

# RELIGION IN AMERICA: THOMAS MERTON'S LEGACY

By Walter H. Capps

The preceding article describes one of many new American communities which, in the words of the author, is "seeking a religious awakening on the level of the great universal religions that have marked the history of humanity." The lifestyle and spirit of these communities has been strongly influenced by a new trend noticeable in American society in the last decade or so: the renaissance of religion, especially the contemplative and meditative aspects of religion. Experts have cited many causes of this spiritual revolution in the United States, including the influence of Asian religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism. In the following article, Professor Capps discusses one "cause" of this religious renaissance: Thomas Merton, the American Catho-

lic monk who in 1948 became a world-famous author with his best-selling autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Merton gradually evolved into one of the most important intellectual figures in Christian philosophy and comparative religion—and a leading apostle of the classic spiritual disciplines of prayer and meditation. Significantly, in his last years and later books, he became one of the major interpreters of Asian religions to the Western world.

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It is more than ten years since the death of the American Trappist monk, theologian and author, Thomas Merton. No one could have known in December 1968, when Merton died in Bangkok at the age of 53, that the next decade would see a revival in the United States of a new contemplative era in religion.

In American religious circles the emphasis before 1968, at least among Christians, and primarily among Protestants, had been on the revised "social gospel"—on the need to establish the Kingdom of God on Earth. The Catholic world was living in the aftermath of Vatican Council II. There was a growing shift to change and experimentation—as distinct from acceptance of doctrine. Baroque organ music was being replaced by a laid-back syncopated beat of Spanish guitars. Priests and nuns, sometimes together, were leaving the religious orders and seeking release from their vows. Some theologians were counseling their hearers and readers to "support the social and political unrest wherever you find it."

In December 1968, on a gentle hillside a short distance from the walls of the chapel of Gethsemani Abbey near Louisville, Kentucky, a community



*Thomas Merton*

of Trappist monks gathered to lay the body of Thomas Merton ("Father Louie," as they called him) to rest. He had gone to Asia two months earlier to participate in a number of conferences on religious renewal. He went there to learn from the Asian monks because in these matters, as he had said, they were ahead of their counterparts in the Western world. When his plane left the airport in San Francisco on October 15, 1968, he wrote in his diary [later published as *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*]: "I am going home, to the home where I have never been in this body." He referred to "being at last on my way after years of waiting and wondering and fooling around." Then he prayed: "May I not come back without having settled the great affair."

Before his San Francisco departure, Thomas Merton had come to the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions in Santa Barbara, California, where he delivered a lecture on the theme, "the monk as marginal man." Here he had identified with those on the edges of society (poets, students, hippies) who were raising critical questions. He stressed the need to develop a universal consciousness. "We are not going to solve the social problems of community," Merton said at the Center, "unless we solve them in universal terms."

Then, after spending some days at a retreat in Redwoods Monastery in northern California, he had gone on to India, Tibet, Sri Lanka and Thailand. In Bangkok, on December 10, 1968, following a lecture in which he elaborated upon the remarks he had made at the Center earlier in the fall, Merton was accidentally electrocuted in his hotel room.

### ***The Turn to Contemplative Religion***

The importance of Thomas Merton's life was recognized immediately. More than any other individual, he had been responsible for giving contemporary Christian monasticism a basis for self-evaluation. He had developed a rationale for interpreting and thereby defending the monastic vocation in something other than self-referential terms. He wrote books about the propriety of the monastic calling. He knew how and why that form of life fitted the needs of the modern world. He was able to articulate a monastic sense of things in terms of a larger context that included sensitivity to social change, resonance with the worlds of art and literature, and an acute awareness of the practical implications of political orientations. He was in communication with these worlds in addition to those to which monks claim disciplined (if not privileged) access.

All of this was known about Thomas Merton in 1968. He had gained a large readership ever since the publication of his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 20 years earlier. But what was not known and could not have been known is the remarkable similarity between his interests (and the subjects he illuminated) and the marked tendencies of the American religious climate that has come into prominence in the 11 years since his death. That period has been marked by the turn to contemplative religion.

Previously, the dominant tendency in the United States was to construe religion mainly in sociopolitical terms, to look at it as a transforming and regenerating force within a society experiencing profound social and political change. But the new era called for a renewal of the classic spiritual disciplines, including prayer and meditation, and has woven these into a mode through which life itself is approached and addressed.

### *Action vs. Contemplation?*

From certain vantage points, the shift appears as a complete turnabout. But lest we extend the distinction into a radical contrast, we should keep in mind that Merton understood monasticism to be an instrument for social reform. It is evident, too, that he refused to pit action and contemplation against each other as competing dispositions. He recognized that there are large areas of overlap, subtle similarities, and a persistent and necessary complementarity. In his view, contemplation finds expression in action, and action is always fed, directed and enriched by contemplation.

Part of the reason the new era in American religion came on with such force was Merton's own catalytic influence. Significantly, he himself did not intend to function as either a religious reformer or a social revolutionary. His intention was to live as a monk. And the end of his life found him seeking for a greater solitude than he had ever known. He was thinking about moving to Alaska. He was wondering about establishing something remote at Redwoods Monastery in northern California. He did not appear to be interested in any additional programmatic possibilities. To be sure, he worked from within the monastery for changes. He was encouraged by the Vatican to engage in these efforts as well as to interpret the monastic form of religious life to persons outside the cloisters. In pursuing all of this, he had found interested readers and commentators. His interpretive work was convincing.

### *Erikson's Primary Cultural Work*

We may be too close to the situation, even today, to understand how it happened that what was designed to revivify the monastery from within was transmitted beyond and transposed into a basis for a dramatic general change in religious attitudes and aspirations. The larger issue is more difficult to penetrate: How did it happen that a religious viewpoint—very monastic in origin and orientation—became attractive to people who are not formally associated with any particular religion?

Psychologist Erik Erikson's interpretive category "cultural work" comes to mind. Thomas Merton was engaged in primary cultural work. He helped to delineate an orientation to life with which many other people could identify. They, in turn, regarded him as a pioneer in an effort in which they themselves were also engaged. He clarified and extended that effort. It is not simply that Merton recognized the new circumstance when it occurred; he also helped bring it to pass.

In Erikson's view, primary cultural work is appropriate when the prevailing ideology no longer functions effectively or when it loses its resonance. Until the reconstructive work is effected, people have difficulty finding appropriate connections. In seeking a basis for understanding himself and his place, the cultural worker also functions as a representative. Others come to accept the correspondences he reconstructs and the resonances he re-establishes. Because he was a person of uncommon intuitive sensitivity and creative ability, Thomas Merton's efforts assume more extensive application and broader social and cultural ramifications.

Thomas Merton pioneered a viewpoint that, among other things, focused less on religion as an instrument of social and political reform and more on religion as a means of interior awareness and psychological self-disclosure. Merton was preoccupied with the definition of the ego, and he claimed that monasticism offered an "alternative way of being." He was fascinated with the Marxist critique of society and with the Buddhist religion, as he concentrated on understanding the nature of the human being.

### ***Beyond the Shadow and the Disguise***

All of this was behind Merton's desire to visit Asia. It is implicit in the frequent statements in his *Journal* that in Asia he found what he had been looking for. The most striking of these statements is the observation he made after viewing the Buddhist wood sculpture figures at Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka:

Looking at these figures, I was suddenly—almost forcibly—jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious....The thing about all this is that there is no puzzle, no problem, and really no 'mystery.' All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear. The rock, all matter, all life...everything is emptiness and everything is compassion.

Then follows an exclamation:

I don't know when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination. Surely, my Asian pilgrimage has come clear and purified itself. I mean, I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for. I don't know what else remains, but I have seen and have pierced through the surface and have got beyond the shadow and the disguise....It says everything; it needs nothing. And because it needs nothing it can afford to be silent, unnoticed, undiscovered.

This describes the deeper vision he sought, a basis which the various religious traditions share, as well as his convictions about the need for a universal consciousness.

It is understandable why there should be an attempt to find social, cul-



*Seeing these sculptures of the Buddha in Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka, Thomas Merton felt "a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination."*

tural and religious alternatives. But why should a fundamentally monastic perspective become attractive outside the monastery? And why should such shifts redirect attention to a 12th-century medieval world view? Why should the vantage point of monks find resonance in a world grown tired and suspicious of the problem-solving orientation to human life?

Monasticism has always had a stake in the transmission of culture. Monks were the ones most responsible for transmitting the world of classical antiquity into medieval form. Today, the traffic is not from classical Greece and Rome to medieval Europe, but between Eastern and Western cultures. Almost all of the monasteries in the West have been affected by Asian religions. The religion practiced in the monasteries is being nourished by the power of the Asian visions. Thus, as before, the monks are involved in sorting out the significant cross-cultural currents. They are

functioning as stewards and as ministers of exchange. They approach this work with the sense of responsibility that has been tutored through the long centuries of practicing the spiritual disciplines.

But this time, the lines of transmission have become extraordinarily complicated. It is not simply that East is meeting West and West is meeting East. It is also that in the meeting of East and West, the West is learning to face the West, as it were, from the East. All of this is occurring in keen awareness of the findings of depth psychology, and in a world in which psychoanalysis has been accepted as a shared experience.

In the contemplative tradition, the identification of the stages of interior prayer as well as the distinct moments and periods in the life of the soul have been central. The writings of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross are vivid examples of this sensitivity. Such efforts have found Biblical sanction in such statements as: "In my father's house are many rooms" (or, in some versions, "mansions"). Now, some of the same distinctions are being correlated with a conception of soul that embellishes the house imagery and frequently employs the insights of C.G. Jung in his *Contributions to Analytical Psychology*. Jung wrote:

We have to describe and to explain a building the upper story of which was erected in the 19th century; the ground floor dates from the 16th century; and careful examination of the masonry discloses the fact that it was reconstructed from a dwelling tower of the 11th century. In the cellar we discover Roman foundation walls, and under the cellar a filled-in cave, in the floor of which stone tools are found and remnants of glacial fauna in the layers below. That would be a sort of picture of our mental structure.

East meets West, West meets East. Corporate memory is at work from both sides, and archetypal awarenesses are being probed in myth, dream and ritual.

### ***Ecological Sensitivities***

As if this were not enough, a new dimension has been added lately: There has been a subtle but growing claim that the basis upon which these careful changes can be effected requires the recovery of a 12th-century monastic viewpoint. The recovery is necessary not for theological reasons, but because of the dictates of the nature of things. The correspondences between knowing and loving are closer than the modern world suspects. If one is to know, one must realize one's likeness to that which is approaching. This temper harmonizes with some current ecological and environmental sensitivities. It opposes some of the requirements and promises of the scientific method. And it is a temper that has emerged after some of the claims of the Enlightenment—and the assumptions upon which they are based—have been found wanting.

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## THE LITTLE AIRCRAFT

By Howard Nemerov

*The little aircraft trudging through night, cloud, rain,  
Is neither alone nor lost among the great  
Inverted ocean of the air, for a lane  
Invisible gives it intelligence,  
The crossing needles keep its heading right,  
The neutrally numbering voices of its friends  
Make of its blindness blind obedience,  
From one to another handing its destiny on  
The stages of the way with course and height  
Till finally it's funneled in and down  
Over the beacons along the narrowing beam,  
Perfectly trusting a wisdom not its own,  
That breaking out of cloud it may be come  
Back to this world and be born again,  
Into the valley of the flarepath, fallen home.*

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