

Boston College
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY
Continuing Education Encore Events

Transcript of
“Thomas Merton: A Prophet for Our Time”

presented by
Dr. Colleen M. Griffith
October 29, 2015

Dr. Jane Regan:

Thomas Merton has been in the news a lot this year, not only for the celebration of the 100th anniversary of his birth but, as we know, Pope Francis highlighted him, along with three other great Americans, in his address to Congress on September 24th. Francis said, and I quote, “Merton was above all a man of prayer, a thinker, who challenged the certitude of his time and opened new horizons for souls and for the Church. He was also a man of dialogue, a promoter of peace between peoples and religions.” It’s this great American Catholic who is the topic of the presentation this evening by my longtime colleague, Dr. Colleen Griffith.

Colleen is associate professor of the practice of theology at Boston College School of Theology and Ministry. She also serves as faculty director of spirituality studies, and in that capacity, she designed and directs the STM summer Post-Master’s Certificate Program in Spiritual Formation, which is now in its 18th year. She holds a doctorate in theology from Harvard Divinity School, where she worked under the direction of the historical theologian Margaret Miles.

Dr. Griffith works at the intersection of theology and spirituality, and her research and writing interests include historical and contemporary spirituality, Christian theologies of the body, method in practical theology, and exploration between doctrine and spiritual practice.

Colleen Griffith—as I know many of you know, because you’ve had her—is a superb teacher and educator and much sought-after lecturer. She has been the driving force behind the Evelyn Underhill Lecture in Christian Spirituality that we have every summer, which is really a key part of our summer program.

In addition to publishing many book chapters and essays, Dr. Griffith’s text *Prophetic Witness: Women’s Strategies for Reform*, published by Crossroads, received the first-place award by the Catholic Press Association in 2010. She served as editor for the *C21 Resources* magazine entitled “Catholic Spirituality in Practice,” which had an unprecedented print of over 200,000 copies. Under Dr. Griffith’s editorial guidance, this publication was expanded into the book *Catholic Spiritual Practices: A Treasury of Old and New*, published by Paraclete Press in 2012.

Boston College

But Dr. Griffith is not only a scholar of distinction, a creative educator, and a prophetic witness in her own right, she's also a person who makes a practice of faith a centerpiece of her generous work. Please join me in welcoming Dr. Colleen Griffith. (applause)

Dr. Colleen Griffith:

Thank you, Jane, for that very kind introduction. I'm very happy to be with you here this afternoon for this centenary year celebration of Merton's birth. I want you to know that I come not as a specialist but as a student of Merton, as I imagine many of you are who are gathered here; hence our crowd this afternoon.

Merton is one of those formative people in the vast communion of saints to whom a great many people turn. They turn for companionship and for instruction in how to live more authentically and fully. As a spiritual guide and prophet, Merton just keeps on teaching 100 years after his birth.

Who was he really—Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk from the Abbey of Gethsemane, known as Father Louis? He's been described as the greatest spiritual writer, Catholic spiritual writer, of the twentieth century, and he certainly has influenced Catholics. But most notably, he modeled a kind of catholicity that stretched beyond the limits of any single institution or tradition.

He's been said to be a spiritual classic unto himself. Now, we typically use the language "spiritual classic" to refer to texts. But if classics indicate something that remains compelling, formative, and lasting, then the life of Merton stands as such a "text."

"He was a sort of question demanding an answer . . . He was unsettling, disturbing, not comfortable to live with . . . There was a kind of truth about him that got under your skin, into your heart. . . He could not be categorized, labeled, pigeonholed. And he had vision . . . a sort of prophetic fire, the fire Christ came to cast on the earth and called on this man to cast . . . He was a great gift of God."

This is a description of Merton offered by Matthew Kelty, an Irish monk of the Abbey of Gethsemane. Kelty, who died only about five or six years ago at the age of 96, was once Merton's typist and later his confessor. He had a profound love for Merton in all of his complexity. He understood that Merton held within his magnetic personality a wide range of selves—contemplative monk, writer, poet, activist, artist, intellectual, social critic, advocate for peace, ecumenist, lover of nature, and ordinary guy—a kind of "every soul," as Sue Monk Kidd calls him in her introduction to *The New Seeds of Contemplation*.

Merton was all of these. But he placed each one of these multiple facets of himself at the service of a single vocation about which he felt passionately: the living of a contemplative way. Merton viewed the vocation of being contemplative as a nonnegotiable calling for himself. And he urged others to see that contemplative orientation was their calling as well, from their respective life stations.

Boston College

In Merton's view, a contemplative orientation was not something reserved for the monastery. His insistence on its centrality in a life of faith was unwavering. And the urging of a contemplative orientation became the melody line from which all else he did and said modulated.

Merton sensed human beings to be created with contemplative capacity, and this led him to declare that the embrace of a contemplative way was essential to the claiming of our whole humanity. He identified silence and solitude as key practices that could buttress a person's efforts to bring a contemplative orientation to their life. Merton considered practices of silence and solitude to be, quote, "morally necessary for anyone committed to engaging life qualitatively in this way." Inside or outside the monastery, practices of solitude and silence would prove transformative activities in the forging of a contemplative heart.

Merton's plea for a contemplative orientation in our lives and his emphasis on solitude and silence assume prophetic proportions in our techno-centric age, an age in which digital culture and its values abound. Life in social media bubbles has come to seem very natural to us. Immediate and short-term digital connectivity has become the new normal, and the utter ubiquity of mobile and online connection options is one of the truths of our time.

We are slowly coming to recognize that, with all of this, there has been some diminishing of genuinely human connections, a disembodiment of social relations, an uncritical acceptance of a constant feed of information and entertainment, marked increase in reported boredom in anything other than multi-stimulating environments, a big rise in distraction, and an overall lessening of ability to be attentive.

Our multiple media technology options and our networked lives are reshaping us. And in the words of Maggie Jackson, the habits of our technological hearts run the risk of, quote, eroding our capacity for deep, sustained, receptive attention—the very building blocks of intimacy and wisdom.

What happens when we place Thomas Merton's pleas for a contemplative way and its concomitant practices of silence and solitude against the techno-cultural cacophony of our day? You know, Merton's writings are not meant to remain timeless artifacts that demand mere repetition. They require interpretation and appropriation by people who question and listen from within their own socio-cultural circumstances.

In his lifetime, Merton voiced some concern about unbridled technological advance, but he had things like the prospect of new monster plows for the fields on the monastery grounds in mind. Never would he, never could he have imagined the smartphones, the tablets, the wearable technologies, the auto-updating applications, the Facebook statuses, Twitter feeds, and barrage of possible social network possibilities that are commonplace today.

The notion of distancing of discourse, something about which Paul Ricoeur and others write, suggests that the prophetic words of Merton, written in the mid-twentieth century, can transcend the limitations of their origin and can function mightily in yet another context.

Boston College

This being so, the import of Merton's words for us today may be even greater than the import of Merton's words for those living in his own time.

The true prophet in any age is one able to offer a different read of reality from the socially dominant one, one able to suggest a counter-consciousness that leads to greater flourishing. He or she is able to point out differences between what is substance and what is illusion and is able to encourage people toward an alternative vision.

In this light, it seems possible to think about Thomas Merton as a prophet right now; a prophet for this age of distraction. But to test this thesis, we need firstly to understand better Merton's thought, particularly what he meant by contemplation and how he understood silence and solitude to function. To these matters we now turn.

What does it mean to be contemplative? Merton talks about it as a facing of life at its source. He writes, and I quote:

Contemplation is the highest expression of a person's intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully alive, fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for life, for awareness, and for being. It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant source. Contemplation is above all awareness of the reality of that source. It *knows* the source, obscurely, inexplicably, but with a certitude that goes beyond reason and beyond simple faith.

Merton senses that there is nothing more alien to contemplation than Descartes's *cogito ergo sum*—I think, therefore I am—more accurately rendered, "I am conscious of myself thinking, therefore I am." The cogito, claims Merton, is the utterance of an alienated being, quote, "in exile from his or her own spiritual depths, compelled to seek comfort in proof for his or her own existence." In contemplation, by contrast, one is aware of one's contingent reality as received, received as a gift from God, a free gift of love.

Who then is a contemplative? "Not one who sits under a tree with legs crossed attempting to edify him or herself," exclaims Merton. It is one who, quote, "seeks to know the meaning of life not with one's head but with one's whole being . . . by uniting his or herself to the Source of life . . . the Source who is too real to be contained satisfactorily inside any word or concept or name assigned by the human." We don't live for contemplation, says Merton; we live for the God of contemplation.

A practice of contemplation becomes the basis for seeing ourselves, others, and our world in God. It is not an escape from common life, but rather a way of entering in all the more deeply. Contemplation, as Merton describes it, is very much of the world. It can't be a choice of being less interested in others and one's surroundings; only one of being more interested and more concerned. A contemplative orientation to life is chosen *for the sake of* truer, more conscious living in the world.

Boston College

It was Merton's contemplative orientation that in fact informed his praxis as a social critic. He rejected what he saw to be deceptions in worldly life and took a stand on important issues pertaining to what could potentially cause our sense of humanity to lose its meaning. And so he stood opposed to war. He stood opposed to police brutality. He was committed to nonviolence and solidarity with the marginalized.

A contemplative orientation turned him also in the direction of a strong ecumenism, an interest in other religious traditions. He writes: "If I affirm myself as a Catholic merely by denying all that is Muslim, Jewish, Protestant, Hindu, Buddhist, etc., in the end I will find that there is not much left for me to affirm as a Catholic, and certainly no breath of the Spirit with which to affirm it." Taken from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.

His spheres of interest and activities reflected his interior stance of contemplation, and even the simplest of daily activities for him held the possibility of a contemplative orientation. He observes: "walking down a street, sweeping a floor, washing dishes, hoeing beans, reading a book, taking a stroll in the woods, all can be enriched with contemplation and with the obscure sense of the presence of God."

For the Christian, a way of contemplation involves union of one's being with Christ, notes Merton. Christ, the one we encounter in the Gospels, makes us friends and dwells in us through the Spirit, uniting us intimately to God's self. Our true personalities are fulfilled in Christ, and the love of Christ begins to burn in us in the practice of contemplation. Our spirits are set afire and energized as they come in contact with rays of truth and ways of love.

Merton never portrays the choice of a contemplative orientation as being for the fainthearted. "Contemplation is no painkiller," he writes. For him, it so often involved quote, "a steady burning to ashes of old worn out words, clichés, slogans, rationalizations! The worst of it is that even apparently holy conceptions are consumed along with all the rest." In short, contemplation included a breaking of idols and a square facing of false selves. Why? Because contemplation was an occasion to see one's true self as within God. Merton comments: "We have the choice of two identities: the external mask, which seems to be real . . . and the hidden inner person, who seems to us to be nothing but who can give him or herself to the truth in the God in whom he or she subsists."

In his own journey in contemplative living, Merton met with many shadows of false selves. His desire to remain true to the concept of God uttered in him got reflected in his description of "salvation" as having to do with being exactly the creatures we were meant to be. Quote, "A tree gives glory to God by being a tree. It 'consents,' so to speak, to God's creative love. It is expressing an idea which is in God and which is distinct from the essence of God, and therefore a tree imitates God by being a tree." As for human creatures, claims Merton, contemplation allows for our "yes" to the indwelling Divine Persons. Merton writes, quote: "Our true self is, then, the self that receives freely and gladly the missions that are God's supreme gift to God's sons and daughters. Any other 'self' is only an illusion."

Boston College

In that receiving of the missions of Trinitarian life in contemplation, persons come to sense places of disunion within themselves and with others. And there are two things that people can do in the face of such a recognition, according to Merton. “We can love or we can hate. Hatred recoils from the sacrifice and the sorrow that are the price of resetting of the bones. It refuses the pain of reunion.” End of quote. A contemplative orientation points consistently in the direction of reconciling practice.

Now, honoring a contemplative way provided Merton with fresh perspective and new levels of vision. In the first selection of his *Asian Journal*, which was published posthumously, this was the journal that was written en route when Merton made his fateful 1968 trip to the Far East, Merton shares a moment of unusual clearness of eyes that he had, as he was visiting the Polonnaruwa Buddhist sculptures in Ceylon, now Sri Lanka. It was for him a moment in which there was a twinning of aesthetic somatic experience with mystical intuition. He’s gazing upon the rock figures, and he’s gazing on them in silence, and all at once he has an overwhelming sense of their beauty and their spiritual validity—the rocks, their creation, the artistry, the landscape. He recalls, quote: “I was jerked out of the habitual half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, real clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious.”

Such moments and opportunities to awaken anew abound, claims Merton. In an oft quoted passage from his book *New Seeds of Contemplation*, he writes: “Every moment and every event of a person’s life on earth plants something in one’s soul. For just as the wind carries thousands of winged seeds, so each moment brings with it germs of spiritual vitality that come to rest imperceptibly in the minds and wills of persons.” Now frequently these seeds are lost, as we simply aren’t prepared, aren’t ready to receive them. But there are lots of seeds of contemplation that survive and come to flourish, and one way that they do this is through practices of silence and solitude.

I think that many of us associate solitude with isolation. But for Thomas Merton, solitude is not to be confused with either physical or social isolation. It’s an interior disposition, one to be cultivated for sure, an interior disposition such that “one could be in solitude even as one lived in the center of a city.”

Solitude in reality exists as a profoundly relational interior space, an interior space where interdependence is truly grasped, and poverty of spirit (our incompleteness unto our self) is the truth that reigns. Solitude is that deep space within where solidarity with others is known and where compassion blooms. Merton writes, quote, “We do not go into the desert to escape people but to learn how to find them. We do not leave them in order to have nothing more to do with them, but to find out the way to do them the most good...” Solitude, therefore, is a place of meeting, and there can be what he terms “rich and endless society” in it, not only with God, with others, with the created order.

Merton further identifies a practice of interior silence as a constitutive dimension of a contemplative orientation. He writes persuasively about, quote, “the friendly communion of

Boston College

silence.” You see, silence is so related to love. In silence, Merton finds himself better able to grasp the goodness of things, and more likely to, quote, “respect reality where words have defiled it.” The need for silence in our lives may be greater than we realize. Merton comments, quote: “We are perhaps too talkative, too activist in our conception of the Christian life. Our service of God and of the Church does not consist only in talking and doing. It consists in periods of silence, listening, waiting,” tending.

Constantly in motion, ever busy meeting the demands of our social roles, extroverted to the excess, we get carried along in the stream of talk and more talk, texts and more texts, Snapchats and Tweets that frequently move us further and further away from the deeper call of the heart and the questions that it poses. Silence can bring us back. The silence that Merton proposes serves as a break from floods of frenetic activity, the racket of constant messaging, and moves us toward a return to what is most true.

As we think again about our present cultural milieu, contemplation, solitude, silence don’t exactly seem to figure that prominently as intentionally chosen go-to practices. Embrace of desert values, descent into one’s poverty of spirit (one’s incompleteness unto oneself), and a prizing of silent attention, intuition, perception—you’re not faring very well in this digital age, in which, as Sherry Turkle notes, “continuous partial attention is the new normal.”

Should we be alarmed that a majority of high school students today juggle five to eight media while doing homework? Should we be concerned that, amidst a plethora of high-tech connectivity, people have fewer and fewer real confidants? Are we noticing the children being pushed on swings in our parks and played with by parents and caregivers who simultaneously are on their cell phones? Do we see the people at the checkout lines in our stores and those who are caught in traffic jams, panicked by the wait, reaching for their devices?

Is it OK that a, quote, “constant stream of stimulation” is seemingly needed by us in order to edit out life’s boring bits? Is it all right that persons feel they always have to be connected to their devices so as not to be alone and in order to fill an unbearable silence? Does it matter that our dashing to browse, surf and tweet makes interior solitude an oddity?

What path are we traveling? Sherry Turkle writes, quote: “Technology presents itself as a one-way street. We are likely to dismiss discontents about its direction because we read them as growing out of nostalgia or a Luddite impulse or as simply (being) in vain. But when we ask what we ‘miss,’ we may discover what we care about, what we believe to be worth protecting.”

The prophetic urgings of Thomas Merton invite a critical read of our networked lives, and they provide a kind of counter-consciousness. The choice of interior solitude, interior silence that buttress a contemplative orientation requires countercultural intentionality in this techno-centric time. But such a choice makes possible deeper living.

Boston College

Dialogue with Merton will not cause us to reject media technology, nor should it, but it may help us to reshape our relationship to it. Merton's call to a contemplative orientation suggests that we think about the shadow dimensions of the digital social environments in which we live. His urging to befriend silence and to choose solitude as an interior disposition, one that provides a different kind of meeting and connecting, can inspire us to set new limits and balance our digital praxis, thereby witnessing to what it is we hold most dear. There are, after all, unintended consequences of our technologies to which we have become vulnerable.

The great Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel, with whom Thomas Merton corresponded over many years, writes, and I quote: "Prophecy is an interpretation of a particular moment in history. . . It may be described as exegesis of existence from a divine perspective." Unbeknownst to anything he could have imagined, Merton offers us a vision that moves beyond the confines of "digital communion" and presents rich points of access for growing our offline lives. He beckons us to see and feel and taste and touch reality at its source, and in so doing, to remember who we are and indeed whose we are. For this prophetic nudge, we are grateful.

Well, Happy Birthday, Thomas Merton! Your words stand between silence and silence. The truth of your words bear down on us, and we are turned to the reality of God. In your prophetic message, we witness the divine rising up out of the sea like a much sought treasure on discernible waves. Our time with you draws to a close, but as your word recedes, may the brightness of the One to whom you point remain on the shores of our being, those of us gathered here. Thank you. (applause)