with the assumptions that Blackham made. Namely, a humanist who held that man is on his own and this life is all that there is. Such a view, of course, would be stranger to the wisdom of Dr. Suzuki, the Zen-master, so greatly admired by Merton. The day before this great man died at the age of 98, he spoke of Christ being born every minute in his soul.

1 Merton, Disputed Questions, p. x.
3 Merton, Mystics and Zen Masters, p. 290.
Two humanists who would fit Blackham's idea of humanism are Irving Babbitt and Sir Julian Huxley. In the first two decades of this century, Babbitt, teaching at Harvard, proved himself a leader in the fight to restore classical humanism to its former dominant position in the college curriculum.\(^1\) By 1960 Sir Julian Huxley had emerged as the flag-bearer for some of his fellow humanists.\(^2\) In 1961 Huxley became the first president of the British Humanist Association formed in good part from the ethical humanists of various organizations, with the Ethical Union being the strongest of the former bodies. Blackham noted the humanist literature of the last decade, singling out *The Humanist Frame* as outstanding. Sir Julian Huxley was the prime contributor to it as well as its editor.\(^3\)

The rest of the chapter will compare in part the Christian humanism of Merton with the particular humanism of Babbitt and Huxley. The humanism of the latter two led them to contemplation. Not, of course, the same kind of contemplation as Merton, for they would reject his idea of man having an intuitive appreciation of the divine life, a gift by God of His life to


Merton, though, would not have rejected the contemplative ability of Babbitt and Huxley. In an early work in which he is explaining reasoning in the contemplative act, Merton recalled the thought of St. Thomas that the broadest possible definition of contemplation is a simple intuition of the truth.\(^1\) Contemplation in this sense could not be denied these two gifted men.

The two following quotations from Babbitt and Huxley illustrate this intuitive awareness. In the first Babbitt seeks to reap from the classical authors a disciplined aesthetic taste. In 1910 he gave expression to this hope when he wrote:

\[
\ldots \text{the main concern of a platonist would have been with that something that seems to proceed from the innermost recesses of man's being, and that makes itself felt, not as an impulse, but rather as a norm and check upon impulse,--not as an elan \textit{vital}, but rather as a frein \textit{vital}.}\]

Huxley seems even more aware of the mystery of man. Adopting the word noösphere of Teilhard de Chardin, he speaks of an intangible sea of thought that modern man exists in and has his being:

Floating in this noösphere there are, for his taking, the daring speculations and aspiring ideals of man long dead, the organized knowledge of science, the hoary wisdom of the ancients, the creative imaginings of all the world's poets and artists.

\(^1\)Merton, \textit{The Ascent to Truth}, p. 205.

And in his own nature there are, waiting to be called upon, an array of potential helpers—all the possibilities of wonder and knowledge, of delight and reverence, of creative belief and moral purpose...

As we shall see Babbitt, Merton and Huxley are one in seeing the need of an integrative factor for all the knowledge available to man in this century. This need has been expressed in educational circles with greater intensity in the past few years because of the rejection of education by the young. In a recent article Thomas Sobel stressed the need for education to relate the intuitive with the rational. Too often the idea or the word seems more important than the thing itself; what the school expresses of life frequently flattens the taste of life. Sobel, in support of his position, quoted a letter that a seventeen-year old youth, of suburban background, wrote to his high-school superintendent telling why he was skipping his senior year. His style may be flamboyant, but it was with deep feeling that he wrote:

... after 12 years of stultifying and stagnating repression, my most imperative need is exposure... to new ideas, new concepts, to life... I have served 17 years of life in a society where education serves least what is most important: How to live...

My second imperative is the need to equip myself to deal with the world as a decent respect for humanity

---

1Huxley, The Humanist Frame, p. 19.
compels. That is an enormous task. It means undoing the fettering disabilities 17 years of Amerikan [sic] education has burdened me with.¹

The position of Irving Babbitt concerning the need for humanism in the college curriculum gives some historical insight as to why there might be such a reaction to present day education. Babbitt in 1919 held that American education was continually oscillating between scientific naturalism as epitomized by Bacon and romantic naturalism that came from the thought of Rousseau.²

What could man use to counter and channel these two influences and make certain they did not unseat man from his control over them? Babbitt gave his answer in the following quotation in which he equated bolshevism with naturalism.

The choice to which the modern man will finally be reduced, it has been said, is that of being a Bolshevist or a Jesuit. In that case (assuming that by a Jesuit is meant the ultramontane Catholic) there does not seem to be much room for hesitation. . . . In fact, under certain conditions that are already partly in sight, The Catholic Church may perhaps be the only institution left in the Occident that can be counted on to uphold civilized standards. It may also be possible, however, to be a thorough going modern and at the same time civilized.³


There is no doubt that Babbitt's position was that of the latter, a non-believer. Paul Elmer More, his life-long friend and colleague in the praise of classical humanism, is clear on the point. Once while they were in graduate school at Harvard and happened to go by a church, Babbitt turned to More and said: "There is the enemy, there is the thing that I hate."\(^1\) On another occasion More responded to Babbitt in a way that seemed to reveal his faith in the supernatural, though at this time of his life, as More later admitted, his faith was all but dead. But Babbitt turned on More and demanded to know if he were a Jesuit in disguise.\(^2\)

Despite his own firm position as a non-believer, Babbitt saw Christianity as a religion that dealt sternly with the facts of human nature. The man who looked on himself as cut off from God and ceased to seek Him was the victim of _acedia_, a sluggishness and slackness of spirit. While the romantics in the manner of Rousseau considered such a _grand malaise_ as a badge of spiritual distinction, such flabbiness was the enemy to Babbitt.\(^3\)


\(^2\) Ibid., p. 27.

\(^3\) Babbitt, _Rousseau and Romanticism_, p. 255.
Babbitt would deliver the intellectuals, destined for leadership in America, from romantic and scientific naturalism through the frein vital, the will to refrain, gained from the study of the classic writers in the original language. More marvelled that his friend Babbitt came so quickly in life to this intellectual position that he never forsook. For Babbitt truth was "something fixed that can be discovered, and when discovered it is of a nature to demand man's unwavering allegiance."¹

Babbitt held that the scientific naturalists of the nineteenth century, leaving no room for human spontaneity, lead men to spiritual depression. While science demands a discipline which a man can use to help bring order into his life, yet it is not able of itself to set right limits to the faculty that it chiefly exercises—the intellect. In fact it stimulates rather than curbs the lust for knowledge. Not only does it fail in this, but by a curious paradox it can easily lead man to the lust for emotion. Protracted and unemotional analysis results finally in a desire for the opposite, namely a frank surrender to the emotions. The scientific naturalist finds support in his giving way to such a sudden urge in the Rousseauean notion that conscience and virtue are themselves

only forms of emotion. Further, the scientist's disinclination to subordinate his own scientific discipline to some superior religious or humanistic discipline finds concurrence in the thought of Rousseau.¹

As was seen in the first chapter, Merton as a young man became a full-blown romantic naturalist through his reading of such novelists as D.H. Lawrence. The one true light in his life at this time was the appreciation of William Blake that his father had instilled in him. Even though Blake is ranked in literary history as a Romanticist, he abominated the naturalism of Rousseau. It was the burning words of Blake that slowly and surely began to corral Merton down the road of asceticism, soon to be greatly aided at Columbia by Mark Van Doren and Daniel Walsh, that led finally to his rejection of the shallow naturalism that had brought such misery into his life.²

Merton clearly shared the belief of Babbitt that classical writing can give rise to a frein vital, a will to refrain. While reading John of Salisbury, a twelfth century English scholar who was fearful that the new and great interest in the

¹Babbitt, Rousseau and Romanticism, pp. 261-62.
²Supra, pp. 21-23, and pp. 38-47.
writings of Aristotle would eliminate the Latin Classics, and the belles-lettres would be forced into exile,¹ Merton came upon some lines from Vergil's *Georgics* that he had learned some thirty years earlier at Oakham.

Felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas
Atque metus omnes, et inexorabile fatum
Subjecit pedibus, strepitumque Acherontis avari.

Happy the man who sees into the causes of all things, for he thereby conquers fear and hate, and even the "roar of hungry Acheron," the river of hell.²

Merton agreed with John of Salisbury that to have gained something of this Classic temper left one ready for faith and the highest truth. Babbitt, it would seem, might well have liked to have composed the following:

To have learned such lines as these and many others is to have entered into a kind of communion with the inner strength of civilization to which I belong, and whatever may be the roar of Acheron (which these days seems more definitive than the quiet voice of Classicism) this inner strength is, in itself, indestructible. But one can abandon it, and get carried off by the rising of the dark winds, not remembering to hold fast to the root of things.³

In view of the appreciation of Merton for the contemplatives of the East it is interesting to find Babbitt finding

---


³ Ibid.
Aristotle and Buddha to be kindred spirits. Babbitt held that the "energetic" contemplation of Aristotle and the "strenuousness" found in the contemplative spirit of Buddha were united in seeing contemplation as a "working" activity. This thought, though, is not to be set in opposition to the basic position of Aristotle that the artist, whose inventions were for man's recreation, was considered wiser than the artist whose inventions were directed to the necessities of life. For once a culture was satisfied in the necessities of life, then it could turn its attention to speculative thought. This is why the mathematical arts were founded in Egypt. Finally, this leisure could lead to the discovery of the 'why' of anything, that is, to Wisdom.¹ Babbitt, however, was striking out at the flaccid passivity of the Romanticists. He held that Rousseau and many of his followers fell into a sham spirituality when they came to equate revery in nature with vision in the Aristotelian sense.²

Babbitt maintained that the nineteenth century French novelist, Baroness Dudevant, who went by the name of George Sand finally recovered a sense of serenity after suffering shock after shock of disillusionment, by exercising to some

¹Aristotle, Metaphysics, 1, 1.
²Babbitt, Rousseau and Romanticism, pp. 260-61.
degree what she called "le sens contemplatif où reside la foi invincible." At this time of her life George Sand was not speaking of religious faith. She became an advocate of what today would be called "free love." In 1837 when she was thirty-three years old, she proposed a revision of the divorce laws in France to fit the new awareness of human emotions. She held that love in certain circumstances might grow so irresistible that a prior marriage binding one of the lovers had to be dissolved. George Sand had serious love affairs with at least four Romantic celebrities as well as with others of lesser figure.

Thoughts of suicide were the fruit of this religion of love. Gradually a new religion dawned upon her, and the religion of human brotherhood was substituted for the religion of love. Again she was disillusioned in her new faith by the Revolution of 1848. In time she was critical of the education proposed by the Romanticist Flaubert for being too passive, for not demanding of its adherents that they act upon themselves. She could not forget that the price of her own victory over despair was born of the work of her will. She rejected at this same time the Romanticist axiom ars gratia artis, for

---

1 Ibid., p. 261.

truth was to be ranked above beauty and goodness before strength. George Sand finally felt that she had rid herself of the sentiment of the ego by her reflection on what she called le vrai total. While Babbitt did not claim her as a great humanist, yet she made the difficult transition from her hereditary faith to a personal conviction of the human law within her. This came not from anything traditional but of her perception of the "total truth" born of her "contemplative sense."¹

Babbitt would keep modern man from being a drifter after the manner of a Rousseauean on the one hand and of unrestrained working as shown in an Edison. The former makes sluggish the rhythm natural to human law; the latter ruffles it and hinders the mind of the eye from coming to a view of "total truth." Babbitt was not unappreciative of the exactness of the scientific naturalists; he saw too that the fantasy born of the Romantic movement could enhance reality, but that it must never be allowed to engulf it. He ever insisted that they both be related to man as he is.²

Babbitt believed that man would come to know himself and approach happiness by working according to the human law within him. As time went on a man would move from a lower to a higher

¹Babbitt, Rousseau and Romanticism, pp. 257-61.
²Ibid., p. 266.
ethical level. Working ethically for Babbitt meant contemplation as he understood Aristotle and Buddha's ideas of it. The "energetic" contemplation of Aristotle and the "strenuous" contemplation of Buddha gives an inner unity to a man whereby he gains possession of his ethical self, a self he possesses in common with other men.¹

Babbitt was honest enough to admit that souls never meet, and that no man ever quite escapes from his solitude, the prison of his own person. Even so, the choice of direction is most important. Rousseau offered man an intoxicating moment when he seemed self-sufficing like God. The following moment he is only the more imbedded in his loneliness. The man who works ethically moves from the less permanent to what is more permanent which brings him more peace. "The problem of happiness and the problem of peace turn out at last to be inseparable."²

Can man save himself from himself through himself? Paul Elmer More, Babbitt's colleague and life-long friend, praised the humanism of Babbitt for leading his contemporaries through the Scylla of Scientific naturalism on the one side and the Charybdis of Romantic naturalism on the other. But once

¹Ibid., pp. 264-65.
²Ibid., p. 264.
Babbitt had brought man into the open sea of his humanism, wide and long as it certainly is, then, what course did he set for man? What harbor did he point out to him? More, near the end of his life had moved beyond the position of Babbitt into Christian humanism. More saw the non-believing humanist using his will

... to clothe human nature with value; value measured by happiness—the chain being perfect, link by link, only at the end it seems to be attached to nothing. ... If we perish like beasts, shall we not live like beasts? ... It is not that the direction itself is wrong; every step of the program is right, and only by this path can we escape the waste land of naturalism. But can we stop here in security? ... Will not the humanist, unless he adds to his creed the faith and hope of religion, find himself at last, despite his protest, dragged back into the camp of the naturalist?¹

In the second chapter it may be recalled Merton held that no man escapes believing. Failing to accept the revelation of God which is above him, leaves him open to the danger of believing in something beneath him. It takes an act of the will to bring the mind to assent in faith to a truth proposed. But if a man waits until he sees it clearly, before he will believe, he never starts on the journey. A man must first act and then he will see, credo ut intelligam.²

² Supra, pp. 57-58.
Merton telling of his acceptance of the grace that started him toward becoming a priest is a thrilling example of this working of the mind and will in an act of faith. Merton had spent the night before talking and drinking until four o'clock in the morning. He and two friends had slept in Merton's small New York apartment until late the next day. Suddenly at breakfast over the clamor of the record player, Merton said that he was going to be a priest. He did not know what caused his announcement. Later, in the evening, when he was alone Merton responded to some kind of an instinct that prompted him to go to the Jesuit Church of St. Francis Xavier on Sixteenth Street. In the basement church he found a simple group of Catholics at Benediction following a novena of some sort or a Holy Hour. While looking up at the White Host in the monstrance, it suddenly became clear to Merton that his whole life was in crisis. Far more than he could imagine was hanging on a decision of his. If he had hesitated or refused he wondered what would have become of him? His whole life seem suspended on the edge of an abyss, but it was an abyss of love and peace, the abyss of God. Merton was being faced squarely with the grace of becoming a priest. If he accepted it, it would in some sense be a blind, irrevocable act. When the priest lifted the monstrance and turned to bless the people, Merton gave his answer:
I looked straight at the Host, and I knew now, who it was I was looking at and I said: "Yes, I want to be a priest, with all my heart I want it. If it is your will, make me a priest--make me a priest."\(^1\)

From what has been said, it is evident that Babbitt and Merton would agree with Aristotle when he urged all men that being mortal should not prevent them from straining every nerve to live in accordance with what is best in them, namely their reasons, and thereby, in so far as they can, become immortal.\(^2\)

Merton would go further. He granted that a metaphysician could grasp being, subjectively, by experience and intuition. But the believing man seeking understanding for his faith through contemplation could come to the point where he

\[\ldots\text{ not only sees and touches what is real, but beyond the surface of all that is actual, he attains to communion with the Freedom Who is the source of all actuality. }\ldots\text{ He is so far above being that it is in some sense truer to say of him that He "is not" than that He is.}^3\]

Babbitt and Merton are separated by the wide gulf of faith. Educationally they are united in the necessity of seeing naturalism being subject to the human law which is permanent in all men. By contrast, Sir Julian Huxley held that the man of

\(^1\) Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, pp. 252-55.


the 1960's was already embarked on what he called the psychosocial stage of evolution, a new humanism that would have nothing to do with absolutes, even that of the nature of man.¹

Huxley gave worthy insights to the problems of modern man. Much of what he said in this regard would find Merton in agreement. They differed on certain points as to solution. Merton, however, seems to have been the more perceptive. He flipped over the rock that man has used to hide the ugly vermin that is within him; but this confronting of humanity at the core of its weakness only leads to a greater openness to the healing effects of the Spirit of God.²

Huxley proposed a new idea-system, which includes beliefs, attitudes, and symbols as well as intellectual concepts and ideas, as a keen need if a man is to emerge from his present disillusionment into the psychosocial stage of evolution. The great increase of knowledge must be organized about, and integrated into this new idea-system, which Huxley gave the name Humanism. Its motto would be: Nihil humanum a me alienum puto. Such a system accepts evolution as a fact, and that man is part of a comprehensive revolutionary process, affirming the unity of mind and body and the continuity of man with the

rest of life. It denies the supernatural, but believes it can find standards to which our actions can be related.¹

Huxley was confident that man can successfully meet the challenge of the present leading into a vast future. Man, he held, has emerged from the biological stage of evolution into the psychosocial stage. Major steps in this stage are caused by new dominant patterns of mental organization, of knowledge, ideas, and beliefs, so that man experiences a succession of successful bodily organizations. Darwin in 1859 opened the door to the evolution-centered organization of thought and belief, which man today can discern, albeit in embryonic form, through the telescope of his scientific imagination. Like all dominant thought-organizations, this idea-system is concerned with the most ultimate problems that the thought of the time is capable of envisaging. Man, the product of over two and a half billion years of slow biological improvement effected by the blind workings of natural selection, is to be the sole agent for the future evolution of this planet.²

The immediate problems that Huxley saw in the present evolutionary stage were the threat of super-scientific war, over-population, Communist ideology, the over-exploitation of

²Ibid., pp. 16-17.
natural resources pushed on by an economy geared to consumption for business, rather than production for true needs, and the widening gap between the haves and the have-nots; problems that still remain. The new belief-system, based as it is on evolution, gives hope to modern man of solving these problems, provided in the meantime that man does not destroy himself or nullify the opportunities open to him. The evolutionary outlook must be global. A beginning of this is shown in the cooperation of scientists that has been able at times to transcend nationalism. The individual need not feel that he is nothing more than a meaningless wheel in the social machine. By discovering his own talents and possibilities, inter-acting personally and fruitfully with other individuals, he can discover something of his own significance. He contributes his own personal quality to the fulfillment of human destiny, and thereby is assured of his part in the more enduring whole.¹

Can such a proposal satisfy any man? Merton through his own contemplation was able to face in himself (and so help others do the same for themselves) the terrible wrestling, an agonía, of his own freedom to choose life or death. To continue choosing life, when living means continuing the absurd battle of entity and nonentity, so well expressed in the

¹Ibid., pp. 21-23.
celebrated soliloquy of Hamlet, demands the virtue of hope. Hope for Merton was a gift from God, freely given, that springs like the life of man out of nothingness. Man meets it most perfectly when he descends into his own nothingness, stripped of his own confidence. When a man exercises this virtue he identifies his own agonia with the agonia of the God who emptied Himself and became obedient unto death.¹

While Huxley was not as clear and as certain as Merton in arming man with the weapons that would insure his victory over death, yet he pointed up the need for man to transcend the basic need of making a living. The tools he offered are art, science, and religion.² In the latter the traditional notion of a God that man acknowledges as his creator is replaced by the idea of Evolutionary Humanism.³

Huxley saw escaping as a need of all men. Escaping not only from the dullness of routine and the practical, in which of necessity we must spend so much of our lives, but above all from the prison of our single and limited selves. Huxley saw escape downwards by some through drugs and dissipation; side-wise through sports or entertainment which within limits is

¹Merton, The New Man, pp. 3-5.
²Huxley, The Humanist Frame, p. 27.
³Ibid., p. 47.
desirable; or escape upwards through art where man makes contact with enduring truth. The artist brings together single elements with separate meanings into a multi-significant whole pattern so that the work of art exerts its effects by conveying multiple meaning in a single synthesis. Huxley considered William Blake as one artist who had done this, pointing out Blake's *Tiger, Tiger, Burning Bright* as an example.¹

The artist must be a creator and an interpreter. Huxley was aware of the need of an artist to be free, but at the same time his own envisioning of evolutionary humanism seemed to cast the artist in the role of beautifying the public sector, affirming values in concrete effective forms, and providing "achievements of which human societies can be proud and through which mankind can find itself more adequately."²

While all the above is possible for an artist to do and still remain true to his own vision, yet the thought of Merton on the freedom of the artist to tell it as it is to his own vision, no matter how sick he shows modern man to be, seems far more respectful of the role of the artist. For Merton, true artistic freedom was not a matter of playing a role; it was "the outcome of authentic possibilities, understood and

¹Ibid., p. 29.
²Ibid., p. 34.
accepted in their own terms." Finally, the only valid measure of the creative freedom of the artist rests in the judgment of its viewers once it is completed.

Merton found such freedom expressed in the artifacts of an old Shaker Village which he was able to visit at Pleasant Hill, Kentucky. The Shakers emphasized the "Second Appearing" of Christ which to them was imminent; this gives understanding to their practice of celibacy. They were persecuted and by the early twentieth century had all but disappeared. Merton believed the Holy Spirit worked through them: that they left a message for their fellow Christians of today. There is no doubt they believed in the action of the Holy Ghost, for in the midst of their dancing and ecstatic experiences, it was His action that sent the whole community to "shaking." In their furnishings Merton felt that the good of the work, the bonum operis, and the advantage of the worker, the bonum operantis, were joined in the transcending act of worship that filled the whole day of the community. While the designs that the Shakers used in their tables, chairs, bed-posts, and other works, are traceable to Colonial America, yet their zeal for one of their maxims that "every force evolves a form," a saying that made Merton think of the art of William Blake, allowed

1Merton, Raids on the Unspeakable, p. 171.
them to make an original contribution to American culture.¹  
In view of his love for Gethsemani, it is interesting to see Merton say of his visit there, "that there is nothing so good anywhere in Kentucky. Those few moments of eloquent silence in the snow stay with me, follow me home, do not go away."²

Merton wanted poets of today to be just as jealous of their freedom. He deplored the gift of any poet ever being smothered in the categories of lesser men. Plato, he reminded them, had no room for poets in his Republic, so some today think they can run the modern world without free poets.³ Of Huxley it cannot be said that he opposed artistic freedom; of Merton it must be said that he recognized and fought the threats to its freedom. Lacking freedom, an artist will never offer his fellow men avenues to plateaus that transcend the ordinary.

Huxley gave science a dominant role in his Evolutionary Humanism. Science, considered as a process of discovering, establishing, and organizing has, as a result, two interrelated psychosocial functions, that of understanding and of controlling the world. Huxley held that science should now seek to study values, holding that they are phenomena which only appear on the psychological level, and so science must first approach

¹Merton, Mystics and Zen Masters, pp. 196-202.  
²Merton, Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, p. 200.  
³Merton, Raids on the Unspeakable, p. 181.
them on this level. In fact, Huxley held that only paranormal phenomena such as mental telepathy and extra-sensory perception still remain outside the range of the scientific system.¹

At the same time Huxley was aware of the great mystery that modern science has thrust upon men. While science has removed the veil of mystery from much phenomena, it now faces man with a basic and universal mystery—the mystery of existence in general.²

The many social ideas that had arisen through an analogous relation to the block-type Newtonian view of the universe were destroyed by the mathematicians and physicists. They faced man with an open-ended universe.³ Huxley accepted this universe, which initially seems too vast and too varied for our human minds to see as unitary, for so many of its components are beyond the measure of human thought. But man must learn to accept its existence (and his own) as the one basic mystery.⁴

Huxley incorporated this mystery into his belief-system, and related it to the new religion he saw emerging. In the past man projected the god-concept into forces or powers not

---

¹Huxley, The Humanist Frame, pp. 35-38.
²Ibid., p. 42.
³Karier, Man, Society, and Education, p. 129.
⁴Huxley, The Humanist Frame, p. 42.
ourselves, or believed and felt not to be within man's pale. These forces, whether those of external nature or the forces imminent in our own nature, are real enough, but if man is to deal with them using the best that is within him, then once and for all, he must discard any belief in supernatural creators, rulers, or influencers of natural and human processes. Such concepts immediately introduce an irreparable split in the universe, and thereafter hinder man from grasping its unity. Theistic religions are not only incompatible with human progress and the advance of human knowledge but are obstacles to the emergence of new types of religions. Religion must evolve with and be compatible with man's knowledge. For the first time in history, science can become an ally of religion instead of a rival or an enemy, by providing to the emerging religion a 'scientific' theology.¹

Huxley offered much with which a believer might contend. An adequate treatment could well require a dissertation to deal with it substantively. In fact, a complete comparison of the humanistic thought of Huxley to that of Merton could possibly in itself approach that proportion. The point of comparison between their thoughts in keeping with the topic of humanism's relation to contemplation lies in their approach to the magnum

¹Ibid., pp. 38-42.
mysterium of the universe. Since Huxley denied all revelation, holding that the acceptance of the Bible as the inspired word of God leads to the rejection or playing down of secular knowledge and scientific method,¹ then a comparison of their theological positions is not possible. As seen above Huxley did speak of a "scientific" theology, meaning that what knowledge is discovered about the universe (and this includes the mystery of his own nature), can furnish man matter for wonderment and awe. Huxley, of course, in using the word theology did not mean the study of God but the study of what man must replace the God-concept with, namely the new belief-system, Evolutionary Humanism, spelled with capital letters as Huxley rendered it at the end of his treatment.²

Huxley is not lacking in vision for the future of man, so perhaps one should not hold back from using his capitalization. He wanted man to transcend. What man has done in space, continually facing the great mystery of its magnitude, must be matched with the exploration of the human mind. For Huxley this would open up a new realm of being, built on, but

¹Ibid., p. 39.
²Ibid., pp. 47-48.
transcending the realm of material realities,

... a world of satisfactions transcending physical satisfaction, in some way felt as more absolute and more perfect. Ordinary men and women obtain occasional glimpses of it through falling in love, or through overwhelming experiences of ecstasy, beauty, or awe.

Huxley admitted that there is yet no proper terminology for even the discussion of such an experience by man. Such terms as rapture, inspiration and heavenly are too ordinary, and the first attempts at scientific terminology such as sublimation, id, and superego, deal only with its fringes. Huxley thought that from his religious point of view, this new direction of man might be defined as the divinization of existence, but of course, the word "divine" here must be kept free of all connotations of external supernatural beings.¹

Merton writing near the end of his life held that the transcendent experience is a metaphysical or mystical self-transcending but at the same time an experience of the "Transcendent" or the "Absolute" or "God" not so much as object but Subject. It is definitely more than a "peak experience," more than an aesthetic transcendence, though it can combine with it and lift it to a higher point of metaphysical insight. The transcendent experience leaves a radical and revolutionary

¹Ibid., p. 46.
change in the subject of the experience.\(^1\)

Merton in contrasting the experience of the ego-self that seems to transcend, and the experience of a St. Paul who speaks of his being identified with Christ, may offer some insight as to the direction in which Huxley would lead modern man. Admittedly, it relies on the testimony of St. Paul's statement in Holy Writ which Huxley rejected as a revelation from God. But Huxley named St. Teresa of Avila as one example of a mental explorer,\(^2\) so Paul's experience may be acceptable to him on that basis. Merton backed away from the ego-self, the individual person, who in transcending does experience a "going beyond" itself. For Merton described such an experience as a spiritual elasticity so that the ego "can stretch itself almost to the vanishing point and still come back and chalk up another experience on the score card. In this case, however, there is no real self-transcendence."\(^3\)

Merton held that both the Christian mystics and the truly enlightened followers of Zen were able to go beyond the limited ego-self. He is very cautious in his language and warned against thinking that the ego-self is annihilated in this ex-


\(^{2}\)Huxley, *The Humanist Frame*, p. 46.

perience, yet it is evident that the identity or the person which is the subject of this transcendent consciousness "is not the ego as isolated and contingent, but the person as 'found' and 'actualized' in union with Christ." It is found in St. Paul when he could say, "I live now not I but Christ lives in me." (Gal. 2:20).\(^1\) It would not be fitting to wonder whether Merton ever experienced such a transcending as he here talks about. Or assuming that Merton and Huxley had both known such an experience it would be out of place to speculate who had gone the higher and which had had the purer experience. But it should be clearly noted that Merton did not see any man coming to such an experience without his acknowledging some power outside of himself and toward which he tends in these best moments of his life. Huxley would concur in seeing the transcending experience as the best moment in the life of a man; it would enable a person to "help in fulfilling human destiny by the fuller realization of his own personal possibilities."\(^2\)

Huxley was not unaware of the sickness of modern man. He held that it took two and a half billion years for the blind opportunistic workings of natural selection to bring man

\(^1\)Ibid., pp. 72-75.

\(^2\)Huxley, The Humanist Frame, p. 47.
to his present stage. He thought man might have an equal stretch of evolutionary time before him, provided he did not destroy himself.\(^1\) He was aware too of the escape downward of many people today through drugs and other ways of dissipation.\(^2\) But his proposal for ordinary people to develop their potencies as a contribution to the rising to a higher plateau in the life of man could leave many a person unsatisfied. Merton saw this dissatisfaction expressed in the writings of the late Flannery O'Connor, especially in her *The Violent Bear It Away*. A young boy struggles with the conflicting philosophies of the school teacher Rayber, well adjusted to the scientific age, who wants to save the boy from his fanatic uncle, a prophet and believer. Suddenly the reader (true with Merton) finds himself on the side of the uncle and nauseated by the "scientific" answers the teacher has for everything. "In him, science is so right that it is a disaster." The boy tells the old man about the great knowledge of his teacher, and wonders if there is anything he does not know. Merton was struck with the old man's reply to the boy that the trouble with his teacher was that he did not know that there were


things he could not know.¹

This is not an attempt to deal off-handedly with a thinker of the caliber of Sir Julian Huxley, nor must it be thought that Merton would curtail science in seeking knowledge. Huxley is a believer in man's knowing. He sees man's present knowledge worked over by his imagination "as the basis of human understanding and belief." But the believing is always tied to and leads back to man's knowing.²

Recalling the *credo ut intelligam* of Merton, in which he stressed that the mind of man is made for knowing and not for believing,³ we can see a psychological relationship between the above thoughts. But Huxley never "lets go" of his knowledge: Merton sees the need to acknowledge the limitations of his positive concepts, if he is to ever "take off," and finally know on the higher plane of faith.⁴

Huxley, as is evident from what has been said, wanted modern man to improve his present lot. It was hoped that each individual would find his happiness and fulfill in his own person an "important quantum of evolutionary possibility."⁵ Merton

---

⁵ Huxley, *The Humanist Frame*, p. 23.
saw his being as that which was given him "with certain possibilities that are not open to other beings." But this awareness of being does not come from revelation by God to man.

On the contrary, the doctrine of creation as we have it in the Bible and as it has been developed in Christian theology (particularly in St. Thomas) starts not from a question about being but from a direct intuition of the act of being.¹

Merton saw man's failure to see his life as a gift from God, as leading him to be fixed on himself. He slowly entangles himself in a psychic and spiritual cramp around his own ego. Finally, since man cannot relax it, the cramp becomes more and more intolerable. Man then destroys it and himself with the same act. The tragedy of suicide for Merton was that the man on the edge of it may be equally on the edge of a miracle of hope that can save him in spite of himself. Such liberation can come from his humbly accepting his being as a gift from an unknown source, and which is in no way subject to his own imperious demand.

A respect for "the world" that does not rest on a real intuition of the act of being and a grateful, contemplative. . . sense of being will end only in the further destruction and debasement of the world in the name of a false humanism. . . .²

As may be suspected this writer is more acquainted with

¹Merton, Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, pp. 200-201.
²Ibid., pp. 200-205.
the thought of Merton than of Babbitt, and more with Babbitt than that of Huxley. The latter, however, was able to clearly state his case for Evolutionary Humanism in the preface and the first chapter of *The Humanist Frame*.

In the beginning of this chapter humanism was defined as man's interest in man. It would seem, then, that no man can escape having a philosophy of humanism, no matter how undeveloped. It would demand that he be at least reflective. He could be contemplative.
CHAPTER V

THE PRACTICAL IMPLICATION OF CONTEMPLATION FOR EDUCATION

This chapter will attempt to prove that contemplation gives to education an authentic response to reality. The word authentic is derived from the Greek word authentes, meaning one who does anything with his own hand. The position taken is that when a person has established a deeper relation with God through contemplation, then he will be blessed with a keener sensitivity allowing him a fuller response to all of creation that exceeds the human alone, left to itself.

Only in a few places in his extensive writings did Thomas Merton treat directly of education. However, his thoughts on contemplation can be brought to bear on education by considering them in relation to the educational ideas of Carl Rogers and Van Cleve Morris.

Rogers in his Freedom to Learn holds that the ideal product of education is the person who can function as fully as his nature, his given constitution, will allow him. Such a

---

1 An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language, new edition revised and enlarged, 1935.
person would be rid of all the defense mechanisms that hinder the inflow and healthy response to stimuli. While such a person does not exist, still education must have him as the goal to be sought. Merton's thought on contemplation bringing a man to know himself in relation to all other beings will be related to this ideal goal of Carl Roger's.

Thomas Merton shared the sentiment of the Existentialists in their rejection of the shallow optimism of the Positivists. He joined them in looking at the loneliness of each man. Van Cleve Morris in his Existentialism in Education wants education to prepare each person to face the loneliness of his own death. He feels that the humanities could arouse in a student a sensitivity to his own feelings. In turn, this would allow him to be more deeply aware of his own experiences. Finally, aware of his freedom he could face the possibility of his nothingness after death. Man's authenticity lies in his awareness of his own freedom, of making his own values. A belief in God for Morris means that man is not free, that he is determined, manipulated by a Supreme Power. Merton's position was that man freely chooses to believe in God. Through contemplation he becomes more deeply aware of the meaning of his action. Finally, he is brought to stand before God with no attempt to

1Merton, Mystics and Zen Masters, pp. 256-58.
cling to his own nothingness. It is a long step beyond the position of the Existentialism of Morris. When man has come this far then he has put his death in history, while the work toward the conquest of death goes on.¹

In 1967 Merton recalling his own education, especially his college days at Columbia, wrote that the purpose of education was to lead the student to “define himself authentically and spontaneously in relation to his world.” The University should help the student to save his soul from the “hell of meaningless, of obsession, of complex artifice, of systematic lying, of criminal evasions and neglects, and of self destructive futilities.” In short, the primary task of the University is to help the student discover himself.² In 1960 Merton wrote that the most important duty for the Catholic intellectual was to preserve the “human person in his integrity, his freedom and his individuality, and to arm him spiritually against the perils of totalitarianism,” not only from the doctrine of the Communists (often so obvious), but also from the subtle invitation to join in a mass-movement for the preservation of a good end through bad means. “Christians can never, with a good

¹Merton, Disputed Questions, pp. 59-61.
conscience, yield to the lure of totalitarianism" offered in
defense of the Church. Such help would only destroy the love
that the Church must ever strive to establish between persons.
Merton looked to Catholic schools, especially on the University
level to provide an "education that strengthens man against
the noise, the violence, the slogans and the half-truths of
our materialistic society."

The clear aim that Merton set for education is in harmony
with the fully functioning person that Carl Rogers would have
as an end of education. But Rogers in some soul searching
reflections now wonders if his attempts at teaching have not
been in vain. Even when his teaching seemed to succeed it
would often cause the individual to distrust his own experience
and to stifle significant learning. Rogers feels that now he
is only interested in being a learner of things that would in-
fluence his own behavior. He found it very rewarding to learn
in groups, or with one person in therapy. While admitting how
far his thoughts were from "the common sense world that every-
one knows is right," yet if the experiences of others were the
same as his, then teaching would be done away with and people
would only come together if they wished to learn.

1 Merton, Disputed Questions, pp. 112-17.

In the above thoughts one can once again see the great reverence Carl Rogers has always shown toward the individual person. In one seminar-type course, actually more an encounter group, that Rogers gave at California Western University for candidates for doctoral degrees, he did all he could to make his students respond to what was deepest within them. The readings suggested for the students were to bring out the personal values each student held in his life, such as family behavior and other interpersonal relationships. But this arrangement was only given as a mere initiator of what each person might contribute to the class and what he might learn from it.¹

Rogers was taken by the reaction of one student in the course who had been a school principal for many years. Despite his important position it seemed that this was the first time he had spoken from within himself, for himself. He wanted people to like him for what he was, not what he had pretended to be.²

Rogers wants teachers to facilitate teaching by always being real, never pretending before their students. A given teacher's showing of feelings of anger, boredom, tiredness, or any other, need not be disruptive of the group. Instead,

¹Ibid., pp. 57-60.
²Ibid., pp. 83-84.
the teacher comes off as a person to his students, not a face-
less embodiment of a curricular requirement. It is just this
honest openness on his part that Rogers finds so helpful in
psychotherapy. His patient has to be aware of what kind of
person he is. With that determined, Rogers had a better chance
to help his patient. This same honesty would facilitate learn-
ing. In turn, the student must know that his feelings, opin-
ions, and his person are respected. Such an attitude would
help the teacher to tolerate a student's occasional apathy and
drifting into the by-roads of knowledge. He would allow him
to chase a few rabbits provided the student eventually came
back to following the deer tracks. With mutual respect estab-
lished, the subject matter is spared becoming the battleground
between teacher and learner.¹

In support of his position Rogers cites five different
studies from 1961 to 1966 that dealt with various aspects of
the facilitation of learning. While the evidence was not over-
whelming nor perfect in relation to Rogers' claim, it was con-
sistent with it.²

It is the freedom flowing from a conviction of personal
worth that allows contemplation, normally a quiet and singular

¹Ibid., pp. 106-109.
²Ibid., pp. 116-18.
undertaking, to be related to the give and take of a Rogerian encounter group. What follows shows this relationship.

Aware of the isolation of man from man that Rogers would awaken educators to, Merton held that the Church must strive to strengthen the individual person against the temptation of surrendering his personality to the faceless void of mass society.¹ For such a society offers only the unity of a massive aggregate, people thrown together without love and without understanding. The resulting power struggle gives a quasi peace to the strong who dominate. In order to taste the joy of this peace, the weak must submit to the strong and join in their adventures. Such an existence does not elevate man to a truly communal and interpersonal cooperation. It only drives him with irresistible demands that alienate him from reality. It destroys in man the inmost need and capacity for contemplation.²

To show the need of a conviction of personal worth as basic to personal freedom, Rogers cited an interesting experiment done by Dr. Richard Crutchfield in 1955 at the University of California, Berkeley. It was found that nearly all those who were partaking of the experiment yielded in some degree

¹Merton, Mystics and Zen Masters, pp. 274-75.
²Merton, Faith and Violence, p. 220.
to group pressure. Even some high-level mathematicians yielded
to the false group consensus on some fairly easy arithmetic
problems, giving wrong answers that they normally would never
have given. There were sharp individual differences that were
found to be definitely correlated with personality character­
istics. Those with a tendency to yield under pressure gave
general evidence of incapacity to cope effectively with stress,
while the nonconformists did not tend to panic when under pres­
sure of conflicting sources. The latter were more open, free,
and spontaneous, having a good understanding of themselves,
while the conformist tended to lack insight into his own motives
and behavior. Rogers wrote:

... the person who is free within himself, who
is open to his experience, who has a sense of his
own freedom and responsible choice, is not nearly
so likely to be controlled by his environment as
is the person who lacks these qualities.\(^1\)

Another study gave support to the above. Rogers supervised
the research of a graduate student concerning the factors which
would predict the behavior of adolescent delinquents. At first
only external factors, such as the neighborhood conditions and
the cultural influences on the adolescents, were included.
Only as an afterthought was a rating made of the degree of self­
understanding in relation to behavior. It was thought that it

---

\(^1\)Rogers, *Freedom to Learn*, pp. 269-70.
might play some part in predicting future behavior, but that it was not a primary determining factor. It turned out to be the better rating by far, correlating .84 with later behavior. Rogers concluded:

... the individual who sees himself and his situation clearly and who freely takes responsibility for that self and for that situation is a very different person from the one who is simply in the grip of outside circumstances. This difference shows up clearly in important aspects of his behavior.1

From the above it can be seen that Rogers and Merton are one in wanting each person to be free to be himself. One of Rogers' participants thought that the encounter groups were of great value to his troubled associates, but that they would not know a permanent cure of their psychological ailments until they developed an intimate rapport with their God. Rogers did not comment on this reaction.2 The point now to be made from the thought of Merton is that the person who is at peace with God would be enhanced in becoming the fully functioning person that Rogers held as a model for educators.

Such a person would be safeguarded against falling into two corruptions of love that Merton warned against. The first, a romantic love that seeks the perfect cause, the perfect idea,

1Ibid., pp. 270-71.
2Ibid., p. 86.
the perfect experience before it will give love. Such a view fails to see that the only way to make a man worthy of love is to love him. Unless he is so weak that he cannot bear to be loved, he will respond to this love by drawing a mysterious spiritual value out of his own depths. In fact, such a romantic idealism can be a way of defending oneself against real involvement in interpersonal relationship.1

In Phaedo, a Dialogue of Plato, Socrates, just before his execution, warned some of his young admirers from becoming misologic, a dislike for argument, because of a misanthropy induced by believing in somebody quite uncritically. Plato warned against forming human relationships without a critical understanding of human nature. Disillusionment results, dialogue ends, and with it education. To prevent this, Plato had Socrates telling his students that they should

... think very little of Socrates, and much more of the truth. If you think that anything I say is true, you must agree with me; if not oppose it with every argument that you have. You must not allow me, in my enthusiasm, to deceive both myself and you, and leave my sting behind when I fly away.2

The second corruption of love comes from the legalist and authoritarian seeking to make everyone conform to what he thinks to be right. Here what matters is the law and the state, and

1 Merton, Disputed Questions, pp. 86-87.

to these the person must always be sacrificed. Persons come
to be treated as objects in order to have the law enforced upon
them.¹

Socrates in refusing to be turned into an object told his
judges:

You would have liked to hear me weep and wail,
doing and saying all sorts of things which I
regard as unworthy of myself. . . . I did not
think then that I ought to stoop to servility
because I was in danger. . . . I would much
rather die as a result of this defense than
live as the result of the other sort.²

Merton saw that it was only by a love like Socrates, that
a man enters into contact with his own deepest self, which will
allow him to go out to his brother as his other self.³ This
same capacity of going out of ourself is the key to our rela­tionship with God. As seen in the second chapter, we often
have to deal with God as if He were "an object," because of
the limitation of our concepts of Him.⁴ We only really come
to know God when we find Him "by love" hidden "within our­selves," a connatural way of knowing. No man makes this dis­covery until he "goes out of himself" by sacrifice. Only then

¹Merton, Disputed Questions, pp. 88-89.
²Plato, The Collected Dialogues Defense 38e.
³Merton, Disputed Questions, p. 84.
⁴Supra, 62-64.
can we find Christ in the place formerly occupied by our own self-hood. In this sacrifice, we cease in a certain manner, "to be the subject of an act of knowing and become the one we know by love." On the other hand, when man gives into the temptation of Satan to be "like unto God," then he places himself as the unique subject in the midst of a world of objects. He alone is a "person" who feels, enjoys, thinks, and desires. The selves of others are only replicas of himself. Man begins to reject this evil when he accepts the love that God offers him.¹

It is contemplation that keeps alive in him the love of God and of man. In the words of William Blake the "doors of perception" are opened and all life takes on a completely new meaning by the insights gained from contemplation. Discovering a deeper awareness of God as well as of himself, a man enters into a new existence which makes him see himself and everything else in a coming from God and a returning to Him. The rush of the common mode of living, so often meaningless and trivial, is no longer able to cloud the real sense of his existence.²

Merton considered the popularity of psychodelic drugs as

¹Merton, Disputed Questions, pp. 84-86.
²Merton, Contemplation in a World of Action, p. 161.
showing a present appetite for this kind of knowledge and inner integration. All they give is a fleeting imitation of this integration of love without producing it.\(^1\) Why this kind of rebellion? Because of the lack of true order in men and in society. An order imposed on people purely from outside themselves, and with no relation to their real inner needs as persons, destroys all faith in the possibility of true order. A vicious circle results, with society alienating people while at the same time summoning them to cooperate in the work of their own alienation. The end of it could be a revolution and the establishment of a totalitarian "order" more rigid than any other—one in which people are systematically indoctrinated so that they may have some motive, however baseless and removed from their true nature as sons of God, for their cooperation in the mass society.\(^2\)

Recalling what Merton held to be the most important duty of present day intellectuals, the preservation of the human person in his integrity against the perils of totalitarianism, then the critical need of educators to keep burning brightly within them "the truth that will make them free" is apparent. He who attempts to help others "without deepening his own

\(^1\)Ibid.
self-understanding, freedom, integrity, and capacity to love, will not have anything to give others."¹

The conclusion drawn is if the position of Rogers that learning is facilitated by a deeper awareness and appreciation of each other as persons is true, then contemplation as put forth by Merton will be the sine qua non for it to be fully accomplished.

The contemplation presented to fit the thought of Rogers, is a recognition of the "splendor of being and unity—a splendor in which man is one with all that is."² Perhaps a classical example of this is seen in the arrangement of the Summa Theologica by St. Thomas Aquinas. The first part deals with God and Creation; the second with Human Acts; the third with the mystery of the Incarnation and the redemptive act of Christ. The parts are best seen in their relation with one another by placing them in a circle that always returns back upon itself. Reality comes forth from the Creator, and man working out his salvation in his use of it made possible by the redemptive act of Christ finds his ultimate end in God.³

Van Cleve Morris and Thomas Merton are one in seeing that

¹Merton, Contemplation in a World of Action, pp. 162-63.
²Merton, Faith and Violence, p. 221.
the empirical and positivistic philosophies failed to face the most important thing in the life of man--his own death. Morris finds it ironical that the scientific philosophies, pragmatism in particular, claim to turn man to real experiences of life, away from the technicalities of classical metaphysics, yet the most real experience of all is not accepted for consideration. John Dewey's interest was primarily "directed to the understanding of means and ends in the routines of daily living. He was not interested in the more profound, and ultimately more human problem posed by the end toward which every man is committed--death."¹

Merton saw himself allied with the existentialists who contested the positivists and the pragmatists in their failure to see the individual person as a "who." The positivist is not quite certain where he is going, but he holds the direction to be the right one since it is determined by his processes and scientific methods. The real question is how to keep moving faster in the same direction. The question "what" is insignificant, for philosophy reduces itself to knowing how: "know how." If one knows "how," the "what" will take care of itself.²

²Merton, Mystics and Zen Masters, p. 262.
John Dewey in holding that reason is not a substance in itself separate from the objects it comes to know, can be seen to belong to the philosophers who emphasize "how" above "what." He wrote:

All reason which it itself reasoned, is thus method, not substance; operative, not end in itself. To imagine it the latter is to transport it outside the natural world, to convert it into a god, . . . outside the contingencies of existence and untouched by its vicissitudes. This is the meaning of the "reason" which is alleged to envisage reality sub specie aeternitatis.¹

Merton was diametrically opposed to the above. Even as a youth he was convinced that artistic vision enabled a person to "enjoy nature sub specie aeternitatis and not merely as it is in itself."² Later in one of his early writings as a Trappist monk, Merton stressed the distinction between reason, a faculty of the soul, and reasoning, the act of that faculty. But the end of reason is not reasoning; it is the mind embracing the truth without labor in the light of a single intuition.³

While Merton's philosophical position always remained with the major emphasis on "what," he was open to the Christian

³Merton, The Ascent to Truth, pp. 203-204.
existentialists in their seeking a return to a Biblical mode of thought which is concrete and personal, rather than the abstract approach found in mere dogma. The latter is important and pertinent, yet simply to acknowledge dogmatic truth without using it as the base for a deep relationship with God misses the point of stating a creed. As seen in Chapter Three, Zen can save a Western man from stopping at the logical. The Church must be ever alert to challenge the "leveling" effect in mass society. But, as Merton warned, if she only calls upon man to subscribe to a few intellectual formulas, then she will have failed in this grave responsibility. When properly understood, existential theology can be seen as unmasking the false social responsibility which has official answers for problems in advance, for it is concerned with man's authentic existence (who). Since this call to authenticity is heard in the depths of conscience, existential theology seeks at all costs to defend the personal conscience "against distortion by the all-pervading influence of collective illusion."¹

Merton held that the non-religious existentialists were unconsciously orientated toward a religious view of life. While they did not accept the truth of the Bible, they saw the

¹Merton, Mystics and Zen Masters, pp. 273-77.
despair that meets man at every turn. Willing to face this sickness they turned away from Christians who put forth glib answers. Since the mass-society more and more closes off the good ground on which the seed of the Gospel can germinate, the non-religious existentialist is at least there to clear away the trivia and let man face the important questions of life.¹

Van Cleve Morris is an example of Merton's observation. He holds that the most human of questions, what is the meaning of life, is essentially a religious question. Men have sought the answer to this question in various religions, in philosophy, and more recently, in social belonging. This religious need for man to be important to the world, to be recognized as valuable by others, is an existential need. "And if education belongs to all men, then the school is obligated to pay attention to that need." Those who take their cue from organized religion want to introduce this or that religious answer into the school program. Secular society has not allowed this. The Experimentalists and the Positivists err on the other side. They refuse to acknowledge the need, holding that the only way to "deal" with it, in or out of school, is to ignore it all together.²

¹Ibid., pp. 269-72.
²Morris, Existentialism in Education, pp. 144-46.
The Existentialists offers more than a compromise between these positions. Morris would adopt the religionist's attitude but not his dogmatic answers. He would neither ignore the need, nor give answers for it. What is left? The need itself.¹

Morris feels that such questions as, "Why do we feel the need for God?," would awaken in the American youngster that "dimension of religious experience which is genuinely existential." Such a procedure would not violate the secular ethic. In fact, the consideration of such a question would complete "the ethic by bringing that which is experienced by all men into the area of open discourse. It fulfills, in an astonishingly apt way, the real meaning of a pluralistic society."²

Van Cleve Morris speculates about his accidentally falling into the Chicago Drainage Canal which flows near Chicago Circle Campus and then being washed down the Mississippi River to the Gulf. What difference would his death make? A few would regret his going and maybe the flag on the campus would be flown at half-mast for a day. But as century passed into century all residual effects of his existence would have disappeared. Still a paradox remains for Morris. While his empirical evidence tells him that he is of absolutely no value, his sub-

¹Ibid., p. 146.
²Ibid., pp. 146-47.
jective knowledge keeps reminding him that he is of absolute value in the world; the latter seems the hardier and sturdier of the two.¹

It is the honest facing of this paradox that gives value to his suggestion for certain studies in the curriculum. Before giving them, Morris's idea on the nature of man (or perhaps the lack of nature) should be explained. It will be seen to contrast with that of Merton's. The difference will provide a means of comparing Morris's authentic man who clings to his experience with that of Merton's who would lead all men to be true to the best in them by seeking to "experience" the life of God in contemplation.

For Morris the question of the existence of God is not really the issue that man must struggle to unravel. The only possible difference the existence of God could make to Morris would be if He could encounter him as a being-for-itself, a "thou" to his "I," a free subjectivity. But if God made Morris, then God could only view him as an "it," an object in the world.²

The importance of the Existentialism to Morris is shown when he holds that the essence of man could not have been in

¹Ibid., pp. 16-17.
²Ibid., pp. 77-78.
the world before his existence. If man's essence were already
given, then men would only have to act out his essence, he
would not be free. Lacking an essence is an agony but it is
the price man must pay to be free. In fact, man does not want
to determine his essence. If he would ever discover it nothing
else would be left to do. All questions, moral or otherwise,
would have been answered. Not only would man's free choosing
be superfluous, it would not even be possible. Man, the choos-
er, the value maker would be gone. Like all other animals he
would be reduced to living out a prescribed existence.¹

It is the awareness of this freedom that makes a person
authentic, that marks him as an existential man. Morris wants
to make clear that revolt, rebellion, and apostasy are not in
themselves a sign of an existentialist. "Even the man who con-
sents to convention can be the existential man if he is aware
of his act of consenting, and hence of the necessity that he
take personal responsibility for living his life in a con-
ventional way."²

The fully authentic person is beyond the reach of most
men. He is the person who knows that every deed and word is

¹Ibid., p. 45.
²Ibid., p. 46.
a choice and hence an act of value creation. He knows that he is personally responsible for the values by which he has chosen to live; these values are not to be justified by referring them to somebody or something outside. But to whom is he responsible? To anyone who would ask him why he so acted. Maybe no one will; but if they do, then the existential man is ready to say why. He will be ready for he has answered to his own conscience. If he were to refuse to claim responsibility for the way he lives his life, claiming that he cannot help the way he acts, then he has told an "intramural" lie that wipes out his precious humanness, his freedom.¹

Merton is found to agree in part with this thought of Morris. The truly adult person, to Merton, is the person who is assured of his own identity - his judgment concerning his own experiences are based on an awareness of what takes place within himself. The surest sign of immaturity is to substitute the ideas and ideals of others for one's own true personal experience and judgment of life. Does this mean that a man cannot accept a creed? That he cannot believe in God?²

In the past it was taken for granted that every man had

¹Ibid., pp. 47-50.
²Merton, Contemplation in a World of Action, pp. 174-75.
a basic natural way of looking at reality, which included in it a need for a Supreme Being or at least the assumption of a first cause. But now it is no longer "natural" for man to assume, as St. Anselm once did, that if there are any beings at all then there must be a Supreme Being. Where in the past it was claimed that the human soul was "naturally Christian," now it is claimed that the consciousness of modern man is naturally atheistic. Since God is not present spontaneously as the basis for meaning in human existence then "God is dead." Further, if in spite of himself, a modern man adheres to the idea of God, then it is caused by fear or some other base motive. In believing, man is held to be untrue to himself, and is therefore unauthentic.¹

The position of Van Cleve Morris is an example of this observation of Merton. In an empirical and secular age, Morris holds, both philosophy and religion have miscarried. Philosophy from Plato to Hegel attempted to explain the world in such a way that man was in some way necessary in the scheme of things. If the world is rationalizable then man is a rational animal; turning it around, the existence of a reasonable person in a reasonless universe is a contradiction in terms. In

¹Ibid., pp. 173-74.
either case man is an ontological necessity. Yet this was not enough to satisfy the need of man to be wanted and cherished. The Christian God filled this need; man could now hold himself dear. Now more sophisticated about his destiny and on guard against fairy tales, modern man has decided to settle for recognition closer to home, here in the world of man. In the United States man seeks his personal value, his identity, in affiliations entered into with other individuals and groups in society. As a result, as David Riesman put it, we are other-directed, group-orientated, fitted into an organization-structured culture. Man has not found recognition in corporate human relations, for it convinces him as never before just how replaceable he is. Be he factory-hand or college professor, the organization always survives any given individual.¹

Merton was aware of the affliction of persons wrought by the present social organization. In 1960 he wrote how surprised he was at the conformity and passivity of Americans from his recent contacts through readings and conversations after twenty years of near isolation. The America he had known in the late 1930's and early 1940's was far more independent.²

¹Morris, Existentialism in Education, pp. 33-37.
²Merton, Disputed Questions, p. viii.
Merton, like Morris, wanted the individual to maintain his freedom. Unlike Morris he looked to both traditional philosophy and religion to help every man remain the "master of his destiny." As seen in Chapter Two Merton regretted that there were so much trivia in the way of present day man that prevent him from grasping the abstract notion of being, truth, and beauty as they are proposed by the philosophers.¹ Merton wanted his creed presented in such a way that man would not drift into a kind of Pelagianism, a Promethean tour de force, in which he saves his soul without the help of God's grace. On the other hand, man must not think that the grace of God assures his salvation without his own trembling and fear; each man must be free to drive his own bargain. He can accept or reject the saving grace of God.²

It must be admitted that the position of Merton is dependent upon belief. He would hold that the essence of man comes before his existence; that man is created to the image and likeness of God. Morris does not escape believing. He holds that all men have a craving to be recognized. Religion, philosophy, and society tried to satisfy this need—but failed.

¹Merton, The Ascent to Truth, pp. 196-97.
NOW man must make his own values. Morris intends to live his life in accordance with the values he himself ordains. "Then, I believe, I will be eligible for the recognition I seek."¹

Morris is honest enough to admit the paradox he lives with. For breaking through the "cracks in the concrete wall of purely rational, empirical truth" which tells him he is of no value in the world, is the conviction that he is of absolute value.²

For Morris the overpowering theme of Existentialism is . . . the project of living one's life in such a way as to be deserving of something better than nothingness and obliteration; to confront nothingness, to deny nothingness, by filling it up with a life that ought never to be lost or annihilated.³

In the above Morris all but says that he believes he will live after death. In it one can find a parallel in the thought of Merton concerning his belief in God. He adopts the traditional Scholastic position that nemo credere potest nisi volens, that no one believes unless he wills to do so. The intellect of the believer is not determined to assent to a given truth by the force of argument as is the mind of one who

¹Morris, Existentialism in Education, p. 37.
²Ibid., p. 17.
³Ibid., p. 29.
Merton believed in his own resurrection from the dead because of the promise of Christ. Morris believes because of a prompting within him. Both will to believe.

By accepting a revelation beyond his own awareness Merton escapes the paradox that Morris seemingly will be faced with all his days. But faith has a price. Having chosen to go out to God, the believer must begin facing God.

Merton saw that many who professed a belief in Christianity, both Catholics and Protestants, did not invoke a God that demanded they try to face Him. Whether consciously or not, they sensed the agony this would bring to facing themselves. Instead they called upon a God to preserve the comfort of an affluent society. Such a "faith," Merton held, should humbly seek to imitate the courage of the honest atheist who refuses to hide from the loneliness of his own death.

Van Cleve Morris, in facing death in a far more realistic way than either Sir Julian Huxley or Irving Babbitt, offers a good example of such courage to a weak believer. It will be recalled from the last chapter that Sir Julian Huxley held

1Merton, The Ascent to Truth, p. 44.

2Merton, Faith and Violence, p. 201.
forth to each individual the rather vague chance for happiness by becoming an "important quantum of evolutionary possibility."¹ Babbitt was more definite. He saw man gaining possession of himself through contemplation. It awakens in man a deeper awareness of the human law within him. As time goes on a man would move from a lower to a higher ethical level, from what is less permanent to what is more permanent within him. This advancement would bring a man greater peace and happiness.² But as Babbitt's friend, Paul Elmer More, pointed out, in the end the ideal of Babbitt seemed "to be attached to nothing. ... If we perish like beasts, shall we not live like beasts?"³

It was pointed out that neither Babbitt nor Huxley ever "let go" of their concepts, their ideas. To each of them was opposed the credo ut intelligam of Merton. He believed that he might know. This meant the acknowledging of the limitation of his positive concepts. He lets them go in a sense, so that he might "take off" and come to knowing on a higher plane.⁴

¹ Huxley, The Humanist Frame, p. 23.
² Babbitt, Rousseau and Romanticism, pp. 264-66.
While Morris, like Babbitt and Huxley, clings to his own idea, it is one that demands a more profound answer from the thought of Merton. As pointed out the *credo ut intelligam* joined to contemplation can give to man a recognition of his belonging to the splendor of the unity of all being.¹

This is a wonderful discovery; its enrichment to a man's life is beyond the telling. But Merton did not see contemplation staying on this level, delightful though it may be. Eventually, it should lead a person to "the transcendent ground and source of being, the not-being and the emptiness that is so called because it is beyond all definition and limitation."²

For Merton this was the moment of truth. It is a coming into the pure light of God, where every falseness in a man is wide open to himself. It is not a time of consolation; it is the moment of "dread." He sees his lack of authenticity, sensing "that one has somehow been untrue not so much to abstract moral or social norms but to one's own inmost self."³

Morris does not seem to have come to this realization. He considers the thought of heaven unappealing because no ethical questions would come forth to be settled. "Moral puzzle-

¹ Supra, p. 11.
² Merton, *Faith and Violence*, p. 221.
ment has at last been put behind. It is a place without problems. This seems to me a veritable hell."

In considering heaven as hell if it lacked moral problems to solve, Morris recalls the thought of Kant. In postulating that God's existence was the necessary consequence of justice and morality, Kant reduced religion to mere morality; morality was more important than God, Who was no longer considered as a Being to Himself. God was made object.

Merton held that man willed to hold this "God-object" in existence as long as it served his purpose. Now man has wearied of it. It could not satisfy the deep need in every man to know God as He is. The God-object had to die. Then came the "death of God" theology.

Merton looked to Zen to help restore a true concept of God. For in both Oriental religions and Christian mysticism the self-aware object is not final or absolute. Instead:

The self is not its own center and does not orbit around itself; it is centered on God, the one center of all, which is "everywhere and nowhere," in whom all are encountered, from whom all proceed. Thus from the very start this consciousness is disposed to encounter "the other" with whom it is already united anyway "in God."

---

1 Morris, Existentialism in Education, p. 54.
2 Neill, Makers of the Modern Mind, p. 212.
3 Merton, Zen and the Birds of Appetite, p. 23.
Necessarily joined to the keeping of God as the center of all is the seeing of all objects, which the knowledge explosion now shows as legion, in their proper relation of man's relation to God. Again Merton found support in the Zen-master Dr. Suzuki for this ideal. Suzuki said that man must work on the level of knowledge, where grace works in him but not without him before he can come to the purity of original innocence, where all is done in us but without us. Innocence or Wisdom does not cast out knowledge; the two must go together.¹

Merton's own educational experience can allow him to be joined with the hope of Morris that education would awaken in a student an appreciation of his freedom, and the attendant obligation to use it to make his own values. Recognizing the well-known principle of readiness in education, Morris would have all in education alerted to the time in the subjective life of the student that:

I speak of as the "Existential moment." It is the moment when the individual first discovers himself as existing. It is the abrupt onset, the charged beginning, of awareness of the phenomenon of one's own presence in the world as a person.²

While there is some empirical evidence in support of the

¹Ibid., pp. 120-21.
²Morris, Existentialism in Education, pp. 111-12.
reality of this phenomenon, Morris did not feel that it needed the proof of empirical studies. For several years he has discussed the Existential Moment with his University classes. It never failed that they knew what he was talking about.¹

This awakening usually came in the general vicinity of puberty, though it is not necessarily related to this organic change. One student reported it as early as four years of age. Morris thought that the Existential Moment to be a more turbulent time than that of adolescence.

Merton gave evidence of such a moment when he was about five. The family, living on Long Island, rented a small house for a year from a Mr. Duggan. Merton's father was incensed when Duggan started to pick the rhubarb that he had planted and nourished. Merton remembered it as having struck him as a difficult case. Once his father had calmed himself he was willing to discuss the morality of Duggan's action with his son. Merton considered:

... that if the landlord felt like it, he could simply come and harvest all our vegetables, and there was nothing we could do about it. I mention this with the full consciousness that someone will use it against me, and say that the real reason I became a monk in later years was that I had the mentality of a medieval serf when I was barely out of the cradle.²

¹Ibid., pp. 112-13.
²Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, p. 7.
Morris would include in the curriculum courses that arouse the creative spirit of students. Here he lists the studies that are labeled the arts: music, the dance, drama, creative writing, painting, and the plastic arts. In these the student gives an "authentic expression of what he sees in his own world." His "work" must not be done in view of exhibition, but "rather to work out, from the center of one's private experience, certain meanings that the world may have for oneself."¹

Morris considers the moving away from the "representational" phase of art to the newer methodological position, where the teacher tries to evoke the child's artistic expression, as very helpful to the student becoming his own value maker. In this relation, Morris sees the Socratic paradigm in use. The teacher does not know in advance what he is after; what he does know is that it is important for the student to feel his own experience.²

Merton would concur in the end for art that Morris proposes. In order for art to be authentic he would allow that the "art of our time, sacred art included, will necessarily

²Ibid., pp. 137-38.
be characterized by a certain poverty, grimness and roughness which correspond to the violent realities of a cruel age." For a Christian he felt that there were certain traditions that would be acceptable for teachers trying to arouse either an appreciation of art or the creation of it in a student. The Byzantine style would be a clear example. He held the picture of Our Lady of Perpetual Help was of a genuine Christian and spiritual artistic style. By contrast, he felt that the bad art found in some churches, in a certain type of "holy" picture, may have aroused hidden distinctive revulsion in young Catholics who later left the Church. Perhaps they were told that such representations were "beautiful" and "holy"; later, in being aware how ugly they were they rejected the Church along with them.¹ As was pointed out in the first chapter, Merton learned from William Blake that it is "by virtue of artistic vision" that a person is lead to "enjoy nature sub specie aeternitatis and not merely as it is in itself."² Morris's view of art as a means to elicit a creative spirit finds agreement in the thought of Merton on art. Merton would go further. From his father Merton had learned that art,

¹Merton, Disputed Questions, pp. 125-30.
involving the highest faculties of man, should lead him to contemplation. The artistic experience produces an affective identification with the object contemplated, a kind of perception that the Thomists call "connatural."¹

Merton had been blessed with this artistic gift from his loving association with his father. Finally, it was the connaturality of his artistic view that led him to know virtue in the same way. A person could have a non-connatural knowledge of chastity, that is, be able to define it without possessing it. His artistic appreciation played a dominant role in Merton seeking to possess virtue in his life.²

Morris thinks that the more significant area of learning is one that is unnamed. He calls it "normative" which includes experiences of all sorts as well as subjects per se which awaken the decision-making awareness of the learner. Morris deals mostly with literature. He regrets that it is sometimes taught as biology or mathematics might be, viz., as verbal material that "lies beyond and independent of the learner." Looking at literature and the humanities in this way would be to destroy or mutilate them for Existential learning. Liter-

¹ Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, pp. 202-203.
² Supra, pp. 40-47
ature should be allowed "to lay bare the nerve endings of one's emotions and to invite stimulation from the author's work." Let the student share the author's feel for love, suffering, guilt, freedom, and above all—death. Are teachers prepared to let their students "really get inside this most existential of all human problems?" Morris would have a student get inside the heart of a man freezing to death by reading Jack London's "To Build a Fire." Let the student ponder the meaning of his own life in view of his certain death.¹

Merton's education is full of examples of literature exciting him to consider his own life in view of the author's handling of his characters. His study of Dante at Cambridge, concurring as it did at the time of Merton's lowest ebb as a moral person, comes first to mind. Merton accepted the things Dante said about Hell and Purgatory but at the time with no firm application of these stern realities to his life.²

Later when Merton studied under Mark Van Doren at Columbia the thoughts of Dante and many others came to have personal meaning. It was Van Doren's class that would persuade him to catch the train in Long Island and go to Columbia.

¹Morris, Existentialism in Education, p. 140.
²Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, pp. 122-123.
All that year we were, in fact, talking about the deepest springs of human desire and hope and fear; we were considering all the most important realities, not indeed in terms of something alien to Shakespeare and poetry, but precisely in his own terms, with occasional intuitions of another order.¹

Merton considered this the best course he ever had in college. It was the only place up to that time that he felt he heard anything sensible said about "any of the things that were really fundamental—life, death, time, love, sorrow, fear, wisdom, suffering, eternity."²

Again the agreement of Morris and Merton is evident. They would have literature open the mind of a student to values that he can relate to his personal life. Morris sees it as a needed aid for a young person to begin building his own value-system. Literature was certainly that for Merton; it facilitated his decision to commit himself to Christ as a Trappist.

Morris would have American education preparing youth for life by boldly facing death. His primary means for bringing the student to face the ultimate moment of life with the values he gives his life have been considered. If they are valuable for education in the United States today (one would not have to fully accept the Existentialism of Morris to so accept

---

¹ Ibid., p. 180.
² Ibid.
them), then contemplation as put forth by Merton belongs to education.

Why? Because there may be a God to meet us after death to judge us. St. Thomas Aquinas held that the existence of God was evident and so knowable, though his essence was not. His essence is only known in an analogous way through his effects, viz, creation.¹

Morris would allow that if a person wanted the love of Jesus to be in the world, then right away it is. Not that this value is something outside the person, but that by accepting the values of Christ, a given person makes them his own for the here and present.² The difference that the life of Merton opposes to this position is that the values do exist in the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, they are in re, they are objectively true. No one is obliged to take the believing position of Merton, but if a person would so do (and it is only facing reality to recognize that many do), then contemplation belongs to education. If one accepts the claim of Morris that death must be faced in education, then helping each person to face the God whom he believes will eternally reward or punish

¹St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1, q. 2, a. 1.
him, cannot be ignored.

Merton's explanation of the fall of Adam, and the resulting task it left to each person, gives understanding to the place of contemplation being helped by education and helping it in return. In sinning, Adam withdrew himself from God into himself. Not being able to remain centered in himself, he fell beneath himself into the confusion of exterior things. Each person has the task of turning the thing right side out for himself.¹

It is difficult. Matter, like everything else made by God, is essentially good, but it is evil for spirit to be subject to matter. This is bad enough when man is aware of it. But when he thinks such a state is tolerably good, then he sets about to govern the universe with his own laws. There may have been a time when man could have kept up this dodge, but now psychoanalysis "has made it no longer possible to doubt the tyranny that self-conscious drives and compulsions exercise over the fallen spirit."²

The sons of Adam have tried to reconstruct the whole universe to their own image and likeness. It is the labor of

¹Merton, The New Man, p. 114.
²Ibid., pp. 115-116.
science without wisdom; the labor of action without contemplation. Let one task be finished, and it opens itself to ten more. If man's spirit was free of matter, then he could calmly face each new task. He would not be "distracted"—pulled apart—by them. Having order in himself, his hand, put to any work, would begin to restore man's and God's order to the universe.¹

Each person must reverse Adam's journey. "Adam withdrew into himself from God and then passed through himself and went forth into creation." Now each man must withdraw himself (in the right and Christian sense) from exterior things. This will enable him to be free of anxiety. He then has a fighting chance to regain possession of his true self.²

Now if education, especially the humanities, are oriented to contemplation, then they are a great aid to man gaining possession of himself.³ Merton finds support in this from Aristotle who taught that the higher things of nature are less accessible to knowledge than the lower. But "the scanty conceptions to which we can attain of celestial things give us, from their excellence, more pleasure, than all the knowledge

¹Ibid., pp. 117-118.
²Ibid., pp. 118-119.
³Merton, Mystics and Zen Masters, p. 80.
of the world in which we live."\(^1\)

Once man has possessed himself then he is able to continue back along the route Adam came down, and go out to seek God. Here is where contemplation enters. Having "experienced" God then the person is able to return to creation, to matter, allowing it to pass through his hand with a true and proper love for it.\(^2\) Our application is obvious. Contemplation allows a scholar or student a greater love for his subject, his particular discipline.

Boris Pasternak, the author of *Doctor Zhivago*, was for Merton an example of the above, holding that his symbolic richness placed him in the mainstream of the contemplative spirit that flowed from the Greek fathers. Pasternak saw symbols and figures of the inward, spiritual world, that work themselves out in the mystery of the universe around him. Especially in the history of each human being interwoven in the destinies of other humans.\(^3\)

Thomas Merton was a realist. He wrote thousands of words about contemplation, yet he could say that it was "very important in the contemplative life not to over-emphasize the con-

---

\(^1\) Aristotle, *De Partibus Animalium*, 1, 5.


\(^3\) Merton, *Disputed Questions*, pp. 24-26.
"If a person seeks to respond in a way that he cannot, he only closes off responding in a way that he can. "Better just to smell a flower in the garden or something like that than to have an unauthentic experience of a much higher value." A true contemplative may someday enter the realm where angels fear to tread, but he knows that to come there he must be true to his own experience, he cannot fake it in the beginning or anywhere along the way.\(^1\)

Before the Fall Adam was perfectly authentic. He was what God wanted him to be. He had access to all the rich powers of his human nature, that placed him in complete communication with all created things. He was in constant and unimpeded contact with the Spirit of God.\(^2\)

Like Adam after his sin, fallen man seeks to hide from the face of God. Adam accepted unreality, preferring a lie to the truth. To return to truth, man must face God. This is a dreadful experience; sin facing Holiness. Hoping in the redemptive act of the God-man, every person can do it. He will see that God still loves him. From then on he can begin to regain the contemplative life of Adam.\(^3\)

\(^1\)Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, pp. 350-51.
\(^2\)Merton, *The New Man*, p. 74.
\(^3\)Ibid., p. 77.
It was from this life that God began to elicit from Adam the names that he gave to all creatures. In turn, these names will flower into many kinds of intellectual activity. They will become, first of all, poems which will express man's inexpressible intuitions of hidden reality of created things. They will become philosophy and science, by which man will objectify and universalize his private vision of the world into thought systems that can be shared by everyone.¹

If man is accepted as having been redeemed by the God-man, then contemplation belongs to life and to education.

¹Ibid., pp. 84-85.
CHAPTER VI

TOWARD BRINGING CONTEMPLATION
INTO THE CURRICULUM

In the concluding pages of his intellectual autobiography, The Education of Henry Adams, the sixty-six year old descendant of the famous political family of Massachusetts, gave expression to the melancholy that prevailed in many of his pages. The following was written in 1906 shortly after Henry Adams had returned to New York from Europe, where he had lived off and on for many years. Looking out the window of his private club on the turmoil of Fifth Avenue, Adams felt

... himself in Rome, under Diocletian, witnessing the anarchy, conscious of the compulsion, eager for the solution, but unable to conceive whence the next impulse was to come and how it was to act. The two-thousand years failure of Christianity roared upward from Broadway, and no Constantine the Great was in sight.¹

Sensitive to his time, stretching from pre-Civil War into the early twentieth century, the reflections of Henry Adams are of lasting interest. This can easily be granted even

though one does not share his view that civilization is doomed because it lacks the unifying faith which gave vitality to earlier ages. Adams was particularly in love with the cultural unity of the thirteenth century.¹

The education of Thomas Merton parallels that of Adams in some ways, even though it lacked the advantages that would come to one born of the most famous family of New England. Like Adams, Merton sensed in the life of Europe the beauty of an age long gone. He readily recognized the decadence in much of the French society he came to know; at the same time he delighted in the harmony that the French brought to everything from bridge building to contemplation.² Again, like Adams, Merton sensed the despair of his times; indeed, Merton was all but swallowed up by despair in his earlier days. It was through Merton's true artistic sense, the soundest achievement in his education, that God allowed the grace of conversion to come to him. In time Merton came to see contemplation as the hope for men caught in the near-despair that he had tasted. He gave his life to that conviction; Henry Adams' education was not so blessed.

²Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, p. 30.
A clear way to bring contemplation into the curriculum is by offering a course based on a selection of Merton's writings to teachers in graduate-education programs. The purpose of the course would be expressed in the words of Merton:

To live well myself is my first and essential contribution to the well-being of all mankind and to the fulfillment of man's collective destiny. . . . To live well myself means for me to know and appreciate something of the secret, the mystery in myself: that which is incommunicable, which is at once myself and not myself, at once in me and above me.¹

Recalling the thought of Van Cleve Morris that the students he taught all agreed in experiencing the moment, the Existential Moment, when they discovered themselves as individuals, then a teacher can seek to have each of his students relate the wonderment in his own person to any given subject. Mark Van Doren was such a teacher for Merton during his days at Columbia. In always seeking the quiddities of things, Van Doren communicated to Merton his own vital interest in life. Merton held that such teaching prepared him for the good seeds of scholastic philosophy.²

Accepting the fact that every person is a mystery to himself, a teacher need not doubt the contemplative spirit being

¹Merton, Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, p. 81.
²Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, pp. 138-40.
in the heart of each of his students. His concern should be that it burn brightly in his own.

Considering the course on a semester basis, the lectures for the first half of the course could be taken from Merton's *The Ascent to Truth*, but leaving the book as only suggested reading. Contemplation would be thereby clearly related to reason.

The students would be required to read *The Seven Storey Mountain*, *Disputed Questions*, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, and *Faith and Violence*. The first mentioned would give the student an appreciation of Merton's struggle to begin becoming a man of God. *Disputed Questions* (1966) marks the time that Merton sees his life as a contemplative clearly related to Christian humanism. It also provides an appreciation of art in education for the development of the contemplative spirit. *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (1968) would make the student appreciate the wisdom of the East; to become truly catholic in outlook. The student, too, might be led to see his education as far more Cartesian than he realized, even if his philosophical training had been scholastic. *Faith and Violence* (1968) shows the strong views Merton held on the Vietnam War and racism. He considered the former an overwhelming atrocity; the latter he saw as having had its best moment of healing in
the non-violent efforts of Martin Luther King. Merton held that contemplation would open man to clearly see the evils of present day violence.

By the middle of the course each student would be required to submit a full outline of a term paper in which he gives a history of his own education relating it to some of the ideas gained from Merton. Hopefully, it would be the beginning (or increasing) of having his education flow into contemplation and vice versa. The papers would be due two weeks before the end of class, thereby allowing some class discussion of them with each student presenting his paper to the class. Prior to that, definite points of observation could be brought forth from the reading assignments, allowing, of course, the students to proceed in discussing the thought of Merton that had been particularly significant to them.

An examination would be given based upon the matter covered in the first half of the course at mid-semester. Another Merton book that the teacher could use in part for lecturing is The New Man (1961), especially the chapter about contemplation returning man to a taste of the free speech that Adam experienced with God before the Fall. This particular content could easily be related to the idea found in The Ascent to Truth or to the thoughts of Merton that the students would
glean from the required readings.

A recent teaching experience of this writer has reawakened and made clearer to him a way of relating study to contemplation. During the past semester (Spring, 1972) this writer has been engaged with other faculty members in an attempt to have their common students integrate their courses in philosophy, history, literature, and art. This took place at Holy Redeemer Seminary College at Waterford, Wisconsin, conducted by the Redemptorist Fathers for young men who aspire to join their ranks as priests or brothers. The students were sophomores and it was hoped that the experience would result in their building their subsequent education on an integrated basis. One term paper was required of them. It could be centered in any of the fields of study mentioned but the student was expected in so far as his subject permitted to show awareness of the other three fields of study, and to proficiently relate them to his chosen topic. Out of a class of thirteen, four were quite successful in fulfilling the end set by the faculty members. The remainder made worthy efforts. It was hoped that these latter students had come to value the purpose of the joint faculty effort. That will be better determined by observing their scholastic efforts in the coming years. Six of these students will spend next year in the novitiate, a time
of special spiritual effort when no formal course requirement has to be met. During this past scholastic year there was some overlapping of classes. In the future the majority of the students experiencing this synoptic effort of their courses, will then go on to the novitiate. Having successfully completed this year and taken religious vows the students are due to return to Holy Redeemer to finish their college courses.

Holy Redeemer College seeks to follow the directives for priestly formation set forth in The Program of Priestly Formation issued by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops of the United States. The Bishops adopted and adapted the directives set forth in The Basic Plan for Priestly Formation put forth by the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education which in turn took their directives from the Decrees on Priestly Formation issued by the Fathers of Vatican II.

The American Bishops wrote that the seminarian must

. . . learn to value disciplined human intelligence as contributing to a mature Christian faith, and to have no fear of constant critical inquiry and research in any field of thought. His study, as well as his prayer, should not remain superficial, but should give him a profound respect for the mystery of God and for the mystery and dignity of the human persons he is preparing to serve.¹

A statement supportive of this directive is found in a letter that Merton wrote to a professor of humanities which was included in *Seeds of Destruction*. The professor was engaged in a Program for Christian Culture conducted by the late Sister Madeleva, the famed poetess, at her St. Mary's College, South Bend, Indiana. Merton wrote that religion today was not dying because of atheism, but because religion was

... without any human epiphany in art, in work, in social forms. ... One who seeks God without culture and without humanism tends inevitably to promote a religion that is irreligious and even unconsciously atheistic, because it is first of all abstract and anti-human.¹

Besides his own seminary education, this writer has been teaching in Redemptorist seminaries for sixteen years. While this education was never devoid of the humanities in the past, presently it is more devoted to them. For example, only in the past four years was art introduced into the curriculum. The American Bishops leave no doubt that they want to educate Christian humanists for the priestly ministry. The directors of college seminaries as opposed to those in theological education were told that "for students from too parochial a background this must be a time for a balanced 'humanization' and 'secularization.'"²

² *The Program of Priestly Formation*, p. 69.
With such strong directives challenging the administration of every seminary in the United States, the efforts to live up to them offers candidates for master or doctoral degrees many openings for theses in the field of Education.

One that this writer sees as feasible can be brought forth by either a dean of studies or a dean of men. Perhaps, a joint effort would be both possible and better. The attempt before mentioned to bring the sophomores at Holy Redeemer College to integrate their studies in philosophy, history, literature, and art, could be related to their present efforts to become contemplatives. Here, of course we speak of a life that is contemplative oriented. When history speaks of contemplatives, someone like St. Teresa of Avila or St. John of the Cross is brought forth as an example. It was the latter saint that Merton relied upon so much in his seeing the relation of intellectual life to contemplation.

St. John of the Cross repudiated the thought of the Quietist Molinos: that a man must abandon all intellectual life even when he first seeks to advance in the spiritual life. Quite contrary, St. John of the Cross held that the beginner must think, study, and meditate. He must put his mind to work to grasp philosophical principles.¹

¹Merton, The Ascent to Truth, pp. 80-81.
Man must use his mind to acquire knowledge in concepts, ideas, and judgments. It may happen that a person may be blessed with infused contemplation and receive mystical knowledge of God. Such knowledge is a judgment, but it is above concepts and registers itself in the soul without an idea. Here, arises a difficulty. The natural desire of the intellect is for light. Now, it must not give into this desire, for then it would fill the mind with obstacles to contemplation. The reason for this is that nothing, created or imagined, can serve as a proper means of union with God.¹

This is not anti-intellectual. The power of the intellect to arrive at scientific, philosophical, and theological conclusions is not looked down upon. Even the knowledge of God that is beyond concepts depends upon the existence of concepts. They are its starting point; the only time a conflict occurs is when a soul entered upon contemplative prayer would cling to concepts.²

Within the boundaries clearly set forth by these thoughts of St. John of the Cross, there is still latitude for a doctoral candidate in either curriculum or counseling and guidance

¹Ibid., pp. 81-83.
²Ibid., pp. 86-88.
to stake out finer boundaries to facilitate the goal set forth by the American Bishops to have seminaries educate Christian humanists.

The obvious and greatest difficulty, one that can never be absolutely answered, for not only are we dealing with the mystery of man here, but the mystery of man seeking a closer relation to God, is setting forth criteria for judgment. Psychology offers much in this regard. Accepting the axiom that grace builds on nature, then, the dean of men, or a novice master who is joined to a college staff even though not on the premises, could establish certain guidelines for both detecting and ridding a priestly candidate of a too parochial outlook as the American Bishops mentioned. Such a view could easily flow from a worthy Christian training, but yet one that does not clearly see the Christian as a member of the earthly city as well as the heavenly one.

The curricula of seminaries have seen many changes since the end of Vatican II. For college seminaries perhaps the major one is that philosophy "must be freed from its curricular isolation and of narrow traditionalism, and given an interdisciplinary and integrative role." However, the student must have "St. Thomas Aquinas as one of his greatest teachers."\(^1\)

\(^1\) The Program of Priestly Formation, p. 70.
One place where a dean of men or dean of studies launched on such a dissertation could look for help to establish guidelines for educating a Christian humanist would be the faculty of a seminary. This writer has enjoyed working with those in the field of philosophy, literature, and art in the before mentioned enterprise to help college sophomores to integrate the above disciplines along with history.

The four involved were a religious sister, and three priests, all formally committed by vows to a life of prayer. However, this is not said by way of excluding a lay person of any faith, for people of various denominations are on the staff at Holy Redeemer College, and have participated in these shared efforts but not at the same time as this writer.

It is the experience of this writer that the study and teaching of history offers insight into a life of prayer. These could be offered to a dean of studies or a dean of men embarked on a dissertation relating to a seminary curriculum to contemplation.

The philosophy that a historian brings to his study, and no historian can escape so doing, must be recognized by him.\(^1\) This writer, holding for the Providence of God in all human

affairs—man working his way down to the final coming of Christ, sees history as more linear than cyclical. Men of one generation may err in a way that recalls the faults of another, but each human act is unique in itself and in its relation to time and place. It is true that we can walk into the same river only once, for life moves. But as the man wading into the river changes its flow no matter how insignificantly, so past events come to us with many effects having met and mingled.

History acquaints one with these happenings which are with us. They could be wars, depressions, the birth of a nation, the dissolution of a cultural unity.

To truly understand the present, one needs to reflect upon the past. Right here is where history lends itself to the contemplative life. One example is seen in reflecting upon the sensitivity of Pope Pius XI to the social conditions of his time when he wrote Quadragesimo Anno (1931). A student made aware of these conditions from history could read this encyclical and be struck with the mirandum that St. Thomas wants all education to arouse. Pius XI and those who worked with him in the writing of this masterful encyclical would ever be a part of him. As the young student moves into his assigned time for meditation, seeking a deeper union with God, thoughts of the efforts of men who strove to bring godliness to the
world could hardly be considered foreign. Many such examples would flow from each of the disciplines.

A recent book that emphasized the need for contemplation to be related to sound intellectual life comes from a Paulist priest, Father James Carroll, assigned to the Newman Chapel at Boston University. He has witnessed the Jesus movement from close-up. In so far as many people are using "the moral absolution of a fundamentalistic Jesus" to stay away from drugs, he praises them. But Father Carroll in the end is saddened by their simple faith. He sees the Jesus people heading for a disillusionment that must always accompany "any absolutistic, authoritarian, doubt-denying world-view."¹

Those assigned to the education of future priests must never allow any contemplative pursuit that even gives the hint of being anti-intellectual. It too will end in disaster. They must strive to relate intellectual effort to contemplation. At the moment, the field is wide open for study worthy of a candidate for a degree in Education.

CHAPTER VII

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The thesis of the dissertation is that the education, life and writings of Thomas Merton indicate the value of contemplation for education.

Played out in France, England and finally the United States, the education of Thomas Merton was instrumental in his choosing to become a contemplative monk. While there were episodes in the education of Merton that contributed to some moral failures, it was his sense of true art, learned from his gifted father, that ever remained an unbreakable thread from which he eventually weaved a life of personal integrity.

At Columbia University in the literature and philosophy courses offered by Mark Van Doren and Daniel Walsh, Merton was awakened to the need to lift his life above the merely natural. In writing his master's thesis in English Literature entitled "Nature and Art in William Blake," Merton, like Blake rejected the artist who merely copies nature. Knowing that the end of art is to lead the viewer to contemplation, he became conscious of the need of a vital faith in his personal life. Shortly after, Merton was baptized into the Catholic Church, and a few
years later, in December, 1941, entered the Trappist monastery at Gethsemani, Kentucky.

As a young monk Merton steeped himself in the writings of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church. In a book published in 1951, *The Ascent to Truth*, Merton explained the relation of the intellectual life to contemplation. He held the intellect to be the highest faculty of man. Reasoning, an act of the intellect, is often laborious and complex. Both by nature and predisposition the intellect of man is intuitive, for seeing the truth in one glance. Contemplation which either lightens the burden of reasoning or bypasses that effort altogether is not just a reasonable act, it is the final act of reason.

Merton was respectful of all the disciplines of learning, but he considered art, literature, and metaphysics as best for leading a person to contemplation. From these particular subjects he reaped concepts that enriched his desire to move beyond them into the contemplation that exceeds the merely natural intuition of the intellect. But this is not always an easy transition, for the intellect, seeking always to know, is disinclined to relinquish its positive concepts. Yet if it continues to cling to them, then it is hedged in by the very boundaries that make a concept knowable. It is the role of the will to command the intellect to renounce the positive concept—and thereby be freed of its limitations. Here we see
a delicate exercise of the virtue of prudence—choosing the best means to obtain a good end.

Merton held with St. Thomas Aquinas that contemplation considered widely is the simple intuition of the truth, which includes the contemplation natural to a philosopher or an artist. But without a belief in God, Merton taught, such a contemplation would not rise above the natural. However, even in believing the intellect remains the highest faculty of man. While the will commands the intellect to give its assent to a truth, yet the reason, or end, for believing is that the intellect might know, credo ut intelligam.

Faith is the beginning of man coming to the knowledge of God as He is; contemplation will bring him to this knowing. But even the knowledge of God that is beyond concepts depends upon the existence of concepts; they are its starting point.

In the last decade of his life Merton became a devout student of the Zen writers of the East. He was convinced that they could help Western man return to a religion more centered on the mystery of God, and thereby free him from a mere social-religion which posits God as necessary for the good ordering of society. Contemplation flows from the former; the death-of-God theology resulted from the latter when man grew weary of holding into existence a safeguarding-morality God.
Merton found that the aim of Zen disciples to find what they call emptiness is psychologically akin to the search for innocence as found in the Western world, especially in monasticism. In each case there is an attempt to prevent intuition from being swallowed by knowledge. The distinction made in the Middle Ages between ratio and intellectus helps clarify the claim of Merton. Ratio is the power of discursive, logical thought. Intellectus is the name for understanding insofar as it is the capacity of simplex intuitus, that simple vision to which truth offers itself like a landscape to the eye.

In 1960 Merton wrote that the contemplative life would be unthinkable to him without the perspective of true Christian humanism. It was after this that he began his controversial writings on race and peace. Basic to his view on both of these issues was his fear that Americans were losing their personalities in a mass society. Allowed at this time more contact with the outside world, Merton was surprised at the lack of vociferous independence he remembered abounding in the nation in the years prior to Pearl Harbor.

Since one's conception of the nature and the end of man is basic to a philosophy of education, Merton's humanism was contrasted with two humanists who did not hold that man is subject to God. The first, Irving Babbitt in the early decades
of this century was a leader in the fight to restore the study of the classical languages to higher education. He held that a youth could be brought to a disciplined aesthetic taste through a reading of the great thinkers of antiquity. From then on he would be safeguarded from the shallow thinking of the naturalists, both scientific and romantic. At the same time he would be freed from the need to accept a religious creed in order to bring a sense of the absolute into his life.

Babbitt and Merton concurred in wanting men to live according to what is best in them—their reasons, with the hope of reaching the point where being itself is grasped subjectively by experience. To this Merton added faith in the revelation of Christ as opening the way for a person to know God as He is through contemplation.

Sir Julian Huxley, holding that man has evolved from the biological stage of evolution into the psychosocial stage, by 1960 had emerged as the "dean" of the humanists seeking to properly place man in the space age. Agreement was found in the writings of Merton and Huxley that the best moment in the life of a person is when he transcends matter. Merton appreciated the new vista given man by open-ended science, making man accept the great mystery of matter itself. Huxley went further holding that man must accept the universe and his own existence as the one basic mystery. The new science would
furnish man with the "dogma," the means with which to fund a "new religion." Merton parted company with Huxley here, holding that man would never know the transcendence that God wants to bring him to through contemplation as long as he clung exclusively to his own concepts. Ironically, the intuitive awarenesses of the gifted Huxley and Babbitt offer a Christian humanist rich seeds for contemplation.

Recent writings of two prominent educators, Carl Rogers and Van Cleve Morris, furnished avenues to bring contemplation more practically into education.

Rogers in his *Freedom to Learn* holds that teaching will be facilitated when students, teachers, and administrators are freed as much as possible from defense mechanisms which hinder a healthy response to experience. In tests Rogers found that the person who has self-understanding and a conviction of self-worth is more able to direct his life and remain free of group-pressure than one who is lacking in a clear knowledge and a proper love of self. Let teacher and student bring this personal freedom born of a true love of self to the educational dialogue, then learning will be at its best. It was put forth that contemplation as proposed by Merton will bring this freedom to its fullest bloom; for the better man knows God, his Creator, the better he will know himself.
Van Cleve Morris in his *Existentialism in Education* proposes that education should help a student face the possibility of his not living after death, yet still choose to remain a responsible person to himself and to society. The thesis of Morris fits what Merton described as the religious view of the non-religious existentialists in so far as they clear away trivia and make men face the most important question of life—death.

Morris offers both an educational theory and a pedagogy for helping a student face the loneliness of his own death without lapsing into futility. He holds it vital to arouse the creative spirit of the student if he is to successfully respond to the puzzlement of his own existence. Morris stresses literature and the arts, such as painting, drama, the dance and creative writing as enabling a student to give an authentic expression of what he sees in the world and not be swayed by mere enthusiasts for various causes. In this Morris has centered upon the very aspects of the education of Thomas Merton that led him to the hard and lonely decision of becoming a Catholic and later of joining the Trappists. If Merton's belief in life after death can be added to the educational theory and pedagogy of Van Cleve Morris then contemplation belongs to education.
One possible application of this conclusion might be the development of research investigating its appropriateness to the work of college seminaries. Recent directives from the American Catholic Bishops demand a Christian humanistic education for future priests. Merton's thought is an easy neighbor to the Bishops's document. It may be that a dean of studies or a dean of men, or better, both working together could give guidelines which might enable seminarians to let their study of philosophy, history, literature, the social and natural sciences, and the fine arts flow into and back from the formal meditation demanded of them. Its end would be a proper integration of a seminarian's studies with his seeking union with God in contemplation.

Recognizing that one person's contemplation cannot be communicated to another, it is granted that contemplation cannot be directly introduced into a curriculum of studies. But the wonder and love of the mystery of life that Merton learned from Mark Van Doren at Columbia can be taken as the end of a course. With that in view a course-offering for those doing graduate work in the field of education has been outlined. It could be demanded of any student taking the course that he accept contemplation as an authentic human experience, and the teacher's duty would lie in showing why contemplation is
essential to education.

Seeking to evoke a reverence for the mystery of each man's relation to God, the teacher might suggest for the course the following works of Merton: his spiritual autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, with particular attention drawn to the facets of his education that were essential to his decision to become a contemplative monk; *The Ascent to Truth*, with its clear relating of reason to contemplation, could offer intellectual assurance to the hesitant and prudence to the enthusiast for contemplation; *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, could show how contemplation is valued in the Eastern world; in turn, a respect for an earlier Western tradition of contemplation could result; *Disputed Questions*, with its relating of contemplation to Christian humanism, could show contemplation as the sine qua non for preserving the integrity of each man from being swallowed by the mass-society; *The New Man*, could show contemplation as the best way for leading man back toward the authentic relation that Adam had with all creation before the Fall. Given the proper opportunity the other works of Merton could be related to the course; particularly, *Faith and Violence*, for its commentary of war and racial strife.

The final conclusion made is that if formal education is
looked upon as preparing a student for a lifetime of self-
education, then contemplation, awakening and sensitizing the
intuitive awareness of the mind, must be considered an integral
part of education.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books


---


---


---


---


---


---


---


---


---


---


---


---


---


---


---


---

Merton, Thomas.  

_____.  

_____.  

_____.  

Meyer, Adolphe E.  

More, Paul Elmer.  

Morris, Van Cleve.  

Neill, Thomas P.  

Pieper, Josef.  

_____.  

_____.  

Rice, Edward.  

Schenk, H.G.  

Ulich, Robert.  
Articles


______. "Is Mysticism Normal?" The Commonweal, LI November 4, 1949, pp. 94-98.


Documents


Unpublished Material


VITA

Edward Coleman Cosgrove was born April 4, 1921, the fourth son of Mr. and Mrs. John J. Cosgrove of Kansas City, Missouri. There, he attended Redemptorist Grade School taught by the Sisters of St. Joseph; in 1934 he entered DeLaSalle Academy conducted by the Christian Brothers of St. John Baptist de la Salle; in 1938 he matriculated at Rockhurst College of the Jesuit Fathers. He graduated in 1942 with a Bachelor of Science degree, majoring in Economics and minoring in European History.

After enlisting in the United States Naval Reserve he was sent to Midshipman School at Notre Dame, Indiana, and was there commissioned an officer in January, 1943. He served with the Amphibious Forces in the Pacific Theater of War, receiving an honorable discharge from active duty in 1946.

In September, 1946 he entered St. Joseph's Preparatory College, Kirkwood, Missouri, a minor seminary conducted by the Redemptorist Fathers and Brothers of the St. Louis Province. In June, 1949 he was accepted at The Redemptorist Novitiate at DeSoto, Missouri, and on August 2, 1950 took his vows as a Redemptorist. He studied Philosophy and Theology at Immaculate Conception Seminary, Oconomowoc, Wisconsin. There, on June 29, 1955 he was ordained a priest by the late Albert Cardinal Meyer, then the Archbishop of Milwaukee.
In January, 1957 he was assigned to the faculty of St. Joseph's Preparatory College, Kirkwood, Missouri. In June, 1957 he enrolled in the Graduate School of St. Louis University. In October, 1958 he graduated with a Master of Arts degree, majoring in American History and minoring in Modern European History.

In 1959 the Redemptorist Minor Seminary was transferred to Edgerton, Wisconsin. He taught here until 1968 and for five years served as Assistant Dean of Men. In 1968 he was assigned to the faculty of the newly opened Holy Redeemer College, Waterford, Wisconsin, a four-year college seminary of the Redemptorists of the St. Louis Province.

In September, 1966, he entered the Graduate School of Loyola University of Chicago. In February, 1969 he graduated with a Master of Education degree in Guidance and Counseling. He then began his studies for a Doctor of Philosophy in the Foundations of Education.

In the Fall-semester of 1969, 1971, and 1972 he taught at St. Alphonsus College, Suffield, Connecticut, a four-year college seminary conducted by the Redemptorists of the Baltimore Province. In the Fall-semester of 1970, during his year of residency, he taught the History of American Education at Loyola University. Presently, he is at Holy Redeemer College, Waterford, Wisconsin.
The dissertation submitted by Rev. Edward C. Cosgrove, C.SS.R. has been read and approved by members of the Department of Foundations of Education.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the dissertation and the signature which appears below verifies that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the dissertation is now given final approval with reference to content and form.

The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

January 12, 1973

Signature of Advisor