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The Counsellor
and
Thomas Merton
The Counsellor and Thomas Merton

A study in the spiritual and the aesthetic dimensions of counselling.

by

TERESA ANN FLYNN

A Thesis submitted to the School of Education at Trinity College, Dublin, in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the award of the degree of Master in Education.

September 1997
DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is entirely my own work and that it has not been submitted for assessment to any other university or Institute of Education.

Signature Teresa Ann Flynn.

Teresa Ann Flynn.
ABSTRACT

THE COUNSELLOR AND THOMAS MERTON: A STUDY IN THE SPIRITUAL AND THE AESTHETIC DIMENSIONS OF COUNSELLING.

This study explores the relevance of the thought of Thomas Merton to the counsellor's work and life. Man's philosophy of life shapes his attitude to himself, to his client, to the world and to his God. His concept of the person determines his actions in his professional work. Merton is a theist. He holds that the spiritual life is not just the life of the mind or of "the summit of the soul". It is the life of the whole person.

Merton stresses man's need to find his identity and to discover his true self in the inner ground of his being. The fundamental questions for Merton are: "who am I" and "what is my destiny"? Modern man is alienated and confused. He sees technological progress as a sharing in the creative role of God. Technology, however, can diminish the dignity of "average man" as he tends to become a cog or a cipher. Thus, man needs guidance and counsel in his quest for the answers to these fundamental questions.

Merton writes of neurotic and existential anxiety in man. Neurotic anxiety paralyses man. In contrast, existential anxiety stimulates growth, prompting man to actualise his potential, to achieve self-awareness and self-transcendence. This struggle is life-giving. A counsellor, conscious of life's struggle, is able to awaken in his clients an awareness of their spiritual and aesthetic dimension. He is able to help them find meaning in their lives in the midst of the struggle. In one sense, the counsellor and the client are fellow-travellers on life's way. His belief in genuine liberty respects the principle that the client is the one responsible for his decisions. He considers that unreflective existence is hostile to the inner spirit of man, and that solitude and reflection are essential to self-knowledge and growth. The search for one's true identity ends only in death. For Merton, death is but the beginning of a new life.

Merton listened to his world. He responded with a literary output of some fifty books, innumerable articles and 1,200 folios of letters. His writings are Merton's means of counselling the people who wrote to him for help and advice. He was a monk and a mystic who, like Maritain, affirmed the primacy of the spirit. He was also a major author with a keen sense of the aesthetic. His life and work are a rich resource for the development of the spiritual and the aesthetic in the counsellor.

Teresa Ann Flynn.
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INTRODUCTION

This thesis posits a place for the role of the spiritual and the aesthetic in the life of the counsellor. In St. Exupery’s *Little Prince* the fox says:

> And now here is my secret, a very simple secret: It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.¹

An effective counsellor needs to have the gifts of heart-seeing and heart-hearing. The works of Thomas Merton are examined to ascertain his view on the nature of man and his world. Is Merton’s concept of the person a valid foundation for a philosophy of life for the counsellor? Merton asks:

> And what is the person? Precisely, he is one in unity which is love. He is undivided in himself because he is open to all. He is open to all because the one love that is the source of all, the form of all, and the end of all is one in him and in all ...(He) is wide open to heaven and earth and closed to no one.²

For Merton, this definition of the person is the ideal, a goal to be realised. Unless he is integrated and whole, he cannot be “open to all” and still remain his own self. This self is the authentic self who has found his identity in the depths of his being.

Merton’s writings cover every aspect of human living. Man, in Merton’s view, is

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essentially a solitary. This does not mean that man is isolated in the cocoon of his aloneness. Merton believes that man in the modern world needs to get in touch with his centre, the inner core of his being. A good guide is vital to the success of this endeavour. The counsellor, who is rooted in reality and who lives existentially, is able to separate the false and illusory from the real. To the extent that the counsellor is rooted in reality and is open to the spiritual and the aesthetic, he is able to listen with compassion. Every encounter with the client, if the counsellor he is empathic and genuine, is life-giving. The growth of the counsellor's self-knowledge results in greater non-judgmental positive regard for the client. The three attributes of empathy, genuineness and unconditional positive regard are traditionally regarded as fundamental to counselling. To these, Merton adds another triad, self-acceptance, self-awareness and responsibility for oneself and for the 'other'. Compassion and love make a pathway to understanding, awareness and self-acceptance.

It is a commonplace that the beauty of creation can fill the human heart with awe. The beauty of the world can raise the most humdrum existence to a new level of consciousness. Man's whole being is refreshed and renewed by the experiencing of the aesthetic and the spiritual. It is implicit in Merton's life and work that the counsellor who enjoys nature, good music, poetry and drama, has rich inner resources which will enhance his empathy with his clients.

Chapter ONE is a brief biography of Merton. It focuses on his search for wholeness and integrity. Thomas Merton was born in Prades in Southern France in 1915. He died
suddenly in Bangkok on 10 December 1968. His whole life was a quest. He searched tirelessly for truth, for a reason to live and a reason to die. His wanderings took him by the path of Atheism, Naturalism, Theism and finally to Catholicism. In one sense, his search ended when he entered the Trappist monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani on 10 December 1941. In another sense he searched for the 'holy grail' all his life. He realised that when he would find God he would also find his true self. He writes: "There is still much change before I can really be living in the truth and in nothingness and in humility and without any self-concern." His search led him to a hermitage in Gethsemani itself, and inspired him to journey to the East to learn more about mysticism. There at the age of fifty-three, on 10 December 1968, his search ended. In death, Merton ended his quest. He went home.

Chapter TWO outlines Merton's weltanschauung. He writes of the ills of modern society. He sees modern man as alienated from himself and his world. Man's search for respite leads him to become trapped in the clutter and frenzy of modern life. He is so agitated that he does not allow himself time to stop to reflect. Time has become the master. This is essentially a negative picture of man in the modern world. Are there no positive aspects to him? Most certainly, for Merton, the answer is yes. Man is the peak of creation on earth. Through the development of his God-given gifts, he is both able to extend the boundaries of knowledge and also to acquire insight into the meaning of life.

Chapter THREE examines Merton's concepts of spiritual direction and counselling. The two notions are not synonymous. Spiritual direction enables the person to become mature, as does counselling. Spiritual direction, however, goes beyond counselling, as it endeavours to help the client to reach the inner core of his being. It allows him to find his true identity in the "I-Thou" relationship with the Absolute Being. The riches culled from diverse reading, gave Merton a panoramic vision of man's potential. For him, man reaches self-awareness and self-transcendence only through relationships, with himself, his neighbour and his God.

Chapter FOUR examines Merton's correspondence with four people who are very different to one another. In every case, the correspondence is reviewed in order to isolate and illustrate Merton's approach with those who came to him for help. Merton's counsel, while responding differently to everyone of the four, bears the hallmarks of balance, common-sense, humour and hope. Merton uses as his point of departure the Thomistic belief that grace not only builds on nature but enhances it.

Chapter Five attempts to situate Merton's approach in the context of traditional approaches to counselling. It would seem that Merton is most in tune with humanistic and person-centred counselling. Essentially, Merton would aim to open up different solutions to the client by helping him to see things in perspective. This enables him to arrive at a solution, which is consistent with his personal freedom, the dignity of his neighbour, and
his relationship to his Creator.⁴

Merton listened to his world and responded with a literary output of some fifty books, innumerable articles and 1,200 folios of letters. Due to his choice of the monastic life, he was not in a position to offer person to person counselling, apart from his work as master of students and later, master of novices and spiritual director to many in the monastery. He was without doubt available for these people. On the other hand, he was generously available to people throughout the world, through his correspondence and his writings.

⁴ 'His' and 'he' are used throughout this work, as Merton died before inclusive language became common usage. Therefore this author includes, where applicable, both man and woman in the generic words 'he' and 'his'.

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1.1. Merton’s Early Years

Thomas Merton was a nomad with a quest. From his birth in Prades, in Southern France in 1915, to his death in Bangkok in 1968, he sought the ‘Holy Grail.’ It was a quest of just fifty-three years. His father, Owen, was a New Zealander; his mother, Ruth, née Jenkins, was an American. They met in Paris where they were both studying Art. Of them Merton says:

They were in the world and not of it- not because they were saints, but in a different way: because they were artists. The integrity of an artist lifts a man above the level of the world without delivering him from it.5

In 1916, as the war casualties increased, Ruth’s parents, who lived in Douglaston, outside New York, prevailed on the young family to come to safety in America. Ruth and Owen were determined to be independent and they rented a small house in Flushing, Long Island. Here their second child, John Paul, was born in 1918.

Merton contrasts his own stormy nature with the serenity of his brother. He thought his mother was very severe in the way she treated him. In fact, he felt ousted in her affections

by John Paul. His apparent failure to please his mother made him insecure and unsure in his love relationships. In fact this sense of being rejected and unloved remained until he fell in love with Margie Smith in 1966. This experience convinced him that he was loveable, loving and loved.

There were no other children in the neighbourhood, so Merton invented an imaginary friend, Jack, who had a dog named Doolittle. He was not sent to primary school but had lessons at home. His favourite book was his geography book. From its study, his ambition was to become a sailor and to travel the globe. His second favourite book was *Tales of the Greek heroes*:

> In those days I learned the name Hesperides, and it was from these things that 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 will and a constant turning away from subjection, towards the freedom of my own ever-changing horizons.

When Merton was six, his mother died. She wrote him a letter from hospital telling him that she would not see him again. This was a cause of bewilderment to Merton, as he was left to work out the implications of the letter by himself. He wrote:

> ...A tremendous weight of sadness and depression settled on me. It was not the grief of a child, with the pangs of sorrow and many tears. It had something of the heavy perplexity and gloom of adult grief and was therefore all the more of a burden because as it was, to that extent unnatural. I suppose one reason for this was that I had more or less had to

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6 Ibid., p.8.

7 Ibid., p.11.
Merton stayed for some months with his grandparents who were looking after John Paul and he was allowed to attend school. Then his father decided that he was now ready to paint the world and he felt that Merton was old enough to accompany him. The wanderings began afresh, first to Provincetown, Massachusetts, and then in October 1922, father and son went to Bermuda.

When I was eight years old, running loose among the rocks and the prickly pears of Somerset Island, Bermuda, I was just in about in the same position as the child of divorced parents. My father wanted to take care of me, but he did not precisely know how. I was without family, without a school, without a church.9

After the Bermuda trip, Owen decided to return to Europe. Merton was left with his grandparents in Douglaston for two years. In 1925, when Merton was ten, Owen returned to New York and told Merton he was taking him to Europe. They settled in San Antonin, in the south of France, near the Pyrenees. Owen hoped to make enough money to build a house for his two sons. He purchased a plot of land and planted two trees, one for Merton and one for John Paul. In 1926, Merton was sent to a French boarding school, The Lycée Ingres in Montauban. He was the butt of much bullying and he was very unhappy. He did, however, make some friends. They began writing novels. Merton had already written one novel in San Antonin. The plots were drawn from the books he was reading. They were all scribbled in exercise books and illustrated in pen and ink.


Owen did build a house of fine stone from a disused monastery. As soon as it was finished, however, he decided to move to London as he was feeling unwell. He had relations in London, Aunt Maud and Uncle Ben, who lived in Ealing. They decided that Merton should be sent to Ripley Court, a junior boarding school. On a shopping expedition to purchase his school uniform, he confided to Aunt Maud that he would like to be a writer when he grew up. In the following year, 1929, he moved to Oakham public school, a good yet inexpensive school. Merton’s grandfather, Pop Jenkins, financed his education. Due to the Wall Street crash, Pop’s assets were depleted so economies were necessary.

More serious than the financial problems was the fact that his father was unwell. Again the shadow of death darkened Merton’s path. Pop asked Merton’s god-father, Tom Izod Bennett, a New Zealander and a Harley Street specialist, to act as Merton’s guardian. In January 1931, Owen died. Merton was thrown adrift into the sea of life. He writes:

And so I became the complete twentieth-century man. I now belonged to the world in which I lived. I became a true citizen of my own disgusting century: the century of poison gas and atomic bombs. A man living on the doorsill of the Apocalypse, a man with veins full of poison living in death. Baudelaire could truly address me then, reader: Hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable, mon frère.

At Oakham he studied modern languages more or less independently, as the school’s forte was in the classics. For the Higher Certificate, he studied French, German and Latin. For the entrance examination to Cambridge, he wrote papers in French and German. He won

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10 Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p.63.

11 Ibid., p.85.
the Johnson Exhibition to Clare College, Cambridge. Several of his friends from Oakham also chose Cambridge. Dr. Bennett had advised Merton to concentrate on modern languages as he felt sure that Merton would secure a very good position in the Diplomatic Corps.

Before going to Cambridge, he travelled through Europe. In Rome, he grew tired of the ancient Roman ruins. Instead, he was captivated by the mosaics and the art of early Christian Rome. He saw this Roman experience as a mystical insight and a turning point in his spiritual development. Here for the first time he read the New Testament and managed to say a prayer in the Dominican church, Santa Sabina, in Rome, despite his inherited fear of Catholicism. “And it was a very definite experience, something that amounted to a capitulation, a surrender, a conversion.”

In October 1933, he went up to Cambridge. Whatever the depth of the Roman conversion, his lifestyle in Cambridge in no way reflected it. In fact, he womanised, over-drunk and over-spent. There was little evidence of scholastic endeavour. Aunt Maud died in November. Merton attended her funeral. That was the last time that he saw any of his family in England. Again Merton was conscious of being alone. Dr. Bennett summoned him to London to insist on his mending his ways, but to no avail. Finally, it appears that he fathered a child. A position at the Foreign Office was now out of the question. Dr. Bennett told him to stay in America where he had gone for the Summer vacation and he

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12 Ibid., p.112.
arranged a financial settlement for the mother and child. This rejection by Dr. Bennett hurt Merton deeply, although it appears warranted by his own reckless behaviour.\textsuperscript{13} Monica Furlong, one of Merton’s biographers, writes that “Merton’s orphaned state had never stood him in worse stead.”\textsuperscript{14}

1.2. America.

Pop was delighted to have his eldest grandson back in America. Merton showed interest in becoming a journalist. On Pop’s recommendation, he enrolled in Columbia University, New York. He did not shed the habits of Cambridge overnight. Here, however, Merton studied very seriously and he made friendships that endured. He showed some interest in the American Communist Party but it failed to hold his attention. In 1935, He began to write in the \textit{Columbia Review} and he had articles and illustrations published in the campus’ humorous magazine, \textit{the Jester}. Mark Van Doren, a lecturer in English literature, and Merton became friends. Merton in an essay entitled “Learning to Live” wrote:

\ldots The fruit of education, whether in the university (as for Eckhart), or in the monastery (as for Ruysbroek), was the activation of that inmost center, that \textit{scintilla animae}, that “apex” or “spark” which is a freedom beyond freedom, an identity beyond essence, a self beyond all ego, a being beyond the created realm, and a consciousness that transcends all division, all separation.

\ldots I always felt at Columbia that people around me, half amused and perhaps at times half incredulous, were happy to let me be myself. (I add that I seldom felt this way at Cambridge.) The thing I always liked best

\textsuperscript{13} Monica Furlong, \textit{Merton} (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985), pp. 59-60.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
about Columbia was the sense that the university was on the whole glad to turn me loose in its library, its classrooms, and among its distinguished faculty, and let me make what I liked out of it all. I did. And I ended up by being turned on like a pinball machine by Blake, Thomas Aquinas, Augustine, Eckhart, Coomaraswamy, Traherne, Hopkins, Maritain, and the sacraments of the Catholic Church....The least of the work of learning is done in classrooms. I can remember scores of incidents, remarks, happenings, encounters that took place all over the campus and sometimes far from the campus: small bursts of light that pointed out my way in the dark of my own identity. For instance, Mark Van Doren saying to me as we crossed Amsterdam Avenue: "Well, if you have a vocation to the monastic life, it will not be possible for you to decide not to enter" (or words to that effect). I grasped at once the existential truth of this statement.  

In 1936 Pop died. Merton records that he knelt and prayed beside the body. His grandmother fell ill shortly after this. Again he prayed:

This time I was more conscious of what I was doing, and I prayed for her to live....I was saying, within myself: "You who made her, let her go on living." The reason I said this was that life was the only good I was certain of. And if life was the one big value, the one chief reality, its continuance depended on the will (otherwise why pray?) of the supreme Principle of all life, the ultimate Reality, He Who is Pure Being. He Who is Life Itself. He Who, simply is. By praying, I was implicitly acknowledging all this. And now twice I had prayed, although I continued to think I believed in nothing.  

She died in August 1937. Around this time, Merton began to feel ill, in fact he describes himself as a neurotic, obsessed with the thought of sickness and death.

If I eat this, I may go out of my mind. If I do not eat that, I may die in the night.

I had at last become a true child of the modern world, completely tangled up in petty and useless concerns with myself...Here I was, scarcely four years after I had left Oakham and walked out into the world that I thought


I was going to ransack and rob of all its pleasures and satisfactions, I had what I intended, and now I found that it was I who was emptied and robbed and gutted. What a strange thing! In Filling myself, I had lost everything. In devouring pleasures and joys, I had found distress and anguish and fear.

...I had come very far, to find myself in this blind alley: but the very anguish and helplessness of my position was something to which I rapidly succumbed. And it was my defeat that was to be the occasion of my rescue. 17

In the course of his studies he read Gilson's *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* and Maritain's *Art and Scholasticism*. The subject of his Master's Thesis was "Nature and Art in William Blake."

What it amounted to was a study of Blake's reaction against every kind of literalism and naturalism and narrow, classical realism in art, because of his own ideal which was essentially mystical and supernatural.... I had learned from my own father that it was almost blasphemy to regard the function of art as merely to reproduce some kind of a sensible pleasure or, at best, to stir up the emotions to a transitory thrill. I had always understood that art was contemplation, and that it involved the action of the highest faculties of man....I, who had been anti-naturalistic in art, had been a pure naturalist in the moral order. 18

Merton searched the Eastern Religions to find God. A Hindu monk, Bramachari, had come from India to America to attend The Chicago World Fair, in 1932. He arrived too late to attend the Fair. He stayed in America for some years and was awarded a Ph.D. by the University of Chicago. Merton was introduced to him. Bramachari recognised Merton's hunger for mysticism. He urged him to read the Confessions of Saint Augustine

17 Ibid., pp.163-165.
18 Ibid., pp.202-203.
and The Imitation of Christ. He started to study the teachings of the Catholic Church but it took time to shake off the anti-Catholic bias of his upbringing.

The poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins and the works of James Joyce (of whom Merton says: "If he had abandoned St. Thomas, he had not stepped much further down than Aristotle"),19 helped him to make the leap of faith. Finally he received formal instruction. He became a Catholic on 16 November, 1938. He says, "for now I had entered into the everlasting movement of that gravitation which is the very life and spirit of God....And He called out to me from his own immense depths."20 Merton in the preface to the Japanese edition of The Seven Storey Mountain (1963) says:

My conversion to the Christian faith, or to be more precise my conversion to Christ, is something I have always regarded as a radical liberation from the delusions and obsessions of modern man and his society.21

Merton felt a persistent urge to become a priest. He talked the matter over with Dan Walsh, who had lectured at Columbia on St. Thomas and Duns Scotus. (Dan Walsh had introduced Merton to Maritain at the Catholic Book Club in March 1939). The decision was made. Merton approached the Franciscans. Initially, they agreed to accept him in August 1940. Merton, however, felt obliged to reveal his Cambridge experiences. As a result, they turned down his application.

19 Ibid., p. 212.
20 Ibid., p. 225.
He became involved in Baroness de Hueck's Friendship House in Harlem and he gave lectures in modern English literature at St. Bonaventure's College in upstate New York. The Baroness urged him to come and work in Harlem full-time. The communists impressed him greatly in their work there. If a Negro family was in trouble, they were there to help out with cash supplements, even sharing their own food and bedding. The Baroness was trying to live the love of Christ by setting up Friendship House in this 'huge, dark, steaming slum.' Of Harlem. Merton writes:

Harlem is there by way of a divine indictment against New York City and the people who live downtown and make their money downtown. The brothels of Harlem, and all its prostitution, and its dope -rings, and all the rest are the mirror of the polite divorces and the manifold cultured adulteries of Park Avenue: they are God's commentary on the whole of our society.

Harlem is, in a sense, what God thinks of Hollywood. And Hollywood is all Harlem has, in its despair, to grasp at, by way of a surrogate for heaven.  

In April 1941, he made a Holy Week retreat at The Trappist monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani, Kentucky. Now his desire was to become both a priest and a Trappist. Merton asked another priest whether his past was an insuperable obstacle. He was encouraged to tell his story to the Trappists. To his great joy, the Trappists accepted him. He was now almost twenty seven years old. On 10 December 1941, he entered Gethsemani. His death would be twenty seven years later, on the same day that he had entered the monastery, 10 December, 1968.

22 Thomas Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, p. 345.
1.3. Gethsemani.

The Trappists are Cistercians of the strict observance. They follow the Rule of Saint Benedict who founded the Benedictine Order in the sixth century A.D. Due to the adoption of the monasteries by the feudal lords, serfs did the work in the fields. The diet of the monks changed as the Lords frequently entertained guests in the monastery refectory. At the end of the eleventh century, Robert of Molesmes led a band of monks out to the swamps around Citeaux. St. Bernard followed him into the wilderness. Together they restored the balance of Saint Benedict’s rule-prayer, manual work and lectio divina. No strangers, except doctors, were allowed into the Cistercian cloister. All the work of the monastery was done by the monks.

With the passage of time some laxity crept into the monastery. The Reformed Cistercians of the Strict Observance were founded by Abbé de Rancé in the seventeenth century. He was the abbot of the Cistercian Abbey of La Trappe in France. He returned to the primitive Rule of St Benedict. His community practised extreme austerity of diet, penitential exercises, and absolute silence. After the French Revolution, some Trappists emigrated to America. The Trappist monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani, Kentucky, was founded in December 1848. This was the monastery with very little alterations, that Merton entered in December 1941.

A life of solitude, silence and contemplation was in keeping with his intense, ardent nature.
At first, Merton discontinued his writing although he continued to keep a private journal. As early as 1943, Abbot Dom Frederic Dunne ordered him to resume his writing. He showed great insight in assigning the young monk this task for Merton states that he would have gone mad without his writing. This same year was a difficult one for Merton. His brother John Paul had joined the Canadian Airforce. In 1942 he visited Merton in Gethsemani and told him that he wished to become a Catholic. John Paul had not been instructed in the faith but obviously had received the gift of faith. Merton says:

I think I talked more about faith and the life of grace than anything else, telling him all that I myself had found out by experience, and all I sensed he wanted most to know. He had not come here to find out a lot of abstract truths: that was clear enough. As soon as I had begun to talk to him, I had seen awaken in his eyes the thirst that was hiding within him, and that had brought him to Gethsemani—for he certainly had not come merely to see me.  

It was arranged that he be baptised in the parish church in New Haven. He made his first Holy Communion with Merton at his side in the Abbey. It was a day of great joy. Merton describes this in *The Seven Storey Mountain*:

Then I realised obscurely that in those last four days the work of eighteen or twenty years of my bad example had been washed away and made good by God’s love.  

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23 The last journal which he wrote before entering Gethsemani was published in 1958 entitled *A Secular Journal*, covering the years 1939-1941. He had given the manuscript to Catherine de Hueck Doherty, hoping the royalties would provide some money to help her in her work. The Cistercian censors were unwilling initially to have the manuscript published. They gave their permission, provided it was stated clearly that it was written prior to Merton’s entry into the monastery. The copyright belongs to Madonna House, which had been set up by Catherine de Hueck Doherty.

24 Ibid., pp. 395-396.

25 Ibid., P.398.
It is evident that he believed that John Paul was a much finer person than himself, serene, forgiving and loving. John Paul was sent to England. There he married. On 17 April 1943, he was killed in action and buried at sea. Merton wrote:

Sweet brother, if I do not sleep  
My eyes are flowers for your tomb;  
And if I cannot eat my bread,  
My fasts shall live like willows where you died.  
....For in the wreckage of your April Christ lies slain,  
And Christ weeps in the ruins of my spring:  
....The silence of Whose tears shall fall  
Like bells upon your alien tomb.  
Hear them and come: they call you home.\(^{26}\)

Merton, now Brother Louis, took simple vows in 1944. In 1947, he took solemn vows. He became Father Louis after ordination in 1949. In the epilogue to his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton writes:

I hear You (God) saying to me:

"I will give you what you desire. I will lead you into solitude. I will lead you by the way that you cannot understand, because I want it to be the quickest way...."

But you shall taste the true solitude of my anguish and my poverty and I shall lead you into the high places of my love and you shall die in Me and find all things in My mercy which has created you for this end and brought you from Prades to Bermuda to St. Antonin to Oakham to London to Cambridge to Rome to New York to Columbia to Corpus Christi to St. Bonaventure to the Cistercian Abbey of the poor men who labor in Gethsemani:

That you may become the brother of God and learn to know the Christ of the burnt men."

\[SIT\ FINIS\ LIBRI,\ NON\ FINIS\ QUÆRENDI\ \]\(^{27}\)

\(^{26}\) Ibid., p.404.
These words were written in 1946. They were to prove strangely prophetic in the light of his death by electrocution in Bangkok on the 10th. of December, 1968.

### 1.4. Merton: Monk, Pacifist and Counsellor

Enthusiasm, vigour and whole heartedness were characteristics of Merton. Once convinced of the justice of a cause, he pursued it with his whole being. His writings show the diversity of his interests: racism, peace, the welfare of the peoples of South America, the monastic life and its renewal, in fact, every facet of human experience. He corresponded with people on all five continents, writing letters of great depth and perception. They reveal the immensity of his regard for God’s creation and his ability to be present in the written word.

The people who came to the monastery to ask his advice were so numerous that one can but wonder at his compassion for his fellow-man. His own personal search continued. Life in the monastery was not all sunshine and peace. When *The Seven Storey Mountain* was published in America in 1948, he began to receive many letters. Trappists normally write eight letters a year. Initially, Merton sent a card to those who had written to him, promising to pray for their intentions. This, however, was not enough. Merton was to

27Ibid., pp. 422-423.
spend many hours answering his correspondence. The letters were often provocative. This in turn forced him to examine his position. He did not hesitate to change his views if a more accurate or more perceptive viewpoint was presented.

After ordination he became ill and for a while he was unable to lead the common life. He stopped writing. In *The Sign of Jonas* he states:

...I found myself face to face with a mystery that was beginning to manifest itself in the depths of my soul and to move me with terror.....I might apologise for it and call it 'suffering.' The word is not adequate because it suggests physical pain. That is not at all what I mean. It is true that something had begun to affect my health, but whatever happened to my health was only, it seems to me, an effect of this unthinkable thing that had developed in the depths of my being....It was a sort of slow submarine earthquake which produced strange commotion's on the visible, psychological surface of my life. I was summoned to battle with joy and with fear, knowing in every case that the sense of battle was misleading, that my apparent antagonist was only an illusion, and that the whole commotion was simply the effect of something that had already erupted, without my knowing it, in the hidden volcano....Nevertheless, in the depth of this abysmal testing and disintegration of my spirit, in December 1950, I suddenly discovered completely new moral resources, a spring of new life, a peace and a happiness that I had never known before and which subsisted in the face of nameless interior terror....It was the peace that was real, and the terror that was an illusion.²⁸

At times he felt he was going to fall when celebrating Mass. He was pursued by the vice of perfectionism. Finally he found peace and joy. He believed that joy has an essential role in maintaining everyone’s spiritual and psychological life.

I think the real reason why we have so little joy is that we take ourselves too seriously. Joy can only be real if it is based on truth, and since the fall of Adam, all man’s life is shot through with falsehood and illusion...To

penetrate the truth of how utterly unimportant we are is the only thing that can set us free to enjoy true happiness.  

Gradually he regained his strength and he began writing again. He had continued even when he was in the valley of darkness to keep a journal. In fact, there is a journal as a source for every stage of his adult life. The journal of the years prior to his entering Gethsemani was published as The secular Journal (1958), The sign of Jonas (1953) continues from where The Seven Storey Mountain stops; next follows No Man is an Island (1955), Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander(1966), A Vow of Conversation (1988), The Hermitage Years ( 1993), edited and published by his great friend John Howard Griffin, Preview of my Asian Journey ( 1989),and lastly the Asian Journal (1974),which ends abruptly with his electrocution in Bangkok.

In all his writings, his concern was for truth and for the welfare of his neighbour. A restless thread runs through them. He was searching right to the end, even referring to coming home when he arrived in the Far East. Punctuating his writing was a refrain of finding what he was searching for only to discover that it was not the completeness of being for which he longed. In The Hound of Heaven, it is the Hound who pursues the soul. The pearl of great price still eluded Merton. Alpha and Omega needed to merge into the One. In all his searching, he was convinced in his innermost self, that it was no longer he who lived, but that Christ lived in him. This in no way diminished his freedom. He was at pains in his writings to show that man has free choice. This is man’s crowning glory.

29 Ibid., p.266.
The mystery of being and non being is in all his writings. He felt that in the divine indwelling, man becomes integrated and finds his true identity.

He was the embodiment of St. Augustine’s saying “Our souls shall ever restless be, O lord, until they rest in Thee.” His yearning is most clearly seen in his quest to have the hermitical way of life recognised as part of the Trappist vocation and not seen as something singular to be avoided. His whole being, despite his gregariousness, his good humour and his love of visitors seemed to crumble, if he did not manage to experience some moments, even days of solitude. In 1955, he wrote to Rome requesting a transfer to the Carthusians. His request was not granted.

In the Trappist monastery the abbot is the father and his duty is to care for the well-being, both spiritual and temporal, of his monks. St Benedict’s Rule says:

> But let the abbot, since he is believed to hold the place of Christ, be called Lord and Abbot, not for any pretensions of his own, but for the honour and love of Christ.30

In the Trappist order, the abbot is doubly influential as he is ordinarily the only person with whom the monks engage in conversation apart from their individual confessors. The Abbot is aided by other officials.

In the monastery of Gethsemani, Merton held two very important official positions. He was Master of Students for four years and Novice Master for ten years. This responsibility

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for the formation of the young monks made it imperative that he study monastic life and contemplative prayer in the greatest detail. His books on prayer and the monastic life were many. They include *The Ascent of Truth* (1951), *The Silent Life* (1957), *Contemplative Prayer* (1969), *Spiritual Direction and Meditation* (1960), and *The Wisdom of the Desert* (1961). *Seeds of Contemplation* was first published in 1949. After five re-writings it was re-published in 1961. *Contemplation in a World of Action* was published in 1973. *The Wisdom of the Desert* was, in Merton's opinion, one of his finest books.

Merton loved both solitude and companionship. Both were allowed to him only through the abbot. In his journals and in his letters, it is clear that he was not always in agreement with Abbot Dom James Fox. He was elected Abbot in 1943 to succeed Dom Frederic Dunne. At times he felt that his freedom was curtailed unreasonably, as the Abbot usually refused him permission to attend conferences. Merton saw these as missed opportunities to engage in dialogue with modern man.

The other day a letter came from Godfrey Diekmann asking me to participate in an ecumenical meeting at Collegeville together with Father Haring, Dom Leclercq, Father Barnabas Ahern and, on the other side Douglas Steere and nine others. I asked Father Abbot and this permission, which in the circumstances I think any other superior would have granted, was refused.

It is not that I had my heart set on going, about that I can be indifferent. I would have liked to go because I think, for one thing, it would have done me good and I would have learned a lot. I would have had the grace of having done something for the Church and of having participated in a dialogue that would be evidently blessed and fruitful...Dom James regards this invitation as a personal threat to himself, to his prestige, to his very existence as father image and icon...So that is the vow of obedience. You submit yourself also to somebody else’s prejudice and to his myths and to
the worship of his fetishes (This was February 1965).

Sometimes, however, he was relieved not to have to make the decisions.

Merton got involved in the peace movement in the Sixties and was in regular correspondence with Daniel Berrigan, Ernesto Cardenal and Martin Luther King, Jr. Complaints were made, allegedly by the Government, to the American hierarchy about his writings, who in turn appealed to the mother house in Rome, to silence him. As a result, the Abbot General instructed Abbot Fox to order Merton to be silent on political matters. The letter arrived in Gethsemani in January. Abbot Fox did not carry out this directive until April. This gave Merton three valuable months to continue his support for the struggle for non-violence and racial equality. Merton's philosophy was that "you must be willing, if necessary, to become a disturbing and therefore an undesired person, one who is not wanted because he upsets the general dream.”

It was this same abbot who allowed Merton in 1964 to fly to New York to meet Daisetz T. Suzuki, the Zen Buddhist Japanese philosopher. Finally Abbot Fox obtained permission for Merton to become the first modern day American hermit in 1965. He was very grateful for this permission. He says:

But I am also going to sleep, because here in this wilderness I have learned how to sleep again. Here I am not alien....I am alien to the noises of cities.


33 After the publication of *The Wisdom of the Desert* in 1959, "it was decided to send the text of the translation to Daisetz Suzuki, one of the most prominent Oriental scholars and contemplatives of our day." Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions Book, 1968), p.99.
In *A Vow of Conversation* February 1965 he writes:

One thing the hermitage is making me see is that the universe is my home and I am nothing if not part of it. Destruction of the self that seems to stand outside the universe. Get free from the illusion of solipsism.

Only as part of the world's fabric and dynamism can I find my true being in God, who has willed me to exist in the world. This I discover here in the hermitage, not mentally only but in depth and wholeness, especially, for instance, in the ability to sleep.\(^{35}\)

There are two incidents involving Merton and Abbot Fox which give further insight into both life in the monastery and the humanity of Merton. Merton had charge of the novices from 1955 to 1965. He became interested in psychoanalysis and wrote an essay "Neurosis in the Monastic Life." Naomi Burton, his publisher and friend, suggested that he contact Gregory Zilboorg,\(^{36}\) a psychoanalyst and arrange a meeting. Zilboorg was born in Russia and had done his training there. He was a member of Kerensky's government in 1917.

When Lenin ousted Kerensky in the October Revolution 1917, Zilboorg fled to the West. "In his own profession, he was a respected if controversial figure, and by 1956, he was at


\(^{35}\) Thomas Merton, *A Vow of Conversation*, p.156.

\(^{36}\) Zilboorg was a professional actor. He made his living while going to medical school by acting on the Russian stage in New York, as well as translating. He translated Russian plays by Andreyev....And then he acted on stage, and he acted when he wasn't on stage....I believe that his character fed on drama and and where drama did not exist in the events, his way of understanding and seeing things gave an assist until he found himself involved in an interesting incident....He was a highly learned and competent psychotherapist. He was a convert to the faith and as happens at times, had too theoretical a view of monastic and contemplative life for it to be helpful in dealing with so complex a person as Fr. Louis was." "An interview with John Eudes Bamberger.O.C.S.O." (Merton's companion at the conference) conducted by Victor A. Kramer in *The Merton Annual* Vol.4 ed by Robert E. Daggy and others ( New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1992 ), pp.28-30.
the height of a remarkable career." He also was a convert to Catholicism. Abbot Fox did not wish to allow Merton to go to New York to meet him. A two week workshop "Psychiatry and its Practical Applications" was to be held at St. John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota in July 1956. Zilboorg was to address the conference. Abbot Fox decided that Merton and Dom John Eudes, who was a medical doctor, should attend. He himself, would be present at the second week's sessions. Zilboorg had already read Merton's essay. In his judgement it was "utterly inadequate, hastily written, will do harm, should not even be revised\(^{38}\)

He had observed Merton while he was conversing with the other people at the workshop. It would appear that he was already opposed to Merton. In fact, he seemed to dislike him. On 29 July, Zilboorg and Merton had a private conference. Mott gives a very detailed account of the meeting, using Merton's notes. It gives a picture of Merton the neurotic with a great dependence on words substituting them for reality. Zilboorg accused him of wanting to be different, of not being content to be an ordinary monk:

> You are a gadfly to your superiors.... You like to be famous, you want to be a big shot, you keep pushing your way out-into publicity- megalomania and narcissism are your big trends. Your hermit trend is pathological. You are a promoter- if you were not in the monastery you are the type that would clean up in Wall street one day and lose it all on horses the next.\(^{39}\)

Merton wrote to Naomi Burton about the interview. He was very generous in his


\(^{38}\) Ibid., p.294.

\(^{39}\) Ibid., pp. 295-296.
treatment of Zilboorg, taking his assessment as the true picture even though it was so harsh.

He has told me more directly and more forcefully than I ever thought possible, the exact home-truths that need to be told, and I need not insist that the desire for absolute solitude has finally been disposed of completely and forever as pathological. Moderate isolation and silence, sure. OK. I will never give anyone any trouble about vocation or stability again, as long as I am in my right mind. 40

When Abbot Fox arrived Zilboorg called another conference. Merton was not prepared to be torn to pieces in the presence of his Abbot. He got very angry and began to weep bitter tears at this unprofessional treachery. Zilboorg kept repeating: “You want a hermitage in Times Square with a large sign over it saying ‘HERMIT’.” Mott says:

This time one’s sympathy is entirely with Merton, who saw himself trapped, and who sat with tears streaming down his face.... Whenever a crisis came up in the years ahead, Merton assumed Dom James had simply told his superiors about the interview with Zilboorg he had witnessed at St. John’s....These were the most damaging ten minutes since he had left the world for the monastery.41

It is the measure of Merton’s greatness that he did not lose his self-confidence and self-esteem. This damaging interview would have broken a lesser person.

The Abbot’s attitude was a cause of great pain and suffering to Merton as he was very sensitive. The other monks admit that there seemed to have been a great deal of friction between the two, especially in the Sixties. To put this in perspective, however, Merton

40 Ibid., p.296.
41 Ibid., p.297.
acted as Abbot Fox’s confessor. Abbot Fox was very upset on hearing the news of Merton’s death. The fact that he was allowed continue as novice-master showed the real regard the Abbot had for Merton. The future of any human organisation lies in its young people. Merton continued to direct the novices for a further nine years, from 1956-1965.

Merton did not go to New York to be psychoanalysed by Zilboorg. Dom John Eudes was sent to study psychiatry in Washington. The novices, when necessary, visited a psychiatrist in Louisville, Dr. J. Wygal. Merton and Dr. Wygal became good friends and Wygal allowed him to read in his office whenever he came to Louisville. Dom John Eudes, Fr. Matthew Kelty and Merton screened candidates who applied to come to the monastery.

Dom James sometimes complained that Fr. Louis (Merton) let in those who were interesting intellectually and Father John Eudes let in those who were interesting psychologically. Nevertheless, the system worked far better than the lack of system in the past.footnote

There was one more matter that Abbot Fox had to deal with before he resigned in 1967. Merton suffered continuously from back trouble. On 25 March 1966, “an anterior cervical fusion was performed to correct the cervical spondylosis, using a graft from the left ilium.”footnote On 30 March, a new nurse, Margie Smith, came to look after him. She told him she had read some of his books. Merton’s initial reaction was that she was a talker and

footnote[42] Ibid., p.298-299.
would delay his return to reading Meister Eckhart. As days went by however, he began to look forward to her visits. When she came in “the room was filled with the light of freedom and joy. Pure joy...the world of laughter that was completely without care. We did not know, of course, that we were now in love.” More and more he had, in his relationship with God, come to trust his experience. Now, perhaps for the first time, he was trusting his experience in a genuine relationship with another human being....At last he had discovered a relationship in which he was loved as a person and requited that love.

After he left the hospital he used every subterfuge to continue the relationship. It was difficult to use the telephone in the monastery, as it was operated from a switch-board. It was the monk on the switchboard who alerted the Abbot to the relationship. He gave Merton an ultimatum: he must choose. His decision was to renew his vows. This was 14th June 1966. The next morning he wrote in his journal:

In order to untie a knot you must first find out how the knot was tied, Buddha.... I love M. but in a different way, peacefully and without disturbance or inner division. I feel that once again I am all here. I have

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44 Ibid., p.57. Margaret Smith and Merton fell in love. They met for the first time on 30 March 1966, when Merton was recovering from a back operation in the hospital in Louisville. Margie was the nurse detailed to take special care of Merton. The most detailed account of their relationship is to be found in Thomas Merton: The Hermitage Years by John Howard Griffin, pp. 56-87. When Abbot Dom Fox became aware of the relationship, he presented Merton with an ultimatum: he must choose Margie or the hermitage. He chose to remain in solitude, but was worried by any suffering he had caused Margie. On 8 September 1966, Merton made a commitment "to spend the rest of my life in solitude in so far as my health may permit." (Ibid., p.86). Merton saw his relationship with Margie as one of great enrichment and growth in understanding himself and others. It greatly increased his compassion for others. This is reflected in " Love and Need- Is love a Package or a Message" in chapter three of Love and Living. London: Sheldon Press, 1979. Margie is happily married.

finally returned to my place and to my work and am beginning to be once again what I am. It has been a time of gruesome yet beautiful alienation. If he could only be assured that she was all right, that her job, her activities and her human contacts were making it bearable for her, he would be truly at peace. 46

On 18 June, he writes:

The bitter and lucid joys of solitude, the real desert is this: to face the real limitations of one’s own existence and knowledge and not try to manipulate them or disguise them. Not to embellish them with possibilities.

Father Louis meditated on the Camus principle that the “absurd” man is without human hope, and that his hopelessness isolates him in the pure present. The monk in refusing to “contaminate my acceptance by inserting into it imaginary hopes,” realised that he differed from Camus in the immense unknown hope that was his own aspect of the “absurd.” His hope did not spring, he said, from knowledge or stoicism but from faith. He possessed “his spirit of stark adoration... which is another aspect of the absurd and the absolute.” 47

Some of Merton’s dreams at this time throw light on his inner struggle. He dreamed he saw briars and roses entangled. One rose caught his attention. His mother’s face appeared behind the roses. Again he dreamt of a black woman of great ugliness and severity and yet full of warmth. They danced together and she hugged him and he felt the love of her whole being. Monica Furlong, commenting on this dream says, “This orphan was finding his home, the place where he belonged.” 48

Merton had to struggle to come to terms with the loss of Margie. He did see her again but

46 John Howard Griffin. The Hermitage Years. pp. 74-75.
47 Ibid. p. 75-76.
48 Monica Furlong, Merton. p. 284.
he finally realised that it was tearing both of them to pieces. She was about to graduate and she got a post in Cincinnati. This experience made him realise that a human being comes to God by many deaths. On the eight of September, he made his commitment to spend the rest of his life in solitude. Abbot Fox endorsed his decision. His love of Margie had given him true insight into the pain and ecstasy of love. He wrote an article “Love and Need- Is Love a Package or a Message?” He writes:

In reality love is a positive force, a transcendent spiritual power. It is in fact the deepest creative power in human nature. Rooted in the biological riches of our inheritance love flowers spiritually as freedom and as a creature response to life in a perfect encounter with another person. It is a living appreciation of life as value and as gift. It responds to the full richness, the variety, the fecundity of living experience itself: it "knows" the inner mystery of life.49

Merton knew the intensity of suffering, both physical and emotional. Through all the events of his life he grew in himself, achieving a wholeness which was rooted in holiness. The two words “wholeness” and “holiness” come from the same root, just as love, joy and suffering intermingle to effect integration and personal development in life’s struggle. He wrote the first of his Antipoems at this time. Here is one stanza:

O the gentle fool
He fell in love
With the electric light
Do you not know, fool,
That love is dynamite.50

Merton was more perceptive and deepened by this experience. In his writings from this

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50 Ibid., p.96.
time until his death, he shows a greater depth of compassion for humankind. In a letter to his friends he says:

In a world like ours - a world of war, riot, murder, racism, tyranny and established banditry, one has to be able to stand up and say NO... But I hope I will be able to give up controversy some day. Pray for me. When one gets older (Jan. 31 is my fifty-second birthday) one realizes the futility of a life wasted in argument when it should be given entirely to love.51

1.5. Merton and The Second Vatican Council.

Merton emphasises that man does not find himself in flight from his fellowmen and women:

The world as pure object is something that is not there. It is not a reality outside us for which we exist... It is a living and self creating mystery of which I myself am a part to which I am myself my own unique door. When I find the world in my own ground, it is impossible to be alienated by it.52

This view of man in the world made Merton an ideal person to examine the Church’s Constitution on Man in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes), alongside the other documents of the Second Vatican Council. In a letter to Pope John XXIII in November 1958 he sets out his mission statement:

It seems to me, that as a contemplative, I do not need to lock myself into

solitude and lose all contact with the rest of the world; rather this poor world has a right to a place in my solitude. It is not enough for me to think of the apostolic value of prayer and penance; I also have to think in terms of a contemplative grasp of the political, intellectual, artistic and social movements in this world -by which I mean a sympathy for the honest aspirations of so many intellectuals everywhere in the world and the terrible problems they have to face.  

His enthusiasm for the Council was boundless as he saw that people were estranged and alienated from the Church as it portrayed an institutional, restricted God to the world. He believed that structures dating back to the Council of Trent, and earlier, were unsuited to modern technological society which emerged in part from the inventions demanded by two world wars; a society where fast food, fast marriages and fast divorces are the norm.

Modern man is reaching out for real water, the real water that only knowledge of the true God can give. This thirst is evidenced by the spread of cults, the use of hallucinatory drugs, and the rise in suicides among youth. These are cries for help in the darkness of man's selfishness and man's inhumanity to man. A revitalised, spiritualization of society is the only answer to stop man wiping himself off the face of the earth.

Man cannot become fully mature until he has opened his heart to the whole world. Merton sees a world in crisis, in the throes of revolution. The only hope for survival is the fullest co-operation between men. The human family can attain peace only in Christ. "All this holds true not only for Christians but for all men of good will in whose hearts grace

works in an unseen way.” The Council quite clearly states that the Church is not bound to any group or political system. “She is at once a sign and a safeguard of the transcendent character of the human person.” A person is to be seen in terms of freedom and responsibility to others and for others.

The ‘global village’ made possible by modern technology is in the living room. Pleas of ignorance of situations with resultant inactivity ring hollow. Today, man must think in terms of one human family, one world. “Man’s social nature makes it evident that the progress of the human person and the advance of society itself hinge on one another.”

Merton gives a definition of a Christian Society:

Such a society is not one that is run by priests, not even necessarily one in which everybody has to go to church. It is one in which work is for production and not for profit, and production is not for its own sake, not merely for the sake of those who own the means of production, but for all who contribute in a constructive way to the process of production. A Christian society is one in which men give their share of labor and intelligence and receive their share of the fruits of the labor of all, and in which all this is seen in relation to a transcendental purpose, “the history of salvation,” the kingdom of God, a society centered upon the divine truth and the divine mercy.

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55 Ibid., N.76, p.88.
56 Ibid., N.25, p.30.
57 Thomas Merton, Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, p.80.
1.6. Merton Travels to the East.

...Our real journey in life is interior: it is a matter of growth, deepening, and of an ever greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts.  

In January 1968, Abbot Dom James Fox resigned and Dom Flavian Burn was elected as his successor. His attitude to Merton on the subject of attending meetings was different to that of Abbot Fox, who had officially sanctioned the herimetical way of life in 1966. Dom Fox himself became a hermit. In fact, such was the volume of requests that new ‘deserts’ needed to be considered. He decided to place the responsibility on Merton himself, leaving him free to accept or reject any invitations he received. Merton turned down most of the invitations. Vatican Two had obliged religious orders to return to the spirit of their founders. The Abbot General and Chapter of the Trappists.

Merton received an invitation to attend a meeting of Asian abbots, starting on 8 December 1968, in Bangkok. Its purpose was to help implement monastic renewal. “This meeting for monastic superiors was to be held under the sponsorship of an international Benedictine organisation, Aide à L'Implantation Monastique (AIM), whose headquarters was in Paris.” Dom Jean Leclercq, a Benedictine scholar, suggested that Merton give one of the principal lectures. He was also invited to the Spirit Summit Conference to be held in Calcutta in October 1968. This was an inter-faith meeting sponsored by the Temple of

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Understanding which is an organisation established in Washington D.C. in 1960, with a world wide membership of religious leaders and concerned laymen. Merton accepted both invitations. Merton said "I hope they will enable me to get in contact with Buddhist monasticism and see something of it first hand." He hoped to visit the Dalai Lama at his monastic refuge near Dharamsala.

Merton had started to study Zen in the Nineteen Fifties. In 1965 he had written *The Way of Chang Tzu*. Abbot Fox had allowed him to go to New York to meet Dr.Suzuki in 1964. This lengthy preparation made him ready to receive the riches of Eastern mysticism. The years of study had given him a familiarity with and understanding of Eastern mysticism and the nature of the Deities of the East. His gentleness and respect for others made him a worthy ambassador. He was true to Christianity always, while being able to appreciate the riches of the other great world Religions.


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60 Ibid., p.47. "The Temple of Understanding, now based in New York, was founded in 1960 by Judith Hollister. The hope, as yet unfulfilled, has been to build a "temple" that would symbolize the shared spiritual quest of all religious traditions....The Temple of Understanding has held a series of Summit Conferences in different parts of the world and has had an international influence through contacts with delegates to the United Nations. It helped to give birth to the 'Global Forum on Human Survival' which brings together religious leaders, politicians, and scientists to try to save life on this planet. Thomas Merton, at the First Spiritual Summit Conference, said, "We are already one, but we imagine that we are not. What we have to recover is our original unity." The Temple has affirmed "The Oneness of the Human family( in Ch. 25), irrespective of color, sex, creed, nation or any other distinctive characteristic and also the harmonious place of the individual person in the total order of things, as a unique entity of Divine Origin, with a basic relationship to the Universe and Eternity." *A Study Guide for Interreligious Co-operation and Understanding*, by Rev. Marcus Braybrooke, Vicar of Marsh Baldon. Source: The Internet, 1997.

saw it as 'completely cerebral' and dominated by the idolatry of control. Merton believed that people in the western world had turned a blind eye on wrongdoing and had tacitly approved behaviour which was contrary to the Judeo-Christian tradition.

If freedom means purely and simply an uncontrolled power to make money in every possible way, regardless of consequences, then freedom becomes synonymous with ruthless, mindless exploitation.62

The West has paid scant attention to ecology and the environment. Merton saw the selfish plundering of nature without any regard for future generations. He highlights the blood lust and uncontrolled nature of modern man. He says:

Its psychological root doubtless lies in the profound dehumanization and alienation of modern western man who has gradually come to mistake the artificial value of inert objects and abstractions (goods, money, property) for the power of life itself.63

These were some of his concerns before departing for Asia. He hoped to find there Sapientia, his "Hagia Sophia" as against Scientia, earthly knowledge.

On the fifteenth of October on the flight to Honolulu he writes:

We left the ground- I with Christian mantras and a great sense of destiny, of being at last on my true way after years of waiting and wondering and fooling around.

He then uses words he never used about any other place:


63 Ibid., p.106.
I am going home, to the home where I have never been in this body. He arrived in Bangkok on 17 October, 1968. There he met the Buddhist Abbot, Venerable Chao Khun. Merton asked him what is the knowledge of freedom? His reply was:

When you are in Bangkok you know that you’re there. Before that you only knew about Bangkok. And one must ascend all the steps, but then when there are no more steps one must make the leap. Knowledge of freedom is the knowledge, the experience of the leap.

The Summit Conference of The Temple of Understanding was held in Calcutta in October 1968. Representatives of “ten world Religions” were brought together for four days of discussion and dialogue. The theme was "The Relevance of Religion in the Modern World." Instead of the talk he had prepared, he gave an informal talk. He spoke of the monk as a marginal person. The monk struggles with the fact of death in himself, trying to seek something deeper than death. He goes beyond the dichotomy of life and death and thus is a witness to life. "This requires faith.....Faith means doubt..... The monk is one who has to struggle in the depths of his being with the presence of doubt". When the monk has fully utilised his own tradition and has gone beyond it, he must be wide open to life, to new experience. Merton speaks of love and loneliness, and of the need for one another. In conclusion, he said:

And I stand among you as one who offers a small message of hope, that

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64 Thomas Merton, The Asian Journal, pp. 4-5.
66 Michael Mott, The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton, p.544.
67 Ibid., p.306.
first there are always people who dare to seek on the margin of society, who are not dependent on social acceptance, not depending on social routine, and prefer a kind of free-floating existence under a state of risk.

...My dear brothers, we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are.68

He offered a prayer at the concluding assembly. He said:

Help us to realise that there can be no understanding where there in mutual rejection. Oh God, in accepting one another wholeheartedly, fully completely, we accept You,...we love You with our whole being, because our being is in Your being, our spirit is rooted in Your spirit. Fill us then with love, and let us be bound together with love as we go our diverse ways.69

On 4 November, he met the Dalai Lama. They spoke of mysticism. The Dalai Lama was interested in the implications of the monastic vows. Merton asked him for his views on Marxism. In his reply, the Dalai Lama criticised the rich for not sharing their wealth with the poor thus playing into the hands of the communists. He felt monks and communists were incompatible, but an accommodation might be possible, “if Marxism meant only the establishment of an equitable economic and social structure.”70

On 2 December 1968, he visited Polonnaruwa in central Ceylon. Three huge stone Buddhas in different postures were in a quiet, hollow surrounded by trees. The Buddhas were quiet, smiling, “filled with every possibility, questioning nothing, knowing

68 Ibid., p 307-308.
69 Ibid., p 318.
everything, rejecting nothing." Merton was so overwhelmed by the experience that he was unable to write about it until 5 December. In some strange way his insights at Polonnaruwa were a preparation for his death. He wrote:

Looking at these figures I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious.... All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear.... 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.... I mean, I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for. I don't know what else remains but I have now seen and pierced through the surface and have got beyond the shadow and the disguise.71

Merton arrived back in Bangkok on 8 December, 1968, for the meeting of the Benedictine Abbots. The last entry in his journal was dated 8 December, as he was preparing to go to the Conference Centre, outside Bangkok. There he gave a talk on Marxism and Monastic Perspectives. He spoke of the identity crisis of the monk who questions himself in the presence of the Marxist.

The monk is essentially someone who takes up a critical attitude toward the world and its structures.... He must have in some way or other reached some kind of critical conclusion about the validity of certain claims made by secular society and its structures with regard to the end of man's existence. In other words, the monk is somebody who says, in one way or another, that the claims of the world are fraudulent.... The difference between the monk and the Marxist is fundamental insofar as the Marxist view of change is oriented to the change of substructures, economic substructures, and the monk is seeking to change man's consciousness.72

71 Ibid., pp. 235-236.
72 Ibid., pp. 329-330.
He based his views of Marxism on the writings of Herbert Marcuse. He recommended that
the Abbots read Marcuse’s book *One Dimensional Man*, and Erich Fromm’s works:
*Escape from Freedom* and *The Sane Society*. He said that Christianity and Buddhism
were alike as they try to change man’s consciousness. The problem of the autonomous ego
must be resolved. *Cupiditas*, self-centre love, must be replaced by *caritas*, outgoing other
centred love. Fromm had written on the alienation of modern man. Merton saw alienation
in the lives of some religious because they had not developed their true potential.
Everyone was now required to be mature and to stand on his own two feet. The time for
relying on structures was over. He referred to the Dalai Lama’s question on the purpose of
the vows—“Do they simply constitute an agreement to stick around for life in the
monastery? Or do they imply a commitment to a life of progress up certain mystical
stages?” He saw the answer as a personal one, an answer of extreme importance for the
salvation of the world.

The monk belongs to the world, but the world belongs to him insofar as he
has dedicated himself totally to liberation from it in order to liberate it.\(^3\)
The monk is in the world and can become whole only by giving himself to others and for
others. This is the foundation of love and in no way depends on cultural or psychological
structures.

The combination of the natural techniques and the graces and the other
things that have been manifested in Asia and the Christian liberty of the
gospel should bring us all at last to that full and transcendent liberty which
is beyond mere cultural differences and mere externals- and mere this or

\(^3\) Ibid., p. 341.
that.

I will conclude on that note. I believe the plan is to have all the questions for this morning’s lectures this evening at the panel. So I will disappear. These were the last recorded words of Thomas Merton. He was discovered lying on the floor at four o’clock. He had been electrocuted by a defective fan. He was flown back to America in an American bomber. He completed the journey to Gethsemani by train and car. Merton’s grave is marked by a simple white cross, no different to the other monks buried in the cemetery. Thomas Merton had gone home.

In veritate, fuit finis quaerendi.

1.7. Epilogue

“apparently electrocuted”
Laughlin wrote me
“at least it was over quickly”
the tearing of the veil
between the soul and God...And:
...since love desires the passage should be brief....
the soul’s rivers of love
flow thither to join the sea
arriving lovely as Joan Baez in a big black car
You used to laugh at ads in the New Yorker
yet here’s one by Pan Am
**Ticket to Japan**
To Bangkok
To Singapore
All the way to the mysteries**
A ticket for contemplation? Yes

14 Ibid., p.343. Michael Mott in The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton records his last words as “So I will disappear from view and we can all have a Coke or something. Thank you very much.”
A ticket for contemplation.

Also for death

*All the way to the mysteries.*

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2.1. The World of the Late Twentieth Century

In order to examine the relevance of Merton's thought to Counselling, it is necessary to examine his view of man and of the world in which he lives. Merton writes:

....The vertigo of the 20th century needs no permission of yours or mine to continue. The tornado has not consulted any of us, and will not do so. This does not mean that we are helpless. It only means that our salvation lies in understanding our exact position, not in flattering ourselves that we have brought the whirlwind into being by ourselves or that we can calm it with a wave of the hand. It is certainly true that the storm of history has arisen out of our own hearts. It has sprung unbidden out of the emptiness of technological man. It is the genie he has summoned out of the depths of his own confusion. 76

Man in the modern world is beset by many illusions which prevent him from becoming his true self. Merton describes the modern world as an alienated city where men are isolated from each other in despair, loneliness and defeat. "This city is crowded with people who are not present to love each other. It is like a desert, although it is full of people." 77 Man is lonely in the crowd, cut off from real human encounter. He is totally engaged in

production. All that matters is to be busy. He is always in motion, never content to be. He judges himself by his output. His bank balance is the yardstick of his worth. An ethic or a superstition of quantity dominates him. The myth dream of power and money are his. The gospel saying is reversed. He needs to gain everything, unmindful of the loss of his soul, that lies buried deep in his unconscious.

They are turning into giant insects. Their societies are becoming anthills, without purpose, without meaning, without spirit and joy....Without God man becomes an insect, a worm in the wood, and even if he can fly, so what? There are flying ants. Even if man flies all over the universe, he is still nothing but a flying ant until he recovers a human centre and a human spirit in the depths of his own being.78

The obvious fact of his perpetual motion points up his lack of inner awareness. In his stockpiling of material goods, he is prepared to trample on 'the other' to get to the top. The top, of course, is always relative. Darwin's theory of the survival of the fittest is applied in this economic jungle. In Rousseau's Social Contract the leader was rejected if he failed to protect and provide for his people. "Failure" is no respector of persons. Success alone is tolerated. In this busy, busy world of frantic activity, man is afraid to be still lest he meet himself or cease to be.

The modern American is kept in terror of boredom and unfulfillment because he is constantly being reminded of their immanence in order that he may be induced to do something that will exorcise him for the next half hour. Then the terror will rise again and he will have to buy something else, or turn another switch, or open another bottle, or swallow another

78 Thomas Merton. Concerning Giants, p.80.
pill, or stick himself with a needle in order to keep from collapsing.\textsuperscript{79}

Merton sees war and business as being jointly responsible for the despoiling of the environment as well as creating a desert in man's heart. In the last analysis, it is market forces that control the economic world. In this world greed, wealth and power are God. This 'god' is rigid, inflexible and merciless. The world is so full of things that Merton agrees that "God is dead." Materialism and greed block out any vestige of the spirit. God is alive only in hearts that are capable of being rooted and grounded in His love.

2.2. The Anonymous, 'Sane' Society

Modern life is anonymous. This leads to the concept of mass society coupled with mass destruction. Modern secular humanism which is so fair in theory is utterly merciless and inhuman in practice. As long as abstract man is in question, his humanity will not rise up to haunt those who starved and bombed abstract man. Any atrocity, it would seem, is acceptable when people are seen as objects.

The purely objective application of science does not take into account living human values, respect for man and his basic fundamental dignity. He is only a thing and thus expendable. This is the way the people in charge of the gas chambers functioned. It was their duty, their job, a necessary prerequisite to the creation of the great German Reich.

The bombing of Dresden at the end of World War Two by the Allies is another example of this objectivity. The whole concept of peace by war is surely a contradiction. Merton writing about the Eichmann trial is impressed that the psychiatrist found Eichmann perfectly sane.

It is much worse to consider this calm, “well-balanced” unperturbed official conscientiously going about his desk work, his administrative job which happened to be the supervision of mass murder....He had a profound respect for system, for law and order.

The sanity of Eichmann is disturbing. We equate sanity with a sense of justice, with humaneness, with prudence, with the capacity to love and understand other people. We rely on the sane people of the world to preserve it from barbarism, madness, destruction. And now it begins to dawn on us that it is precisely the *sane ones* who are the most dangerous.

....We can no longer assume that because a man is “sane” he is therefore in his “right mind.” The whole concept of sanity in a society where spiritual values have lost their meaning is itself meaningless.

Merton concludes that this sane view of society excludes the concepts of love, sacrifice and empathy for the sufferings of his fellowman. Christians have displayed this sanity in the past and accommodated a totalitarian regime.

The sanity of the modern man is about as useful to him as the huge bulk and muscles of a dinosaur. If he were a little less sane, a little more doubtful, a little more aware of his absurdities and contradictions, perhaps there might be a possibility of survival.

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81 Ibid., p.33.
2.3. Narcissism

Merton agrees with Fromm who says that much of modern society can be summed up as highly organised narcissism. This makes man a self-worshipper alienated from the 'other'. The 'other' may be critical and non-affirming. Rather than risk any affront or criticism, he encloses himself in a protective cocoon. Narcissism makes man desire to acquire money, wealth and all kinds of luxuries. In fact a "pseudo-culture" enslaves him to the rat race. The self is the centre of the narcissistic universe. Everything is evaluated against the yardstick of self. Self-absorption leading to self-adoration is the atmosphere he breathes. Here all forms of fanaticism flourish. The more the "ism" withdraws the need for intellect and demands only blind obedience, the better for narcissistic man. This abdication of independent thought led to the Nazi concentration camps, chemical warfare and the world of race hatred. Nothing must be allowed to interfere with the agenda of the self-indulging, self-obsessed, ego-centric tyrant. This tyrant "portrays the destructive tendencies of a society that grows rich on the prospect of nuclear war."

Merton speaks of the "Faustian narcissism and self-idolatry of "post Christian" man." Brought to its logical conclusion, narcissism poses a threat to the very existence of man. Here, there is the right setting for "pseudo-mysticism" which seeks the permanent delight of the ego in its own spirituality, its own purity, as if it were itself absolute and infinite.

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82 Ibid., p. 146.
83 Ibid., p. 147.
This explains the success and the danger of the current western fad for producing spiritual experience by means of drugs. Without dialogue between the self and the world, the self is destined to be forever isolated and alienated in his bullet proof, cushioned ivory tower.

"Thanks to me, I am not as other men" is his first and last thought.

2.4. Man's Thirst for Power

Man has a colossal will to power. Lucifer personifies 'Non Serviam'. This 'Non Serviam' echoes and re-echoes down the ages. It is a self glorification without limitation. Merton retells the story of Prometheus to illustrate graphically the proud 'Non Serviam.'

Prometheus was beloved of the gods. He was, however jealous of fire which the gods reserved to themselves. As a beloved son he would have been given a share of fire as his birthright. This gift-giving was anathema to his proud spirit. He would not be beholden to anyone, even the gods. Thus he stole the fire. Then, realising the enormity of his action, Prometheus condemned himself to eternal punishment. Even in his punishment, he shouted "non serviam".

This is modern man to-day. So much has been achieved by technology that the idea of being answerable to anyone, even God, is abhorrent. God has become Sartre's 'other', the inferno. Merton calls this the elephantiasis of self-will.

When men, as individuals or in society, seek only to use creation in order to dominate other men, to gain power for themselves, to enrich themselves at the expense of others, then the 'world' becomes in some sense the victim of their greed and it takes on the character of those who make use of
it in a sinful way. It is the "world" in this sense that the Christian and the monk must liberate himself from. But in reality we liberate ourselves not from created things but from our own inordinate and wrong desires.84

Merton also speaks of the fragmentation of life by the manipulators. They attempt to break reality into a pattern of their own choice, creating a new template each time for the jig-saw of life. Man thus becomes confused and dependent, as he is lost in the maze of irrational pathways. Therefore he is alienated both from himself, the world and reality, as the blue print of reality has been destroyed. In his confusion, he suspends his judgement and becomes a pawn in the hands of those who loudly tell him, as if he were a baby or an imbecile, what he should or should not do. His usefulness is the only valid reason for his continuing to exist.

2.5. The Concept of Usefulness

The world’s yardstick is usefulness. Aesthetics, nature, beauty and love are all subject to the laws of usefulness. This creates a problem for modern man. What of the unemployed, the handicapped and the sick? Are they to be thrown on the scrap heap like last year’s calendar in January? Merton says:

The true "law" of our day is the law of wealth and material power. The

fate of men, indeed of mankind itself, depends on the laws of economics. It is the market that in reality determines the existence, indeed the survival of all men and dictates the ideals and the actualities of social life. In our time the struggle of mercy is not against rigid and inflexible morality but against a different and more subtle hardening of the heart, a general loss of trust and of love that is rooted in greed and belief in money. 

This criterion of usefulness is devoid of sentiment. It is hard, unyielding and without mercy. Those in power seem to operate double standards. The city planners give permission for the commercial use of many green belts, transforming the playground of God’s creatures, both human and animal into an asphalt jungle of flats piled on top of each other like modern towers of Babel. On the other hand, the rich, entrenched behind high walls, allow themselves a superabundance of greenness in their ranches. Well may the questions be asked: Is there a God? Is there any justice for ordinary people? The luxury of uselessness is not the prerogative of the rich. Uselessness in terms of aesthetics is the key to the soul of man. In keeping with this concept of uselessness, man, made in the image of the Creator, if he becomes useless in the practical sense, must be eliminated. No exceptions are allowed. Euthanasia, in this useful moral order, is not only to be desired but is essential.

The universal and modern man is the man in a rush, a man who has no time, who is a prisoner of necessity, who cannot understand that a thing might perhaps be without usefulness.

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85 Thomas Merton, Love and Living, p.217.
86 Thomas Merton, Raids on the Unspeakerable, p. 20.
2.6. The Manipulators- The Armchair Generals

Another strange phenomenon is the cycle of peace and war. It appears that years of great economic growth are followed by war. This disposes of the surfeit of produce and people. In *Henry IV. Part One* Falstaff does not rush off to battle. His view is that common folk are only cannon fodder for the use of the armchair generals. Merton makes this same point in writing of the Eichmann affair. There is nothing new under the sun. King David put the rival husband into the front line of battle to be mowed down, leaving him free to marry his widow. The prophet Nathan makes the immorality of the crime clear. King David’s repentance is poured out in Psalm Fifty-one. He is not able to turn the clock back. The deed is done.

In the field of economics, the poor are shackled to terrible conditions and paid a pittance to allow the few the luxury of uselessness. It would seem that faceless people are manipulating the pawns, the poor and the weak, in selfish self interest. The myth of the fall is the development of a human desire to exploit people and things in the interest of pleasure and power. Man, with his technocratic and self-centred worldliness, acts out “his fantasies as a little autonomous god, seeing and judging everything in relation to himself.” Merton holds that in ethics today humility is necessary as man has to risk

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making provisional decisions in good faith. Ethics is concerned with man as man who is striving to gain personal freedom and integrity. Man is also responsible for his neighbour. He needs to consult the wise who have experience of the ways of the world. The final decision is, however, his alone.

An ethic of personal integrity and responsibility... accepts and respects objective moral norms, while remembering the distinction between an objective norm and pathological compulsion.88

Merton makes a very powerful statement about the future of the world which holds as good today as in 1960. He is concerned with the spread of Christian Humanism in the world. He wishes man to be free of illusions. Man is a prisoner of economic individualism in a world of mass technology. He is in danger of becoming a mere cipher. Solitude is needed to discover anew that he can only discover himself in others and ultimately in God, in whose image he is made.

The vocation of man is...to work for the establishment of that ‘Kingdom of God’ which is the unity of all men in peace, creativity and love.

I do not believe that this Kingdom and its peace can be established by the power of money. I do not believe it can be established by the noise of slogans, or by dynamos, or by marching armies whether militant or pacific. I do not believe that this kingdom can ever be the work either of individualists or of mass-men. It can only be the work of persons who have reached not only natural maturity but the full supernatural stature of Christ.89

88 Thomas Merton, Love and Living, p.125.

2.7. Violence and Prejudice

Merton sees violence as a major ingredient of the modern world. When man suffers from alienation and frustration, he seeks relief in fantasies and dreams of violence. Writing after the assassinations of the Kennedys and Dr. Martin Luther King, Merton says:

In any event this is my comment: the problem of violence in our society is now critical and it is not just a problem of a few psychopaths or rebels. The violence that threatens us to the point of possible self-destruction is endemic in the whole of society and more especially in the establishment itself, the military, the police, the established forces of "order" - they are all infected with a mania for overkill, rooted in fear.90

Change is needed and violence will not change anything. At most it will only transfer power from one set of bull-headed authorities to another. A climate of totalism, according to Merton, compels man to forego his freedom. He becomes a cipher, a cog in the wheel of mass power. His is an "obedience to the authority of might rather than freedom."91

An eighth grade student, Betsi Baeten, wrote to Merton asking him to write a few paragraphs, in language that an American teenager could understand, on "Why people vent their hatred on the coloured man."92 Merton, in reply, states that there is a "psychological mechanism" whereby man picks out the traits and characteristics of those

91 Thomas Merton. *Love and Living*, p. 207
he finds attractive. In contrast, he also targets the shortcomings of those he dislikes. Then if he is in a position to do so, he punishes those he dislikes on the grounds that they are bad, dirty and evil living.

Instead of having to admit evil in themselves and having to live with it, they project it on to others. Thus ideas of dirt, evil living, animality etc. which are all present in the unconscious fantasies of white people, tend to be projected onto Negroes and hated in Negroes.93

The notion of the scapegoat is present here. The evil is channelled into violence against the ‘other’ who dares to be different. Prejudice is in essence pre-judging. Man's prejudices colour all his actions no matter how unbiased he believes himself to be. Ghandi stated that "truthfulness is even more important than peacefulness" for, once the truth is perceived, the person no longer needs violence. Merton adds, "We are all, to some extent, liars."94

And again:

Everybody knows that passion blinds the intelligence. Prejudice is the fruit of inordinate desire. When truth is not what we want it to be, we twist its message out of shape in our own mind to fit the pattern of our desires. In so doing, we do not hurt the truth itself: we ruin our own spirit.95

Merton in his treatment of the impact of technology on modern man describes him as "a savage armed not with a club or a spear but with the most sophisticated arsenal of

93 Ibid., p. 116.
94 Thomas Merton. Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, p. 84.
diabolical engines, to which new inventions are added every week.\textsuperscript{96}

2.8. Alienation and Guilt

There is a kind of schizophrenic self-alienation at the source of all the inadequate mysticism of heroism and guilt. The longing of the restless spirit of man is symbolised by the need to scale the impossible mountain and to find there what is, in the last analysis, his own.

Prometheus is the prophet and contemplative that is required by the atomic age.... Prometheus and his guilt and his gods are simply the composite picture of man's own schizophrenia. Why must we live in the shadow kingdom of beings who can never quite believe that they themselves exist? Without the living God (without a center) men become little helpless gods, imprisoned within the four walls of their own weakness and fear. They are so conscious of their weakness that they think they have nothing to give to another and they only can subsist by snatching from others the little they have, a little love, a little knowledge, a little power.... For you decrease and I must increase, and I must grow and live on your decline.\textsuperscript{97}

Promethean philosophy is totally self-orientated. It marks the depths of man's own nothingness. The action of Prometheus is that of a man who realised his nothingness. He sees no other way to become what he is meant to be except by stealing power from others. This is an illusion, or rather an impossibility, as being is a free gift of God. The very nature of 'gift' demands a free giving in love. The most important gift is the gift of life, the

\textsuperscript{96} Thomas Merton, \textit{Love and Living}. p. 55.

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid. p. 16 - 18.
gift of one's own identity.

2.9. The Death Wish

Merton writes of the death wish in modern society. Man, isolated and alone, gives way to despair. He is cut off from his roots and life itself becomes a negation. The influence of technology and the savage dictatorship of time is partly responsible for this. Merton considers endless activity a form of violence. Man is breaking his spirit in the spiralling whirlpool of perpetual motion.

We live in the time of no room, which is the time of the end. The time when everyone is obsessed with lack of time, lack of space, with saving time, with conquering space, projecting into time and space the anguish produced within them by the technological furies of size, volume, quantity, speed, number, price, power and acceleration.98

This man certainly has no time to stand and stare. He is so concerned with keeping on the treadmill of life that he dare not look aside lest he be left behind. Why this fear of aloneness? Simply, propaganda and the media tutor him that belonging to the group, be it of toastmasters, of the possessors of the latest aerodynamic invention or the latest computer technology, is the only way to life, to being. As he has no time, he is in no position to examine these subtle "hidden persuaders". Paradoxically he will, if challenged, assert vigorously that he is not manipulated. No, he is acting precisely as he wishes and

98 Thomas Merton. Raids. p. 49.
chooses. Merton disagrees.

The primordial blessing "increase and multiply" has suddenly become a haemorrhage of terror. We are numbered in billions and masses together, marshalled, numbered, marched here and there, taxed, drilled, armed, worked to the point of insensibility, dazed by information, drugged by entertainment, surfeited with everything, nauseated with the human race and with our own selves, nauseated with life.99

Truly this is the time of 'no time' and of 'no room'. Effective propaganda leaves the person thinking that the decisions he has made are totally his own. What if everyone agrees with his decision? Then, that is all the better and indeed more comfortable. A minority of one is a very lonely isolation.

The death wish is very powerful. It amounts to a despair. Faced with war and rumours of war, man feels death is just around the corner. He is like the mouse, waiting for the cat, death. The global village, made present by satellite, shows the inhumanity of war, of famine and disease. This is the century of mega-technology, yet man sits in front of the television and feels more and more powerless. As he becomes convinced that he can do nothing to ward off the inevitable destruction, his despair grows deeper. Alternatively, he can rouse himself from his stupor and start a campaign for peace. Now he is a mad man disturbing the peace. The only place for him is the asylum in a strait jacket, in a padded cell. T. S. Eliot was right when he said "we cannot bear too much reality." The madman is now an example to others. Merton describes the death dance as the denial of life, of life, surrendering to the instinct to dominate and destroy.

99 Ibid.

62
Some see Western society as being cerebral. In fact there is an anti-intellectual current in modern society. The moguls of business look for a very skilled, well educated work-force. Merton points out, that knowledge of technology is knowledge of knowledge, and not knowledge of reality. Merton spells out the ills of modern society. The seven deadly sins are there, seven being the symbol of completeness. It is abundantly evident that Merton is well acquainted with the world of modern man.

2.10. Man in the Modern World

This is Merton's assessment of the world of the twentieth century man. Merton in The New Man describes man's position. "Life and death are at war within us. As soon as we are born, we begin at the same time to live and die."\(^{100}\) There is nothing startling here. This is a statement of fact. In Seeds of Contemplation he states:

To say I was born in sin is to say I came into the world with a false self. I came into existence under a sign of contradiction, being someone that I was never intended to be and therefore a denial of what I am supposed to be. And thus I come into existence and non-existence at the same time because from the very start I was something that I was not.\(^{101}\)

This false self poses the crucial problem for man. The question "who am I?" is fundamental. The answer to this question is the key to the discovery of man's true identity.

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The search for identity is central to Merton's thought. He believes that unless man struggles to answer this question, he is destined to wallow in a sea of despair. He will be at rest only when he is sated and drugged into oblivion. If he abandons the struggle, he will have to suffer being a thing, at the beck and call of every whim, either his own or his neighbour's. Is this the destiny of man, the peak of creation? Merton clearly answers "no."

There is a false self and a true self. This apparent duality is explained by Merton's understanding of original sin. Adam was created in the image and likeness of God. When Adam thought to become a god he lost the 'likeness' of God. The recovery of likeness from unlikeness is the life long quest. Merton describes original sin as "a spontaneous inclination to resolve the split in ourselves by denying that it exists and by closing ourselves in upon the superficial and exterior unity of the superficial ego."\(^{102}\)

Merton calls this state of unlikeness by various names: false self, smoke self, unreal self and illusory self, in his writings. Merton adopted Maritain's distinction between the individual and the person. Maritain, the Neo-Thomist writes:

> One might say that in each of us, individuality, being in one which excludes from one all that other men are, is the narrowness of being and the "grasping for oneself," which in a body animated by spirit, derives from matter.\(^{103}\)

Man consists then, of two poles: the individual pole, the material and the spiritual pole: the

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person. As man is one, individuality and personality are united in the human being.

Maritain says that the pull towards God is the work of the spirit, while the impulse of the individual is towards the material. Personality, for Maritain, is the image of God in human beings.\(^{104}\)

...Thomist philosophy lays stress on the basic psychosomatic unity of the human being (one single substance composed of matter and the spiritual "form" or entelechy), thus affording us a philosophical key for a sound interpretation of the great modern discoveries in neurology and psychiatry. Also, it lays stress on the notion of human personality. Man is a person, who holds himself in hand by his intelligence and his will. He does not exist merely as a physical being. There is in him a richer and nobler existence: he has spiritual superexistence, through knowledge and love....Through love he can give himself freely to beings who are to him, as it were, other selves; and for this relationship no equivalent can be found in the physical world.\(^{105}\)

Maritain was one of Merton's philosophical guides. Other writers tend to see Merton's doctrine of the person as the result of his study of St. Bernard, St. Augustine and Duns Scotus.\(^{106}\) St. Bernard uses the term "region of unlikeness" in describing the fall of Man.\(^{107}\)

In *The New Man*, Merton sees post Fall Adam, as a wanderer enmeshed in ignorance and sin. While this may be true, it is also true that man is called to freedom. If one allows man's essential freedom and his initial creator orientation, then the means of moving from

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\(^{104}\) Ibid., p.68.


'unlikeness' to 'likeness' must be inherent in his nature. Otherwise, humankind, determined by evil, is predestined to perdition. Freedom is only a charade. Aquinas says that the incarnation was necessary to redeem man. Merton says that too much emphasis has been placed on the fall of man. Not enough attention has been given to the redemptive power of Christ's incarnation, death and resurrection. Man's salvation, for Merton, lies in his finding his true identity, his relatedness to others and to God. In his daily living, man struggles for liberation from the 'unlikeness ' of ignorance and error in order to reach transcendence. God himself, in the hidden ground of man's being, reveals man's true identity when he seeks to understand the mystery of existence.

2.11. The laws of Nature and the Uniqueness of Man

Trees, plants, animals, according to Merton, all have the law of their nature indelibly marked in them. They live, grow and die in harmony with their inner essence. Why then, is man so different? Why is he not fashioned and programmed like the plant and animal world? Merton's answer is that man is different. The difference lies in his essential nature.

God leaves us free to be whatever we like. We can be ourselves or not as we please. We are at liberty to be real, or to be unreal. We may be true or false, the choice is ours. We may wear now one mask and now another, and never, if we so desire, appear with our own true face.108

In fact, sanctity and salvation depend on finding one's true self, the person one truly is.

This journey of self-discovery leads the person to freedom. He is freed from the chains of the hedonistic and destructive ego which relies on a multiplicity of disguises. If man fails to transcend the destructive ego, he will never find the way to self-fulfilment. More important, he will never find truth or reality. Man is at liberty to accept or reject the gift of life.

*The seeds that are planted in my liberty, at every moment, by God's will are the seeds of my own identity, my own reality, my own happiness, my own sanctity.*\(^{109}\)

### 2.12. The Search for Identity

Merton believes that man is truly free and not determined. In fact, such are the implications of man's freedom that, if man does not become what he is intended to be, he will spend eternity contradicting himself. He will be now something and now nothing in the eternal 'now' of dying and living in an eternal knot of indefiniteness. Man has the potential to be his true self.

As long as I am no longer anybody else than the thing born of my mother, I am so far short of being the person I ought to be that I might as well not exist at all.\(^{110}\)

God, he states, does not know the illusory self. Merton wryly states "that is altogether too much privacy."\(^{111}\) Not knowing in this sense does not deny God's omniscience but implies

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\(^{109}\) Ibid., p.26.

\(^{110}\) Ibid., p.27.

\(^{111}\) Ibid.
a blocking from man's consciousness of his real inner self. The false self seeks pleasure, 
power, riches and love in an attempt to fill his emptiness. All these things fail to satisfy. 
They are like tranquillisers and sedatives which deaden the questionings of man.

Therefore there is only one problem on which all my existence, my peace 
and my happiness depend: to discover myself in discovering God. If I find 
him I will find myself and if I find my true self, I will find Him.112

The basic dynamic of the spiritual life is the search for identity. The lack of groundedness 
in God makes for radical alienation and disorientation from man's deepest identity. One's 
identity is that which one really is, ones real self. This will be discovered only when the 
accretions of vanity and illusion are stripped away. Salvation is the therapeutic wholeness 
which is God's love invading human life at every level.

The object of salvation is that which is unique, irreplaceable, 
incommunicable- that which is myself alone. This true inner self must be 
drawn up like a jewel from the bottom of the sea, rescued from confusion, 
from indistinction, from immersion in the common, the nondescript, the 
trivial, the sordid, the evanescent. We must be saved from immersion in the 
sea of lies and passions which is called the "the world." And we must be 
saved above all from that abyss of confusion and absurdity which is our 
own worldly self. The person must be rescued from the individual...The 
creative and mysterious inner self must be delivered from the wasteful, 
hedonistic and destructive ego that seeks only to cover itself with 
disguises.113

Merton, the counsellor, conveyed this by his writings and his correspondence. He was 
convinced that directing people in the path of self-discovery was part of his mission.

112 Ibid., p.28.
113 Thomas Merton, Seeds of Contemplation, pp. 29-30.
Ultimately, they would come to realise that the quantum leap to the Absolute would be the work of the Almighty bending down to awaken the deepest, 'deep-down' things, implanted in the core of their being.

Man is not content with slavery to need: making his living, raising his family and leaving a good name to posterity. There is in the depths of man's heart a voice which says: "you must be born again". It is the obscure but insistent demand of his own nature to transcend itself in the freedom of a fully integrated, autonomous personal identity.\textsuperscript{114}

2.13. The Atheist' Dilemna

Where does the atheist feature in this picture? H. J. Blackham, the humanist, claims that as this is the only world man can be sure of, then he must work to make it the best possible place for everyone. He says:

\begin{quote}
Humanism proceeds from an assumption that man is on his own and this life is all and an assumption of responsibility for one's own life and for the life of mankind.\textsuperscript{115}
\end{quote}

Here is the challenge. Man, in serving others, actualises his potential, for man does not live alone. His happiness is achieved only in union with others. This is to turn Sartre's statement "'the other' is Hell" on its head. Merton says "I will never be able to find myself if I isolate myself from the rest of mankind as if I were a different kind of being."\textsuperscript{116} The

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., p.194.
false self uses others. This manipulation takes two forms. Firstly, the false self believes he is so superior that everyone should be grateful for being in his presence. Secondly, he gets so full of his own importance that he begins to believe he is omnipotent. The incense and lamp are in place at the shrine of the 'super-ego deity'. Marx declared:

Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people...Religion is only the illusory sun about which man revolves so long as he does not revolve about himself. ¹¹⁷

This judgement is unavoidable if religion leads man to suspend his own moral judgement.

Merton says:

Contemplation is not the gift of prophecy nor experience of collective enthusiasm in a totalitarian parade, the self-righteous upsurge of party loyalty that blots our conscience and absolves every criminal tendency in the name of class, nation, party, race or sect....Yet it is precisely these ersatz forms of enthusiasm that are "opium" for the people, deadening their awareness of their deepest and most personal needs, alienating them from their true selves, putting conscience and personality to sleep and turning free, reasonable men into passive instruments of the power politicians. ¹¹⁸

The passive invocation of God's will is the substance of Marx's attack on Religion. Merton echoes him but sees man's abdication of his powers as man as the source of the misinterpretation of Religion. How much easier it is to be a sheep, content to be one of the group. The morality of an act is not dependant on the acquiescence of the group. The process of decision-making is complex. Therefore the individual man is forced into

¹¹⁷ Karl Marx, Early Writings, edited and Translated by T.B. Bottomore (London: 1963), pp.43 - 44.

trusting his leaders, as he claims he has no means of judging cases. This is part of the world of illusion and delusion. Man's abdication of power leads to his being swept up in the general enthusiasm created by a ruling group. They shatter the individual's sense of self, by declaring his inferiority in the face of their superior wisdom.

We are persuaded that many who consider themselves atheists are in fact persons who are discontented with a naive idea of God which makes Him appear to be an "object" or a "thing", or a person in a merely finite and human sense....Yet they are likely to be very intrigued by the direct and existential testimony of contemplative experience.119

2.14. Compassion

His chequered personal career gave him first hand knowledge of many of the snares that exist to entrap people. His insight into human nature is blessed by the quality of mercy. His is not a judgmental stance.

Through his long years of spiritual direction, he came in contact with everyman, warts and all. He is not content to state the evil. Merton describes the positive life-affirming nature of Christian humanism. Man, as part of creation, is essentially good. Merton is no Manichean. Man is inclined to evil but to surrender to evil is to deny the redemptive death and resurrection of Christ. Merton considers that love is stronger than both fear and hatred. Life is also stronger than death. The truth of man's inner resources can be found

only in quiet and solitude. Then man will find his true centre in the hidden ground of love. It is not easy but not impossible. All that is required is the desire to be the person that one is meant to be. Man does not fully know himself as long as he is isolated. His identity comes to light only when it fully confronts the 'other'.

2.15. Freedom

As man grows in wisdom and truth, he becomes more aware of his spiritual freedom. In contemplation, he arrives at an intuition of the unity of love, freedom and life in God. God has given man freedom and intelligence. These faculties grow in proportion as they are used. It is freedom guided by reason which leads man to a higher plane of thought. It also leads man inward to search his heart as to the meaning of life. Struggle is involved. In theory it sounds easy to make this 'leap of the spirit. In reality, the leap only comes in response to a call. Man will hear the call in his innermost heart only when he is attuned to hear the whisper of the spirit in the gentle murmuring of the breeze. The ego and super-ego jealously guard the door to the innermost heart as they have no intention of surrendering their power to the spirit. Again there is struggle. Fear and despair can triumph and block the spirit. The spirit blows where he wills but as in the Holman Hunt picture "The Light of the World", the handle to the door is inside. Man, in his freedom, is free to welcome or repel the spirit.

"Man is naturally mature and free when he has passed through all the stages of emotional
and physical development." He is spiritually mature when he freely consents to become what he is intended to be.

Adam, containing in himself the whole human race, was placed at the metaphysical cross-roads of a universe that was charged with vision, love and spiritual experience.  

Man, in his freedom, is like Adam standing at the cross-roads. At this cross-roads, man can become a co-creator or see himself as an end in himself. In the latter case the id wins out. Man is not a puppet, he is free. He is free to take or not to take the 'quantum leap' into new life. A true relationship is built on freedom. When man "leaps," the I and Thou disappear to become an I-Thou relationship, rooted and grounded in love. Grace is opposed only to nature in its limitations. St. Thomas is certain that grace, not only builds on nature, but enhances it. This is the theory and ideal. In reality, man suffers the dark before the dawn. The dawn appears on the horizon only when man cries "why have you forsaken me?" The new day brings peace and intuitive freedom.

He makes for himself, a new world within the world God has made. He constructs a "city"- a society- which is a microcosm perfectly reflecting the order established by God, a living organic whole in which elevated above their original destiny by productive use in all the arts by which man lives, praise God no longer in themselves but with man in his society. This society becomes an extension of the sanctified spirit of man.  

In the prayer, The Our Father, the petition, or more correctly, the aspiration is, "Thy will

120 Thomas Merton, The New Man, p. 31.
121 Ibid., p.39.
122 Ibid., p.41.
be done on earth as it is in Heaven. "Reality says "Deliver us from evil." Man's spirit is despoiled when he is used as a tool of production, when he is no longer treated as a person but used as a thing, an instrument, for profit.

Sometimes man tires of the effort to be and relinquishes the struggle to the false self. Dissatisfaction and despair gain mastery. It is, in an effort to break free of their tyranny, that man agrees to consult a counsellor. In Ireland, in the early Christian Church, people had an 'anam cara'. That is the role of the counsellor to-day. Merton, speaking of friends, says:

May God preserve me from the love of a friend who will never dare to rebuke me. May he preserve me from the friend who seeks to do nothing but change and correct me. But may he preserve me still more from one whose love is only satisfied by being rebuked.123

Here there is balance. The counsellor's work is to get the client to examine the situation from all angles. If any vestige of common sense remains, when he is helped to take an objective view, he will find a way out of the maze and tangles of life. Perseus found the way out of the Minataur's labyrinth by means of the thread of love. The counsellor's unconditional positive regard and empathy is the modern day thread of love, spun by the client with the counsellor at the therapeutic sessions.

Freedom, according to Merton, is a fundamental value in life. If freedom is paramount, then there are two consequences for man. Firstly, he must guard against nihilist

123 Thomas Merton. No Man is an Island. p. 31.
philosophies. Secondly, all thinking men must unite against the death dance and work to establish the kingdom of love. Paneloux, for Camus, is an example of an "unchristian Christian" who knows about God but does not know God himself.

In the essay Prophetic Ambiguities: Milton and Camus, Merton sees man faced again with choice. He gives a pen portrait of Adam and Eve who have too much leisure and little scope to use their initiative. He quotes Tillyard who called Adam and Eve "old age pensioners enjoying perpetual youth." They have more food than they will ever be able to use.

Merton sees a parallel in the over-production as a result of technology to-day. Here again, man's inventive skill is not channelled. Then, in frustration, man turns his mind to engines of war, sowing the seeds of destruction. There is no need for Christ as Saviour. Instead man saves himself but in so doing tries to rule over others not in love, but in subjection. This sets the domino principle in motion. Paranoia rules. All that matters is to be his own boss. Even if he rules only over his own backyard, there he is king. Merton points up the absurdity of the situation. Is it so far from the situation to-day? A ruler needs subjects. What of those who are discriminated against on account of their race, colour or creed? This state of passive and active aggression leaves man exhausted. His life is disjointed and empty save for his petty fiefdom. In the event of his dispossession, he will indeed need counselling to restore his balance and perspective. His super-ego is shattered. His 'id' has

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no further pasture to tyrannise. The ego is alone and afraid.

Modern man lacks a fear of Hybris... and we have no tragic dread of nemesis. The Greeks were well aware that he who has no sense of nemesis is in fact very close to it. Those whom the gods would destroy they first make mad with self-righteous confidence and unquestioning self-esteem. 125

Man, to remain sane, must return to himself and regain his perspective and freedom. Then, and only then, will he be free in his spirit to reach out in love to the 'other.’ When this happens the threefold relationship of the presence of self to self, self to 'the other' and lastly, self to God will be bound up in a unity and trinity of love.

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Elias - Variations on a theme.
The free man is not alone as busy men are
But as birds are. The free man sings
Alone as universes do. Built
Upon his own inscrutable pattern
Clear, unmistakable, not invented by himself alone
Or for himself, but for the universe also
Nor does he make it his business to be recognised
Or care to have himself found out
As if some special subterfuge were needed
To get himself known for who he is.

....For the free man's road has neither beginning nor end. 126

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125 Ibid., p. 258-259.

2.16. The Power of Love

Love in the service of others is necessary for the integrated human life.

Christianity does not teach man to attain an inner ideal of divine tranquillity and stoic quiet by abstracting himself from material things. It teaches him to give himself to his brother and to his world in a service of love in which God will manifest his creative power through men on earth. 127

Merton argues that Christian humanism respects people in their personal and existential actuality. The centre of Christian humanism is the idea that God is love, not just infinite power. Only in silence and solitude, in the quiet of worship, does the ego-self discover the riches of God in adoration and receive his word of love. Communication changes to communion in the glance of love.

Love does not move in a straight line from life to death. Love curves up and down in the ebb and flow of life. It is an intensification of life, a completeness, a fullness, a wholeness, which makes life worth living. It is the spark of the divine in this altruistic mode of life. The more one loves, the more love grows. Here the principle of sharing and receiving back the hundred fold holds good. Merton says that in order to love, man must leave the comfort of the cradle where he is given everything. Standing erect he reaches maturity. He is then able to give to others. In fact, he rejoices in liberal. Again there is need for common sense. To give everything to everyone may seem to be an imitation of the saints. Merton, while admiring the poverty of St. Francis, realises that to give indiscriminately is

127 Thomas Merton, Love and Living, p. 150.
unwise. It also does violence to the person. The mark of maturity is discrimination.

The frenzy of the activist neutralises his work for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of his own work because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful. ¹²⁸

In Merton's view, love releases man from selfish introspection and enables him to reach out to the 'other'. Love enables him to escape from the person of his false self and to find safety in risk. The risk is stepping out into the unknown. In the unknown he finds the pearl of great price. This is the discovery that he is one with others in a "union with the Life who dwells and sings within the essence of every creature and in the core of our own souls"¹²⁹ This is the moment when he becomes mature. He is able to shake free of prejudice and myth. His needs become authentic. He is no longer dancing to the tune of what other people think he should or must want. The controls are in his own hands. He learns to think for himself. The illumination of self-knowledge is ideally accompanied by humility, which will save him from losing his sense of place and proportion. Desiderata, an anonymous reading says

If you compare yourself with others you may become vain and bitter; for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself. Neither be cynical about love; for in the face of all aridity and disenchantment, it is perennial as the grass.... Beyond a wholesome discipline, be gentle with yourself - you are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars, you have a right to be here....Therefore be at peace with God, whatever you conceive Him to be and whatever your aspirations in the

Being Love, God has given himself without reservation to man as He himself became man.  
By reason of the incarnation, the Love which is also the infinite creative secret of 
God in his hidden mystery becomes manifest and active through man, in man's world.\textsuperscript{131}

It is not a matter of God or of man. God is found by loving man and the true meaning of 
man is found hidden in the love of God.

Man cannot live without society....Besides protecting man's material 
life....society gives each individual a chance to transcend himself in the 
service of others and thus to become a person.\textsuperscript{132}

Merton quotes Pasternak's Dr. Zhivago to illustrate the relationship of man with life and 
death.

Because of the coming of Christ, man does not die in a ditch like a dog - 
but at home in history, while the work towards the conquest of death is in 
full swing; he dies sharing this work.\textsuperscript{133}

Man may fail in life and see no exit beyond despair. There is indeed an exit. The way out 
is by means of love. Love makes man more alive in the face of failure and death. He is not 
a passive agent. By his initiatives the world changes. That is the role of man. Science has 
proved how great the mind of man is. Philosophy debates the existence of an Absolute

\textsuperscript{130} An anonymous writing found in a New England Church.Printed in \textit{The Assembly Book}. Edited by M. 

\textsuperscript{131} Thomas Merton, \textit{Love and Living} , p.149.


Being. Man's intuition drives him to look deep into his own spiritual depths. The result is awe perhaps, at the realisation that he is not a meaningless pawn. One man does make a difference. This is the thirst of modern man in mass society - to matter and not to be just an anonymous nonentity. Merton writes:

> Every other man is a piece of myself, for I am a part and a member of mankind.... What I do is also done for them and with them and by them. What they do is done in me and by me and for me. But each one of us remains responsible for his own share in the life of the whole body (of Christ).... Nothing at all makes sense, unless we admit, with John Donne, that: "No man is an island, entire of itself, every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main."134

Merton in offering solutions to man in the modern world does so in a very tentative manner. He feels that asking the right question is as important as or even more important than giving the right answer. People, he says, read his books because he does not try to give copper-fastened answers.

In the *New Man*, Merton says that for man to be man, he must grow not only in his body and his feelings, but also in his intellect. Thinking intelligently, he proceeds to love others and in loving others he finds his fulfilment. "In a word, for man to live, he has to become wholly and entirely alive. He has to be all life, in his body, his senses, his mind and his will."135 The true man is controlled in all his actions. His whole being is devoted to actualising his deepest spiritual potentialities in a peaceful integration of all his gifts.


Man, then, can only be said to be fully alive when he becomes plainly conscious of the real meaning of his own existence, that is to say when he experiences something of the fullness of intelligence, freedom and spirituality that are actualised within himself.¹³⁶

Merton states that man cannot uncover the whole mystery of his being on his own. He needs to be made aware of his spiritual centre. This spiritual centre enables him to transcend himself and reach a fuller, deeper consciousness of what it means to be alive. Man is fully alive when he takes responsibility for himself. The realisation "that his ultimate fulfilment or destruction" depends on himself, makes him conscious of his dignity as man.

True life, in other words, is not vegetative subsistence in one's own self, nor animal self-assertion and self-gratification in the 'other' by love. It is freedom transcending the self and subsisting in the 'other' by love. It is entirely received from God.¹³⁷

This aspiration to fulfil his deepest needs is often thwarted by the fact of being a tool of production. The media try to convince him of the need to try out a new drink, a new car, even a new girl. His wants, then, become his needs. He is engrossed in attaining these things, ready to discard the old in an effort to measure up to the advertisers' image. Out of this treadmill comes a growth, not of new life but of greed and envy.

More importantly, this dissatisfaction, when it is focused on marriage, becomes dangerous. The other person's wishes are not considered. Love is seen as a deal. It is the nature of a

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 5.
¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 9.
deal that goods can be taken on a trial basis. Thus, if the partner fails to live up to the buzz, fails to satisfy according to the requirements of the glossy magazine, then it is right to break the agreement on "the return of goods to sender" principle. "Till death do us part" is still part of the contract. The death, referred to, is now the non-existence or the cessation of creative love in this superficial relationship. Here 'the other' is viewed as the plaything of pleasure. Man is condemned to spiritual death as he is living in the jungle created by his 'id'. This is a travesty of love. Love is the life giving force in man. As Merton says:

We do not become fully human, until we give ourselves to each other in love. It is not confined to sex; it embraces everything in the human person - the capacity for self-giving, for sharing, for creativity, for mutual care, for spiritual concern.138

2.17. False Love- A Deal

Love is not marketing, it is a form of worship, a living appreciation of the gift of life. The zenith of this appreciation of the gift of life is the fruit of love, the child. Love is revealed in the child, whose birth is a sharing by the man and woman in the creative power and love of God. This is the miracle of birth. The love of the parents sustains them in times of crisis.

If they are believers in the "fast food package" concept of love, then the child is not seen

138 Ibid. p. 27.
as the revelation of love, but perhaps, as a mathematical mistake. Like the glutton, eternally forced to be a spectator at the banquet, man keeps trying to find the ideal partner, not realising that the intention of permanence is the foundation of a true relationship. The freedom of man includes respect for the freedom and the dignity of the 'other'. The hidden ground of love is explored by the partners in a spirit of freedom and love. Respect demands a marriage or union of equals. The mature man sees the world realistically, not as he would like it to be.

Adolescence is a time of recurring change, mood swings and physical development. In primitive societies the mark of adulthood was the rite of marriage. Merton says that when land was the security there was no problem with the concept of marriage for life. "To-day one's security and identity have to be constantly re-affirmed. Nothing is permanent, everything is movement."¹³ In this welter of emotions, man needs help to sort out the imaginary from the real. The existence of marriage counsellors attests to man's inability to find his true self alone. The objectivity of the counsellor gives distance and perspective. The very fact of examining the problem may help to see why breakdown is imminent. Reconciliation is possible, when the partners begin to respect each other as equals. Love grows with knowledge. The revelation of the real self to each other is the key to awareness. Communication and dialogue are stepping stones to freedom in a communion of love.

Man is truly alive when he is aware of himself as master of his own destiny

¹³ Ibid., p. 31.
to life or to death, aware of the fact that his ultimate fulfilment or destruction depends on his own free choice and awareness of this ability to decide for himself. This is the beginning of true life.140

2.18. Contemplation

Merton states that the apparent emptiness and uselessness of contemplation affords man the space to find his real identity and to realise the truth of his being a creature. Only the person, who has found out who he truly is, is able to love.

Man in contemplation becomes his true self. He is able to be truly human in the face of his daily experience of man's inhumanity to man. Lear was rescued from his despair by the love of his daughter, Cordelia. Man is rescued from alienation and despair similarly by the love of God filtered to him by the love of his fellow man. When man, in the hidden ground of his being, has discovered who he really is, he is able to embrace all humankind as his brothers and sisters.

Man finds himself and is happy, when he is able to be aware that his freedom is spontaneously and vigorously functioning to orientate his whole being toward the purpose which it craves, in its deepest spiritual centre, to achieve. This purpose is life in its fullest sense of the word - not mere individual self-centered egotistical life which is doomed to end in death, but a life that transcends individual limitations and needs, and subsists outside the individual self in the absolute - in Christ, in God141

140 Thomas Merton, The New Man, p.7.
141 Ibid.
Contemplation is the turning inward, outward and upward of the reflective powers of man. Man reflecting on himself comes to discover his true worth in correct relationship to himself, to his neighbour and to God. Man must become both real and aware. Merton says:

Contemplation does not arrive at reality after a process of deduction, but by an intuitive awakening in which our free and personal reality becomes fully alive to its own existential depths which open into the mystery of God.

Merton dismisses the Cogito Ergo Sum of Descartes as a theory of impoverishment. This theory reduces both man and God to the level of a concept making God's existence contingent on thought.

For the contemplative there is no cogito ("I think") and no ergo ("therefore") but only Sum ("I am"). Not in the sense of a futile assertion of our individuality as ultimately real but in the humble realisation of our mysterious being as persons in whom God dwells, with infinite sweetness and inalienable power.

Life consists in learning to live on one's own, to be at peace within oneself. In this, it is necessary for man to leave aside the busyness of life and wait in silence for the growth of the spirit in his heart. Only by leaving aside the hectic schedule of activity can man discover his true centre in tranquillity and rest. This withdrawal from frantic confusion and anxiety leaves man free to discover his inner depths. In this contemplation we are not

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142 Thomas Merton, Seeds of Contemplation, p.7.

143 Ibid.
divided but one with everyone in God's love. *Contemplari et contemplata aliis tradere* is the wisest procedure. There is no point in spreading ignorance. One should not speak until he has something to say. Speech for the sake of speech is like the cackle of geese. Merton echoes Shakespeare who said, "thou canst not utter what thou dost not know." The only valid speech is grounded in experience and founded on true knowledge, not ignorance. Wisdom comes with reflection on the knowledge which has been learned. *Scientia* must grow into *sapientia*, not only for the person's sake, but also for the benefit of the 'other'.

The frenzy of activity is a type of violence. The verbal outpourings which are repetitive also do violence both to the person himself and to the 'other'. "In silence and tranquillity is your rest" the psalmist says. Rest is wholesome and life-giving and implies its opposite - activity. This interaction of work and rest makes man a more human person, more ready to have time to listen to his neighbour.

This emancipated, peaceful person is able to help his neighbour without self-interest. For him, contemplation is imperative as it frees him to explore the inner void, to look death in the face. In addition, he confronts the fear of emptiness and examines the cult of usefulness. In this lesson, man learns who he is, what he has to offer to the world and finally how to make that offering valid. The world becomes more real in proportion as the people in the world are able to be more fully and more humanly alive. This involves freedom. This freedom enables the person to choose his own way of life and to live at the deepest level possible to man. Merton gives a definition of the person:

> He is one in unity which is love; undivided in himself because he is open to all. He is open to all because the one love that is the source of all, the form
of all and the end of all is one in him and in all. He is truly alone who is open to heaven and earth and closed to no one.\textsuperscript{144}

This is the portrait of perfection. Man for the most part is taken up with the business of earning a living to stay alive.

One of the great problems of our century is not merely of finding work for the unemployed but that of developing a new concept of work that will prevent practically everybody from becoming unemployable.\textsuperscript{145}

Alternatively, he is so taken over by the media and propaganda that his waking hours are filled with noise and distractions. These two pictures may be exaggerations. Merton sees a great need for silence and contemplation in the modern world. He maintains that this era of violence and unrest demands, if man is not to self-destruct, a rediscovery of meditation, of silent inner unitive prayer and creative Christian silence. This positive silence will pull man together and make him realise who he might be. Paul Tillich calls it "the courage to be".

\section*{2.19. The Mystery of Suffering}

The discipline of creative silence demands a certain kind of faith. It causes the person to question himself as to the reasons for his existence, in an effort to make sense of life. Most times, he is unselfconsciously reflective. When, however, death or sickness crosses

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\textsuperscript{144} Thomas Merton, \textit{Love and Living}. p. 17.

\textsuperscript{145} Ibid., p. 121.
his path, he is forced to examine the meaning of life. In fact, in his pain and fear, he may rant at Fate and assert that God, if he exists, is not a God of love. The whole question of sin and suffering becomes a raw, running sore.

Camus in *The Plague*, faces this question of sin, suffering and death. He sees Paneloux, the Jesuit priest, as representing both the French clergy under the Nazis and the "church as she confronts man in his moral and metaphysical estrangement - his lostness in an absurd world". Camus has the priest give a variety of answers for the cause of the plague at different stages in the novel. First, the plague is a punishment for sin, then he describes it as the will of God. When an innocent child dies, he is forced to say that "it is the work of a Love which people cannot understand". Rieux, the doctor, says "I have a different conception of love and I shall refuse to the bitter end to love this scheme of things in which children are tortured". Merton says that unfortunately some Christians view life in this way. "And it is they who present Camus with an absurdity against which he must revolt".

The novel must be read not simply as a drama or as a psychological study, but as a myth of good and evil, of freedom and historical determinism, of love against what Hopkins called 'the death dance in our blood'....Man's drive to destroy, to kill or simply to dominate and to oppress comes from the metaphysical void he experiences when he finds himself a stranger in his own universe.

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147 Ibid., p. 180.

148 Ibid., p. 181.
Man, according to Camus, must find meaning in his existence if he is to survive the "death dance," which is a wilful negation of life that is built into life itself: the human instinct to dominate and destroy. Camus' message, Merton states, is that man must create meaning in his life instead of seeking refuge in empty formulas. "The Plague is a protest against all forms of passive submission to unhappiness and un-meaning".149

2.20. Symbols

Merton writes of the importance of symbols. He makes a distinction between living and creative symbols and those that are depraved. "A true symbol, according to Merton, points to the very heart of all being, not to an incident in the flow of becoming." 150 It is not only a sign but a sacrament and a presence. One of the fatalities of the modern world is symbolism. Technology which reduces man to a cipher, robs symbols of meaning. A sign informs and explains. A symbol points to a deeper mystery. Merton speaks of "the pseudo-symbols of the mass movement"151 by which man loses his individuality and is swallowed up in group hysteria. This group hysteria dispenses with the need for decisions. Intellect is

149 Ibid., p.182.
150 Thomas Merton, Love and Living, p.55.
151 Ibid., p.58.
suspended. Man becomes a vacant shell, obeying the dictates of an exterior power which deprives him of his sense of interiority. On the other hand, there are creative symbols which serve to unite man. He is united with nature, with his neighbour and with his God "in a living and sacred synthesis." Education helps man to distinguish the life giving symbols from those that are depraved.

The vital role of the symbol is precisely this: to express and to encourage man's acceptance of his own center, his own ontological roots in a mystery of being that transcends his individual ego. The symbol helps man to come to an awareness of the reality of being that is within himself and brings him to communion with himself, his neighbour, his world and his God.

2.21. Solitude

Solitude is not withdrawal from ordinary life. It is not apart from, above, "better than" ordinary life; on the contrary, solitude is the very ground of ordinary life; it is the very ground of that simple, unpretentious, fully human activity by which we quietly earn our daily living and share our experiences with a few intimate friends. But we must learn to know and accept this ground of our being.

Man is a solitary, no matter how dependant he is on his friends. The evidence for this is seen in the fact that man dies alone. His attitude to death depends on his attitude to life. If death is the end then it is essential to get the good life here on earth. Merton sees death as a movement onto a higher form of life - a progression to life rather than a regression into

152 Ibid.
153 Ibid., p. 65.
154 Ibid., p. 23.
Writing of man's need for solitude, Merton says:

In an age of science and technology, in which man finds himself bewildered and disoriented by the fabulous versatility of the machines he has created, we live precipitated outside ourselves at every moment interiorly empty, spiritually lost seeking at all costs to forget our own emptiness and ready to alienate ourselves completely in the name of any 'cause' that comes along.\(^{155}\)

The only remedy, he claims, is solitude. The true solitary does not necessarily live in the desert. Solitude is an attitude of withdrawal, of having a kernel of inner peace within himself. In this his deepest centre, the ground of his being, he is free to be free. He is not less human. In his solitariness he is able to be detached. He is forced to be his own person.

He renounces illusory claims of collective achievement and fulfilment, by which society seeks to gratify and assuage the individual's need to feel that he amounts to something.\(^{156}\)

He comes face to face with himself. His inner self is not immediately accessible as he has built up barricades to protect himself from himself. In addition, he is frightened in his aloneness as the buzz is missing. The sense of belonging is gone. The crowd of acquaintances is no longer present to offer solutions and advice. The temptation to panic is great.

Man is born in society so this inner withdrawal is, as if, he were entering a foreign country.

\(^{155}\) Thomas Merton, \textit{The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton}, p.339.

\(^{156}\) Thomas Merton, \textit{Disputed questions}, p. 145.
This country is full of chaos and darkness. Why? Because man must search his own confusion and attempt to reduce it to an intelligible order. Part of the chaos is the loss of things he thought he could never do without. This is the work of the collective machine telling people what they need to make them happy. Now he no longer finds these baubles satisfying. "He accepts the difficulty of facing the million things in his life which are incomprehensible, instead of simply ignoring them."\textsuperscript{157} In the light of this truth, he finds faith. This faith has, as its foundation, the realisation that he must take responsibility for his inner life. Then he gets an insight. He realises "that his mystery and the mystery of God merge into one reality, which is the only reality."\textsuperscript{158} Merton makes the point that man dies alone. Other people die in a like manner. A harder concept to accept is that "each one must also live alone."\textsuperscript{159}

This 'hard saying' is modified by Merton's insistence that man cannot live without other people. Thus the true solitary is called not to leave society but to transcend it. In his aloneness he reflects on the crimes that seemed reasonable when sanctioned by the group. Now they are seen as crimes. This forces him to take a different stance.

He must renounce the blessing of every illusion that absolves him from responsibility when he is untrue to his deepest self and to his inmost truth - the image of God in his own soul.\textsuperscript{160}

\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., p.141.
\textsuperscript{158} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{159} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{160} Ibid., p.143.
He must now be fully awake. He lives in unity with himself. It is not his business to point
the finger. If possible, he hopes to escape notice. The solitary does not put up a notice
saying 'solitary'. To be solitary is endless struggle. The person who says he much prefers
solitude has not got the truth in him. He is still fettered by illusion and delusion. "He needs
society as a ventriloquist needs a dummy."\textsuperscript{161}

The true solitary is not diverted to peripheral issues. He can survive without applause. He
is forced to the margins. He is no longer a parrot of the collective voice. His is the
realisation that he was "one of them". Without vigilance, he can slip back into the cosy
nest of the social milieu. This revelation of his aloneness comes gradually. In solitude he
discovers what it is to be a man. His is the obligation to grow to spiritual maturity. In his
aloneness, he discovers the I-Thou relationship. From this relationship, he completes the
circle, reaching out to help his fellow man. "For the mercy of God is not heard in words
unless it is heard, both before and after the words are spoken, in silence."\textsuperscript{162} Man yearns
for security and independence at the same time. The path of life is slippery and
treacherous. The hand of God is found only in darkness. This darkness is akin to despair.
The night before the dawn is long. For some, it is endless, unless they find a counsellor to
listen to their hopes and fears, who will enable them to choose the dawn despite the
nakedness of the light.

The solitary, far from enclosing himself in himself, becomes everyman. He

\textsuperscript{161} Ibid., p.145.

\textsuperscript{162} Thomas Merton, \textit{The Power and Meaning of Love}, p.61.
dwells in the solitude, the poverty, the indigence of every man.\textsuperscript{163}

...Thus the solitary cannot survive unless he is capable of loving everyone, without concern for the fact that he is likely to be regarded by all of them as a traitor.\textsuperscript{164}

\textbf{2.22. Intuition and Aesthetics}

Merton's approach to counselling hinges on his concept of the person and his relationship to the world and ultimately to God. Man in relationship is both the subject and object of Merton's writings. The psalmist says: "What is man that you keep him in mind, mortal man that you care for him? You have made him little less than a God, with glory and honour you crowned him." \textsuperscript{165} Aquinas defines the person as a complete substance, subsisting by itself, separate from all else and endowed with a rational nature. Developing this, man is seen by Merton, as a being with essential freedom. This involves the anatomy of choice. Human awareness enters deeply into the act of choice. Awareness depends on knowledge garnered from experience which is twofold: external and internal. This is further refined in the movement from the existence of experience to the reflective processing of experience. Man shares being with everything that exists. Aristotle says that man is a composite of body and soul endowed with thinking emotion and feelings.\textsuperscript{166}

\textsuperscript{163} Thomas Merton, \textit{Raid}s, p. 16.
\textsuperscript{164} Ibid., p. 20.
\textsuperscript{166} Based on notes from Professor V. Rice's Lectures, January 1996.
Merton does not often use scholastic language. More often he uses poetic imagery to express his concept of person and identity. "Love is my true identity. Selflessness is my true self. Love is my true character. Love is my name." 167 Again he says: "He is the "Thou" before whom our inmost "I" springs into awareness. He is the "I am" before whom with our most personal and inalienable voice we echo "I am". Yet another definition of the person says:

He is one in unity which is love. Undivided in himself because he is open to all. He is open to all because the one love that is the source of all, the form of all and the end of all is one in him and in all. He is truly alone who is wide open to heaven and earth and closed to no one. 168

Merton is more at home with poetic imagery than with the scholastic/classical terminology. Many of his writings have lyrical passages intertwined with the great Greek myths. He is at his most fluent when he draws on his intuitive aesthetic experience. His writings are vivid with imagery. Imagery touches the secret, innermost eye. His word pictures illuminate the heady message of man's transcendence and his creation, in the image and likeness of God. In creative silence, man comes to know himself. He is inspired with a new vision of who he might become. This aesthetic experience shines from his writings. The lyricism of his works make intelligible to the reader concepts, that are very difficult, as they centre on being itself in all its manifestations. His prose and poetry awaken a response. Even if the reader does not understand the concepts behind his

167 Thomas Merton. Seeds of Contemplation, p.47.
168 Ibid., p.
writing, he is lifted above and beyond the pedestrian world of usefulness and the anonymity of 'his cog in the wheel' presence to life. Merton lifts man, as the eagle carries the robin perched on his wings, to penetrate the clouds in a wild exultation of being, lifted high above the tired, turgid, careworn footsteps of normal journeying.

2.23. The Blessings Of The Rain

George Kilcourse in *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ*, ends his book with a paragraph which is relevant to the consideration of aesthetics and aesthetic experience.

Thomas Merton borrowed from the dramatist Ionesco a quotation that provides a hermeneutical key to his own autobiography, self identity, and christology. "(A) country where art is not understood is a country of slaves and robots." Merton's own art, his poetry canon, proves indispensable in his spirituality to the discovery and liberation of the true self in Christ. The false self can ultimately be liberated only by the "ace of freedoms," the Christ of kenosis. It is this Christ we have tried to quarry from the strata of the monk's poetry and anti-poetry, his journals, his correspondence, his literary essays. He identified the artist as peculiarly aware of our spiritual crisis and therefore alert to the epiphanies of Christ in human poverty, emptiness, and the inviolable transcendental freedom of every human person. Here, in the artist's epiphanies of the true self, we experience Merton's homecoming. It is patterned on the personification of the inner self in his poetry - the transformations of a "landscape of disaster," such as he lamented in the April wreckage of his "poor traveller" - brother's death, into a haunting but welcome summons "they call you home."

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Kilcourse has caught the essence of Merton in this passage. In his reference to Ionesco, he is quoting from Merton's essay: *Rain and Rhinoceros*. In this essay, Merton indicts the modern materialistic world where eventually even the rain will have to be paid for. The rain, which makes the street alive and transparent, is considered of no account. Everything in the city is myth. "Instead of waking up and silently existing, the city people prefer a stubborn and fabricated dream." ¹⁷⁰ The rain is a problem for the men with watchchains as it cannot be controlled. They miss completely the vision of the newly washed streets. They have no realisation that "they are running in skies to catch a bus or taxi". The wondrous bounty of the rain escapes them as they are chained to their blinkered, shackled vision of their world. "They have constructed a world outside the world, against the world, a world of mechanical fictions which contemn nature and seek only to use it up, thus preventing it from renewing itself and man." ¹⁷¹

Merton enjoys the rain and rejects the world's concept that life is for having fun. For Merton, life is for living reflectively until man finally arrives at a realisation of his natural identity. Fun in the world's opinion is "a state of diffuse excitation that can be measured by the clock and 'stretched' by an appliance". (an oil lamp) ¹⁷²

The viewpoint of Philoxenos, a sixth century Syrian hermit, is a condemnation of the

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¹⁷¹ Ibid.
¹⁷² Ibid., p.12.
collective existence and canned fun which men use to enclose themselves further in the
womb of unconscious, unreflective living. He sees a time to be unborn and to be born.
Unless man emerges from the collective womb of illusion, he will never be free, he will
never know himself. In fact, he has no identity. In contrast, the man who is born,
emerging from "the enclosing womb of myth and prejudice,"\textsuperscript{173} is able to be real, able to
stand erect as befits man, able to think his own independent thoughts. This birth is
accompanied by clarity of vision in which he is able to see things as they are, not as
presented by the controlling image makers. This clarity allows him to see the world and
his neighbour as they really are. The stark reality of suffering humanity evokes mercy and
compassion. Compassion unites both the viewer and the viewed in an epiphany of
suffering, enabling the less wounded to share "the universal anguish and the inescapable
condition of mortal men."\textsuperscript{174}

In Ionesco's Rhinoceros, Berenger finds himself to be "the last human in a herd of
rhinoceros. He considers various alternatives. Should he rush out into the street to try to
stop the stampede of his fellow citizens? He rejects this as he feels he will be trampled
underfoot. To reassure himself, he looks in the mirror and searches for a photograph of
other humans. The image in the mirror does not resemble anyone else - he is alone.
Ionesco castigates individualism, where man has no concern for anyone else except for his
own needs. He condemns modern society for its conformist and totalitarian tendencies.

\textsuperscript{173} Ibid., p.15.
\textsuperscript{174} Ibid., p.16.
In reply to the charge that he should have ended the play on a positive note instead of leaving the people in a void, Ionesco says: "and that was my intention. It is the business of a free man to pull himself out of this void by his own power and not by the power of other people."  

Ionesco's rhinoceros portrays mass man, who is bound hand and foot to the concept of usefulness. He has no time for reflection and contemplation.

If one does not understand the usefulness of the useless and the uselessness of the useful, one cannot understand art. And a country where art is not understood is a country of slaves and robots. Rhinoceritis, he adds, is the sickness that lies in wait "for those who have lost the sense and the taste for solitude."

Merton, reflecting on Ionesco, stresses the need for contemplation in solitude, if man is not to be deafened and destroyed by the pounding of the collective stampede. The collective stampede can tolerate no form of difference in the herd, It eliminates what it makes no effort to understand. Thus, the solitary is vital for the survival of society. The solitary has only basic needs and is not lost in a morass of possessions that mass man and mass media try to convince him he must have. The child in the story, The Emperor's New Clothes, is the solitary with clarity of focus. Truth and beauty are both necessary for the seeker who declines to be a rhinoceros. His aesthetic experience is rooted in awareness of the goodness of man, despite the apparent rejection of the spiritual by the majority. Aesthetic awareness leads man to discover the deep down things, "the ladder which links

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175 Ibid., p.19.

176 Ibid.
heaven and Charing Cross”. He appreciates the music of the rippling creeks, the beauty of
the lone dandelion and the cacophony and harmony of nature's orchestra.

This appreciation of the aesthetic or spiritual, deepens a man's view of life and living. The
counsellor with this dimension, is better able to identify with the dreams, aspirations and
black despair of the client. "Vain imaginings" are real for the client until the mist of
incomprehensibility is lifted by the "as if" attitude, displayed by the congruent counsellor.
The practical, no nonesense school of thought which adopts a "pull yourself together"
attitude, displays a lack of sympathy and a lack of appreciation of the darkness and despair
of the drowning client, stretching out for the lifebelt of understanding and empathy.

2.24. Poetry and Contemplation

Poetry and Contemplation: a reappraisal, was published in October, 1958. The original
essay, entitled, Poetry and the Contemplative Life, was published in 1948. In the
introduction to the revised version, Merton says:

In actual fact, neither religious nor artistic contemplation should be
regarded as "things" which happen or "objects" which one can "have".
They belong to the much more mysterious realm of what one "is" - or
rather "who" is. Aesthetic intuition is not merely the act of a faculty, it is
also a heightening and intensification of our personal identity and being by
the perception of our conatural affinity with "Being" in the beauty
contemplated.177

177 Thomas Merton. "Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal" in The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton
   p.339.
Merton observes that there would seem to be an apparent conflict between contemplation as rest and poetic creation as action. This is simplistic and perhaps untrue. It poses a situation not unlike that facing the characters in *Waiting for Godot*.

In actual fact, true contemplation is inseparable from life and from the dynamism of life which includes work, creation, production, fruitfulness, and above all love.... It is the very fullness of a fully integrated life.178

Merton sees the world as full of emptiness, yet full of the most advanced technology. In this mechanical age, it is man who is spiritually empty. As nature abhors a vacuum, man searches wildly for something to fill the space. Thus, he turns to different religious cults and exotic forms of spirituality. Merton understands this frenzy and sees in it hope for the future. Man searching, is much more active and aware, than man, just passively waiting for a feared end. Man is alienated and displaced, but if there are sufficient people who are not satisfied with the status quo, materialism fails to triumph. Merton sees Boris Pasternak as an example of the victory of the freedom of mind and spirit.

He became a kind of "sign" of that honesty, integrity, sincerity which we tend to associate with the free and creative personality. He was also an embodiment of that personal warmth and generosity which we seek more and more vainly among the alienated mass- men of our too organised world. In one word, Pasternak emerged as a genuine human being, stranded in a mad world.179

178 Ibid.

179 Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions*, p.16.
Merton writes of the essential Christianity of *Dr. Zhivago* and sees him as a sign of contradiction, a challenge to the materialistic modern world. His great gift to humankind is love. Because of this, Pasternak refuses to conform to any pattern save that of the blueprint of the Creator. Threats will not tame the savage breast. Only the influence of inner music will bring man back into harmony with life. Dr. *Zhivago* is not won over by the ethical passages in the Gospels but by the fact that Christ "explains the truth in terms of everyday reality." Merton states that Pasternak sees the mission of the poet as both dynamic and contemplative. The poet, through his use of language, unites the Spirit with the dynamic and contemplative. The poet also unites the Spirit with the dynamic flow of the poet.

In the flow of new and individual intuitions, the poet utters the voice of that wonderful and mysterious world of God-manhood— it is the transfigured, spiritualized and divinized cosmos that speaks through him, and through him utters its praise of the Creator.

Pasternak sees the liberating force of love and pleads for a renewal of spiritual values, which alone will rescue man from the materialistic world. If life is meaningless, it is essential to continue to hope. It is through devotion to the 'other' that renewal will come. "The solution is love as the highest expression of man's spirituality and freedom." Man's true freedom and his creativity will be released through love. "He is a witness to the

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180 Ibid., p.25.
181 Ibid., pp.27-28.
182 Ibid., pp. 47-48.
spirituality of man, the image of God. He is the defender of everything that can be called a spiritual value, but especially in the aesthetic and religious spheres.\textsuperscript{183}

The men with watch chains are doomed to failure. They cannot tame the human spirit. The reflective contemplative nature of man is seen in his searching for meaning in life. In his quest he becomes a contemplative with an "intuitive perception of life in its source."\textsuperscript{184}

This intuitive perception is seen in art and worship where the everyday mundane things of life are endowed with transcendent meaning. Art, worship and love penetrate the depths of man and give him "the power to create a new world and a new life."\textsuperscript{185} Merton says that contemplation unites art, worship and love and plunges man's whole soul into the supernal waters, in the baptism of wordless understanding and aesthetic prayer.\textsuperscript{186}

There are different levels of contemplation- the intuitive aesthetic vision of the artist and poet, and the beauty seen in liturgical celebrations. For Merton, contemplation that does not reach to the Source of life, is not the fullness of experience. This limitation, however, does not deny the contemplative dimension of art and poetry.

The true poet is always akin to the mystic because of the "prophetic" intuition by which he sees the spiritual reality, the inner meaning of the object he contemplates, which makes that concrete reality not only a thing

\textsuperscript{183} Ibid., p. 36.


\textsuperscript{185} Ibid., p.341.

\textsuperscript{186} Ibid.
worthy of admiration in itself, but also above all makes it a sign of God.\textsuperscript{187} Merton, while acknowledging the pervasive influence of the divine, states that inspiration needs the art of skill which is the poet's natural gift. Ovid comes to mind here where he says that whenever he wrote prose it mysteriously turned into poetry.\textsuperscript{188} Poetry and art in their manifold manifestations are the music of life which lift man from the dull clay to the heavens. In this regard, the City Fathers have an obligation to make cities places of beauty by enforcing strict planning laws. They must control billboard advertising. A greenbelt of land must be accessible to everyone. The concrete, asphalt jungle in no way lifts the heart of man.

On the other hand, the dawn chorus of newly awakened birds, nesting in leafy trees, fill human hearts with wonder and delight. For some, the majestic ebb and flow of the sea brings assurance and solace that something greater than man is here. Merton sees the need for contemplatives to take their place as leaders in the world of art, letters and politics. "This means a solid integration of one's work, thought, religion and family life and recreations in one vital harmonious unity with Christ at its center."\textsuperscript{189}

\textsuperscript{187} Ibid., p.345.

\textsuperscript{188} Ovid, Tristia iv. 10. 23-26, in Introducing Ovid by Sheila Astbury and John Richmond ( Dublin: Folens & Co. Ltd., p.145.

\textsuperscript{189} Thomas Merton, The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton, p.346.
2.25. The Dignity of Aesthetic Experience

Aesthetic experience has an integral dignity. Contemplation and poetry are intimately related. Merton distinguishes between aesthetic experience and the thrill of the sense appetites aroused by art. It is an intuitive perception of the latent perfection of things....Its mode of apprehension is that of "connaturality" - it reaches out to grasp the inner reality, the vital substance of its object, by a kind of affective identification of itself with it. 190

Aesthetic intuition and experience act like a mirror of the ontological creative power of "natural contemplation, which arrives at God through the inner spiritual reality (the Logos) of the created thing." 191 Previously, Merton insisted on the artist's need of technical skill. More important is the metaphysical promptings of the Spirit in the inward self which no amount of technical expertise will summon.

The majority of people never enter into this inward self, which is the abode of silence and peace and where the diversified activities of the intellect and will are collected so to speak, into one intense and smooth and spiritualized activity which far exceeds in its fruitfulness the plodding efforts of reason working on external reality with its analyses and syllogisms. 192

The artist, true to his aesthetic intuition, will not prostitute his art by inferior or crude presentations which would negate his artistic integrity. The artist searches his heart to bring to birth works of his inner spirit. If he goes the next step and reaches out for the

190 Ibid., p.347.
191 Ibid.
192 Ibid., 348.
living water of true mystical contemplation, then his inner stirrings lead him "to pass through the centre of his own soul and lose himself in the mystery and secrecy and infinite, transcendent reality of God living and working within him." 193 This man is both a mystic and a poet. In the last analysis, this author sees this examination of the relationship of poetry and contemplation as another manifestation of the maxim, "grace builds on nature".

The reading of poetry is to be recommended to counsellors. Why? Because

art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time. The mind that responds to the intellectual and spiritual values that lie hidden in a poem, a painting, or a piece of music, discovers a spiritual vitality that lifts it above itself, takes it out of itself, and makes it present to itself on a level of being that it did not know it could ever achieve. 194

Often flashes of intuition provide the key to unlock the client from his prison of black pessimism. The creative reframing and input of the counsellor metaphorically lifts the maze and allows the clients to see, for the first time, possible exits from his dilemmas.

The integration of the mature adult would not be complete without the deepening of the aesthetic within. The way to integration is the way of poetic insight and experience. There is a quest for truth, for wholeness in meaning. The counsellor's inner spirit needs to be in harmony. He can achieve this by virtue of being still. Merton uses the example of a glass, full of stream water, where the silt drops to the bottom.

Let us not separate the aesthetic, the intellectual, the spiritual and the higher religious experiences .... Sometimes an aesthetic impulse can release

193 Ibid. p.350.
194 Thomas Merton. The New Man. p.69.
2.26. The Theology of Creativity

What is the ultimate meaning of man? It is to be human. In the breaking through the shell of the ego, the real self emerges. All change in the quality of a person's life results from a change in one's vision of reality. When man becomes whole and integrated, he has found his heart. The heart is the centre of the person where "we are not divided into intellect, will and emotion, into body and mind, but are one with ourselves." Integration for the counsellor at the deepest point of being is a goal to be strived for. No one escapes pain and hurt. It is the way the counsellor handles "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" that enables him to maintain the, "as if," relationship of counsellor to client.

An examination of Merton's *Theology of Creativity* shows that he is critical of the misuse of the word "creative." True creativity is seen in the free and spontaneous person who has something original to say and is able to say it in paint, in poetry, in music, in his house, in his work, or simply in his way of confronting life. The media, however, pervert this way of looking at life by presenting people with images of desire which are superficial. The impact of big business on art further undermines true artistic endeavour. The

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"Mycenas and Lorenzo De Medici" style patrons seem to be superseded today by sponsors who support artists not for art's sake but to increase their product market. The 'good' delights the senses as well as the intellect but the delight of the senses must never become the artist's only end. "If art seeks to please, it commits a betrayal and tells a lie."¹⁹⁷ Furthermore, when the artist acts as an instrument of the political programmers then "he merely paints pictures that make the worker happy about 'creating' the new world which will be the inevitable result of over fulfilled production quotas."¹⁹⁸ This concept of creativity does not take art seriously. Art is only a superstructure whose creativity, if any, depends on economics. Tillich and Maritain, in Merton's view, hold the solution for the true artist of the twentieth century. Tillich maintains that the artist must accept the existence of the technological world with all its anti-human tendencies "and live creatively, expressing the predicament of the most sensitive people of our time in cultural production."¹⁹⁹ The artist cannot help but depict this in his work. Picasso comes to mind in this regard. His painting, The Bombing of Guernica, with its hideous shapes and monsters, depicts the inhumanity of man to man, even his bestiality. Tillich does not use this example but it would seem to concretise Tillich's abstract theory.

Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time. The mind responds to the intellectual and spiritual values that lie hidden in a poem, a painting, or a piece of music, discovers a spiritual vitality that lifts it above itself, takes it out of itself, and makes it present to itself on a level

¹⁹⁷ Thomas Merton, "Blake" in The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton, p.65.
of being that it did not know it could ever achieve.\textsuperscript{200}

Maritain in his turn sees the contemporary artist as sometimes debasing himself by "a craving for magical knowledge and his dismissal of beauty." Shakespeare's maxim, "to thine own self be true" is applicable here. The dignity of man requires that he be a man with intellect and will, able to use both independently. He is not merely a puppet responsible to the whims of society or economics or relying on tricks and false mysteriousness. Maritain writing on Dante says:

\begin{quote}
The ego of the man has disappeared in the creative self of the poet. Theological faith itself, the most sacred belief, has entered the work through the instrumentality of creative emotion and poetic knowledge and passed through the lake of disinterestedness and of creative innocence.\textsuperscript{201}
\end{quote}

2.27. The Counsellor and The Aesthetic Experience

While the value of aesthetic experience and intuition have been seen as a key to help the clients solve their problems, it is more important to see the value of the aesthetic experience for the counsellor himself. The counsellor's inner spirit needs to be in harmony. No one can give what he does not possess. Thus the inner strengthening and expansion of the counsellor himself demands that the spiritual stirrings be fed by the experience of good

\textsuperscript{200} Thomas Merton. \textit{No Man is an Island}, p.53.

art, music and contemplation of the wonders of nature. The variety of problems presented to the counsellor requires the deepest possible response. The inner eye of intuition and awareness blossoms in the deepening of insight. The "as if" capacity of the counsellor grows with every encounter, be it real, or vicariously experienced.

If man is to recover his sanity and spiritual balance, there must be a renewal of communion between the traditional, contemplative disciplines and those of science, between the poet and the physicist, the priest and the depth psychologist, the monk and the politician.

...but one thing is certain, if the contemplative, the monk, the priest, and the poet merely forsake their vestiges of wisdom and join in the triumphant, empty-headed crowing of advertising men and engineers of opinion, then there is nothing left in store for us but total madness.²⁰²

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²⁰² Thomas Merton. Love and living. p. 79.
Chapter 3. Merton, Spiritual Direction and Counselling.

3.1. The History of Spiritual Direction

What can we gain by sailing to the moon if we are not able to cross the abyss that separates us from ourselves? This is the most important of all voyages of discovery, and without it all the rest are not only useless but disastrous.\(^{203}\)

In the early Christian community people had no need of spiritual direction as their whole ambience was Christian. The bishop explained the mysteries of faith. The parish priest and the family formed the Christian community. A new situation emerged when the hermits went off into the desert to seek Christ. Then there was need for spiritual directors.

In any event, their deliberate withdrawal from the normal life of the visible church was a very perilous spiritual adventure.... In this adventure, certain safeguards were absolutely essential and the most obvious and important of these was the training and guidance of the novice by a "spiritual father". In this case, the spiritual father replaced the bishop and presbyter as representative of Christ.... "Direction" then was God's answer to a need created in the soul by trial and compunction and communicated through a charismatic representative of the Mystical Body, the Abbas, or spiritual Father.\(^{204}\)

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Merton explains the training of a spiritual director in the early church. The disciple would learn his craft from one of the Fathers. He lived with him to learn the 'way' to God. This is paralleled in the Celtic tradition. The paroachia of Columcille reached from Lindisfarne to Kells and Durrow. The Columban houses were scattered over Europe stretching from San Malo to Switzerland and finally to Bobbio in Italy. Irish rules and Irish minuscule script were distinctive. An integral part of that rule was the *anam cara* who would have been trained in the school of Columcille or Columbanus or Finnian. Just as the daughter houses of Citeaux were an integral part of the mother-house, similarly in the Celtic tradition the teaching and practices of the "saint" held the filial houses together. Thus the *Book of Kells* is thought to have been partly written in Iona. Due to the Viking raids there, it was brought to Kells for safe keeping in the 9th century.

As time passed, the medieval monks were available to all people, whether it was to pray over a sick animal or for a good harvest or a conscience matter. The stained glass windows of the Cathedrals, sponsored by the guilds, were the picture books of the people of the Middle ages. Well could the Church say *nihil humanum mihi est alienum*. Julian of Norwich advised many people. Her sane advice reassured many that although they were experiencing hardship, they would not be overcome. The Franciscans and the Dominicans stood in the market place and in the universities. They listened, advised, taught and admonished. The silent life of the Cistercians, in their monasteries in the countryside, in contrast, reminded the people of an other-worldly reality. The monasteries served as hotel and hospital.
In the sixteenth century the Jesuits were established to teach the word of God. The missionary thrust had been previously absorbed in the Crusades. With 'the Age of Exploration' the gospel was now brought to the ends of the earth. Generation after generation, religious movements developed to meet the needs of the time. The holy man tradition is continued by Meister Eckhart, Edmund Rice, Frank Duff, Matt Talbot and Merton. Among the holy women are numbered Julian of Norwich, Nano Nagle, Edel Quinn and Mother Teresa.

This is the world of Merton, a world scarred by the horrors of two world wars, the final solution in the Holocaust, the atomic bomb, wars and rumours of war. In this context Merton sees a spiritual hunger. Spiritual hunger is, despite the noise and confusion of the 20th century, a reality. Some seek to relieve this hunger by the use of psychedelic drugs. This remedy is unsound in Merton's view, as it seeks to provide a remedy without the effort and involvement of the intellect and will of man.

3.2. The Nature of Spiritual Direction and Counselling

(Spiritual direction) is a continuous process of formation and guidance....Spiritual direction is not merely the cumulative effect of encouragements and admonitions which we all need in order to live up to our state in life. It is not mere ethical, social or psychological guidance, it is spiritual.\textsuperscript{205}

\textsuperscript{205}Ibid., pp. 13-14
Spiritual direction aims to help people make sense out of life. It provides a forum where the client can reflect on life and its meaning and find where he fits into life's mosaic. "It is not mere ethical, social or psychological guidance. It is spiritual". This definition shows the wide remit of spiritual direction. If it covers ethics, then it is concerned with the living of life in a meaningful way, taking into consideration the rights of oneself and others. The correct relationship of man with man lies at the basis of society.

Merton in referring to social or psychological guidance, is aware of the social strains of modern living. In the modern world, the very nature of life itself is questioned. Suicide, euthanasia, and abortion reflect the negative side of modern life. Equally negative are the constant attempts of the media to fashion and direct people's lives. It is necessary to stress the positive in face of this negativity - people are essentially good and other orientated. This statement makes decisions seem easy. Why then, are directors needed? Technological society is anonymous. Man appears to be insignificant. Only the armchair directors seem to enjoy the privilege of choice. In face of this, man desperately needs to find himself; to find out who he is and what is his goal.

The last section of the definition is spiritual. What does 'spiritual' mean. Is it the extension to the marketplace of the wares of the monastery? Is it observance of religious practice and church attendance? Is it the creation of a kill joy social atmosphere controlled by the church as outlined by Calvin in his Geneva church state? This age has been termed "post Christian," reflecting the dominance of the secular city. Therefore, 'spiritual' to be relevant to modern man must have some meaning outside the domain of
religious observances. The term spiritual is defined as the things pertaining to the spirit of man, his powers of loving, his powers of thinking and reasoning and his ability to transcend himself and actualise his inner potential. Merton adjudges this spiritual dimension to be a major component in the essential nature of man.

First of all the spirit means simply the highest spiritual faculty in man - the intelligence, as a principle either of speculative or of the practical understanding. In other words, the spirit is the summit of man's nature and the source from which his most personal and characteristic and elevated activities are derived.206

Merton then explains the second meaning of the word 'spirit'. He unites the mystical and the spiritual (pneumatikos).

Here the pneuma is still man's natural faculty, it is still the summit of man's nature. But that summit has been transformed. Though remaining essentially the same, it has acquired an entirely new and different modality by the fact that the Spirit of God is present within it.207

The spiritual director seeks to quicken and enliven the whole man, to penetrate the shell of the false self.

Yet we must not deal in too negative a fashion with the external (false) self. This self is not by nature evil, and the fact that it is insubstantial is not to be imputed to it as some kind of a crime.208

Like a man lowering a bucket into a well, the director draws forth water which may be muddied and unclean until it is purified. Narcissism and materialism must be drawn out of

206 Thomas Merton. The New Man. p.46
207 Ibid.
the water to allow the living water to enter every crevice in man's being.

Every person wears a mask in his dealings with others. With the confidence gained in direction, he is prepared to risk leaving aside the mask. This risk is real. Man in his nakedness is vulnerable. He needs the "courage to be." This quantum leap of trust comes only in an atmosphere of love and encouragement.

Merton states that the basic difference between spiritual direction and counselling is that "it is not mere ethical, social or psychological guidance. It is spiritual." Lest it be thought that this spiritual direction is to be applied only to the spirit, Merton sees it as embracing the whole person. There is no dualism, man is one. The same may be said of counselling. Both deal with the whole person. There is however one basic difference. Spiritual direction goes one step further. "It directs the whole person not simply as an individual human being, but as a son of God, another Christ, seeking to recover the perfect likeness to God in Christ, and by the Spirit of Christ." Counselling helps the person to become mature. Spiritual direction also desires the emergence of the mature person. Only the mature person is capable of self transcendence in the pathways of salvation. Grace builds on nature.

Merton believes that as every person is unique a director should tailor his counsel to suit every person. The authenticity of the counsellor is seen in his ability to relate to the client.

210 Ibid., p.15.
in a genuine, human fashion. If the director does not find a home, so to speak, in the mind set of the client, then the door of the self remains closed. The sessions will ultimately prove abortive. Mechanical formulae are sterile. It follows, therefore, that the relationship between director and client is of prime importance. The first thing the director must do is to establish an empathetic bond with the client. The genuineness of the relationship must become apparent.

3.3. The Necessity of Spiritual Direction

A plant comes with instructions to maximise growth. Poison bottles carry dangerous substance symbols. Young parents often complain that no instructions come with the infant, the most dependent, initially, of all living beings. Is this true? In a sense yes, but psychologists like Piaget chart the normal emotional stages of growth and physicians monitor physical development. Piaget’s stages treat of interpersonal relationships at each stage of normal maturity. (No two children in the one family develop at the same pace). Physicians monitor physical development. What remains to be examined and shaped is concerned with the very essence of the person, his spiritual, intellectual and cultural development. Hence the need for spiritual direction.

People consult the doctor when they are unwell. Companies require prospective employees to undergo a medical examination. Is spiritual direction to be availed of in the same way? Is it for crisis situations only, a type of fire brigade service or is it necessary for
full human maturation and growth? Merton sees direction as a help to achieving full maturity. This is the ideal. The dearth of spiritual directors makes the availability of ongoing direction very rare. One of his aims in writing *Spiritual Direction and Meditation* was to encourage people to become spiritual directors.

Spiritual direction is not reserved for those in the monastery. Merton believes that in a small parish, where the laity would be known to the pastor and/or confessor spiritual direction is unnecessary. He does, however, hold that in large communities and parishes, the people are not known to each other nor to their pastor. This anonymous gathering of the "people of God" is not conducive to personal direction. In these circumstances, the confessor should try to guide the person in the course of the reception of the sacrament of penance. Merton sees this as direction of a kind but considers it to be insufficient. Also, he makes it clear that this minimum is not for him true spiritual direction. "It does not go deep enough, and it does not aim at the orientation of one's whole life, with a special ascetic vocation or apostolic mission in view."\(^{211}\)

Merton considered that Catholic action workers, college students, professional men and couples preparing for marriage should have access to at least a minimum of spiritual direction. For the novice in religious life something more is needed. In the religious life, the training of the postulants, novices and scholastics is clearly set out. The duties of the novice master and the master of scholastics are delineated.

\(^{211}\) Ibid., p. 22.
Merton had first-hand knowledge of this aspect of the young religious' life. He was master of scholastics from 1951 - 1955 and master of novices from 1955 -1965. He argued, that as the novice's outward activity is so precisely regulated, there is a great need for the interior development of the novice to flourish in an atmosphere of freedom. The Rule is impersonal. Its interior acceptance and understanding is extremely personal. Strain and anxiety result if the novice is not shown the relevance and meaning of a particular exercise. In a life which is meant to result in freedom, the novice, without direction, becomes an automaton.

Freedom, according to Merton, is man's crowning glory. It involves the free exercise of mind, heart and will. A religious regime which does not result in the flowering of the free person, totally dedicated to the Word that he believes in, is an aberration, a death-bearing life. Death to self in the guise of the false narcissistic self is essential. On the other hand, people freely vowed to Christ must find their reality and integrity in Him within the human guided organisation. Otherwise the vows are shackles, more imprisoning than physical captivity. Merton terms this "a meaningless pantomime of perfection." The happiness of the religious depends on his spiritual formation. Personal spiritual direction should not stop when he makes his vows.

It is very important for all newly professed religious to enjoy, if possible, a guidance that is fairly continuous, though not necessarily frequent. What is most to be desired is the intimate direction of someone who knows and understands them, in an atmosphere of informality and trust which perhaps

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212 Ibid., p.23.
The Dalai Lama in 1968 in his talks with Merton was very interested in the concept of the Christian religious vows. He wished to know if they aimed at achieving certain levels of perfection as would be involved in the training of the religious in Buddhism. In Merton's last talk in Bangkok he posed the same question to the assembled religious. To effect the deepening and spiritual integration which the Dalai Lama saw as a natural progression of the vows, direction is needed. This progression demands the total will and free endeavour of the religious, quickened by the Holy Spirit. This is not a renunciation of freedom nor an infantile living out of the vow of obedience. Religious maturity is seen in the ability to choose life, to choose a *modus vivendi* consistent with this vocation.

The role of the abbot as Father is not intended to keep the person at a childish level of acting and reacting. Rather it is an imitation of the Father who gives freedom to His sons and daughters as the basis for their love and worship. Without freedom, all the straining and sacrifice is in vain. "I desire love not sacrifice", says the Lord. The prodigal Father is a life-giving, love-filled image. The mature religious is secure and confident in his carrying out his day to day affairs. He does not, and should not refer to authority. Faced with new challenges or a change of life-style, then it is prudent to seek guidance. It is important, however, to realise that the free person is himself responsible for his decisions and the consequences of any action, not the director.

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213 Ibid., p.24.
Merton believes that many religious leave the vowed way of life due to a lack of proper spiritual direction after the initial formation period. There is a dearth of directors while the proliferation of spiritual direction manuals indicates the thirst for counselling. There is a danger of burn-out in the over worked director.

His first duty, if he wants to be an effective director, is to see to his own interior life and take time for prayer and meditation, since he will never be able to give to others what he does not possess himself.214

This is balanced advice. Grace builds on nature. The dictum contemplata aliis tradere is common-sense, otherwise it may be a case of the blind leading the blind.

3.4. The Spiritual Director

The director is not to be regarded as a magical machine for solving cases and declaring the holy will of God beyond all hope of appeal, but a trusted friend who, in an atmosphere of sympathetic understanding helps and strengthens us in our groping efforts to correspond with the grace of the Holy Spirit who alone is the true Director in the fullest sense of the word.

It is also emphasized that, since grace builds on nature, we can best profit by spiritual direction if we are encouraged to develop our natural simplicity, sincerity and forthright spiritual honesty, in a word to "be ourselves" in the best sense of the expression.215

Spiritual direction paves the way to the discovery of the real self, the self that man is meant to be in the plan of the Creator. If the real self does not emerge then the person is

214 Ibid., p.28.
215 Ibid., pp. 5-6.
simply weaving a cocoon of unreality in a pseudo-dialogue with the director. He is merely
becoming more lost "in a maze of abstract fictions".216 The director is not a miracle-
worker. He cannot make problems disappear. The person often knows the correct path
to take but does not wish to walk that way either through fear or distaste.

In point of fact, we very often depend on someone else to solve problems
that we ought to be able to solve, not so much by our own wisdom as by
our generosity in facing the facts and obligations that represent for us the
will of God. 217

The director's role in this case is that of an enabler. To change is to grow. There is a price
to be paid for growth which is at times painful. In the natural order, Shakespeare's seven
ages of man demand adjustment and realistic acceptance. Merton believes that the
objective focus of the director may bring out facets of a situation which are obvious to
him. The client may be too close to the problem to see and judge clearly. The spiritual
director, firmly rooted both in Christ and reality, will not feed the false self who wishes to
grow in perfection with an audience of admirers. That perfection is neither healthy nor
life-giving but is rather an illusion which becomes a delusion. The true self emerges only
when the client turns outward and upward. In the search for wholeness navel gazing is
counter productive. The 'I-Thou' relationship develops only in an atmosphere of
forgetfulness of the 'I'.

"What we need to do is bring the director into contact with our real self, as best we can,
and not fear to let him see what is false in our false self." Honesty is essential for real direction. Otherwise it is at best playacting, at worst a travesty of being, evading any real contact either with ourselves or with the director. Any effort to be interesting, to have an unusual problem is an escape into fantasy. Honesty allows the client to face his problems head on. He will not seek to fight criticisms which are made in an effort to heighten his self-awareness. Self-awareness leads to transcendence, with the resulting integration into the 'Thou'. This is the transition from I and Thou to the 'I-Thou' of ultimate fulfilment.

In a word, the director is interested in our very self, in all its uniqueness, its pitiable misery and its breathtaking greatness. It is, in fact, this respect for the mystery of personality that makes a real director: this, together with common sense, the gift of prayer, patience, experience, and sympathy.

The client seeking direction must be both honest and sincere. Both good and bad aspirations are grist to the mill of spiritual direction. If the client's dreams and day-dreams are not discussed, the director will never penetrate the caverns of the inner self as he is being shown only part of the picture. A visitor is shown into the rooms that are clean and polished. The rest of the doors remain tightly shut, perhaps locked. If the director is given the 'visitor's tour' then both the director and client are at best just wasting their time in a charade of hypocrisy and deceit.

How often the director, listening to seemingly admirable religious souls, is saddened and chilled by the sense that a smug, unconscious complacency, armed with the clichés of pious authors, stands before him fully prepared to resist every advance of humility and truth. His heart is contracted by a

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218 Ibid., p.33.
219 Ibid., p.34.
kind of hopelessness, a feeling that there is no way of breaking through and setting free the real person who remains buried and imprisoned under the false front that has been acquired, unfortunately, as a result of religious malformation.\textsuperscript{220}

Merton sees as counter productive any effort to establish the degree of perfection or the interior mansion one might have reached. The important thing is to break through the layers of the false self. The focus in real prayer is God, not the self. If the client's balance has been disturbed, the wise director sees this as a moment when one must be patient. Maturity is seen in the ability to accept that one does not understand what is happening. To become neurotic in seeking a solution is a sign that the false self is in control.

The spiritual director is concerned with the whole person for spiritual life is not just the life of the mind or of the affections or of the "summit of the soul" - it is the life of the whole person\textsuperscript{221}

Merton suggests that healthy human interests are an essential corrective to the analytical client, as well as valuable in themselves. Manual labour is also health-giving. By encouraging these activities and advocating balance, common sense and a sense of humour, the director enables the clients\textsuperscript{222} "to reintegrate their whole existence, as far as possible, on a simple, natural and ordinary level on which they can be truly human....Then grace can work on them and make them fully sons of God."\textsuperscript{223}

\textsuperscript{220} Ibid., pp.39-40.

\textsuperscript{221} Ibid., p.14.

\textsuperscript{222} Merton does not use the word 'client'. He uses the words: person, layman, religious, penitent, novice. The author has used the word 'client' as it is the word most commonly used in counselling parlance.

\textsuperscript{223} Thomas Merton, \textit{Spiritual Direction and Meditation}. p.45.
All may not be serene in spiritual direction as the director may say something which awakens a secret hidden thought, there may be a flash-back to some former day when aspirations were higher. This former challenge in the 'now' is life-giving. *Nunc stans* and *nunc fluens* are both part of the eternal 'I am' in which the 'I-Thou' relationship is realised.

Merton states that the director is not a psychoanalyst. He should indeed have a basic knowledge of emotional problems and be quick to recognise their existence in his clients. His respect for the client and his consciousness of his role, require him to challenge the client in the course of direction. This challenge must be rooted in the desire to make the client mature. The balance desired in the client must be evident in the director. He should be neither too harsh nor too lenient. Reality is the yardstick. In addition,

...*(the director) should realise that psychological problems are very real and that when they exist they are beyond the range of his competency. He should not be one of those who deride psychiatry on principle and pretend that all emotional problems can be solved by ascetic means. He should know when to refer someone to a psychiatrist for proper treatment. He should not try to "cure" a neurotic by bluffing him, or jollying him along, still less by jumping on him!*224

Merton observes that direction may sometimes be calm, seemingly dull and uninteresting. The client is on an even keel. For this, let the Lord be praised. Who is to know what the client's state would have been without direction? Many might not have left the religious life if they had enjoyed the benefits of spiritual direction. His hope is that these words will

224 Ibid., pp.49-50.
encourage many to undertake the task of guiding persons to maturity, which in turn is the natural basis for the I-Thou integration in God.

Merton is critical of systems of direction. "Such spiritual direction is mechanical and it tends to frustrate the real purpose of genuine spiritual direction." He acknowledges that a modus operandi is necessary. It must be modified to suit the individual.

Merton advises the client to stay with the same spiritual director unless he has become totally uncongenial and therefore death-bearing. The decision to change one's director should not be reached lightly. Merton believes that stern directors are ineffective and even harmful.

They have standard answers which are "hard sayings" that admit of no exception and no mitigation and are always the same, no matter how the case may be altered by circumstances. Thus they take satisfaction in secretly indulging their aggressive instincts.

This is inhuman and counter-productive. The timid person in this situation is coerced into a programme of thought and action which perhaps does violence to his nature. Conversely, the headstrong and irascible person, in such a regime, may become a fanatic or reject the counsel completely, feeling he has no place in such a hostile climate. The maxim "bloom where you are planted" is good advice if a skilful director is at hand to spread the roots in the transplanted state. Otherwise the situation in the parable of the

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225 Ibid.

226 Ibid., p.19.
sower, without the last fruitful scattering, may be the outcome. In addition, this type of destructive direction leads to a breakdown of the body of Christ. These harsh directors may produce clones ostensibly obedient but brimming over with frustration and self-hate.

...the soul is to be reduced to a state of absolute, machine-like conformity with others in the same fantastic predicament. Result: a procession of robot "victim souls" moving jerkily from exercise to exercise in the spiritual life, secretly hating the whole business and praying for an early death, meanwhile "offering it up" so that the whole may not be lost.227

Merton is not condemning difficult tasks which build up the person, nor home truths for the good of the person. Sacrifices are grist to the mill of the aspiring saint provided that a harmonious relationship exists between the director and client. The young and the young at heart both rise to a challenge. With regard to autocratic directors, the seventeenth-century Benedictine mystic Dom Augustine Baker says:

The director is not to teach his own way, nor indeed any determinate way of prayer, but to instruct his disciples how they may themselves find out the way proper for them.... In a word, he is only God's usher and must lead souls in God's way and not his own.228

3.5. Spiritual Direction by Correspondence

Merton refers to direction by mail. He does not dismiss it but says it is restricted in its

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227 Ibid., p.20.
228 Ibid., pp. 20-21.
usefulness as it lacks personal contact. "The direct person to person relationship is something that cannot be adequately replaced."229 A good director can, of course, be effective by letter. He is often, due to his reputation, under pressure and therefore has not really time to write long letters. In the normal course of events, the director is not to be obeyed blindly except in the case of a scrupulous client who lacks prudence and right judgement.

Merton has stated his reservations about spiritual direction by mail and his reluctance to undertake such a task. His letters, however, are laced through with direction. He is unable to keep back the life-giving words which may help people to become their true selves. His published correspondence is contained in five volumes. There are letters in each volume which are directive in both tone and subject matter. He cannot help offering words which will lead people to maturity. In this correspondence, for the most part, only Merton's replies have been published. The style of the letter indicates the nature of the enquiry.

3.6. Spiritual Direction in Merton's Writings

He is a man so convinced of the need to communicate the truths of life that in one sense all his writings are directive. *The New Man, No Man is an Island, The Ascent to Truth, Contemplation in a World of Action, Seeds of Contemplation* (1949), (rewritten as *New Seeds of Contemplation* in 1961), and *Raids on the Unspeakable* all have a common

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229 Ibid., p.48.
thread. Their purpose is to lead men to self-knowledge. The emergence of the true self from the semi-darkness of falsehood and mediocrity will bring man face to face with the fundamental question: what is the meaning of human existence?

His philosophy of education is concerned with the evolution of the whole person. Thus in his outlining of the curriculum for the novices and scholastics he is convinced that a broad liberal education including History, Psychology, English Literature as well as Philosophy and Theology is necessary. With this knowledge, which should be continually deepened and widened, the monk is enabled to understand man in the modern world. The mission of the monk is always apostolic. Merton's overall focus is to point man, who is searching for living water, towards the stream of truth, the fount and source of integrity of being.

This view of his work shows his philosophy of life. A narrow introspective focus is totally alien to his thinking. He is grounded in reality. His correspondence has an earthiness and rootedness which makes every letter personal. His great gift, both in his books and in his letters, is his ability to communicate with others. His works are direct and simple. The breadth of his reading gives his letters a wholesome panoramic vision. He is in the monastery but, as he exclaimed on one occasion, he is fully human, no different from the rest of the human race.

Many views of the spiritual life are to him phoney as they tend to divorce body, heart and mind. This is not life-giving. The body is an essential part of man. Indeed man is more than the sum of his parts. The creation of artificial divisions causes problems. The body is man's persona to the world. If it is not afforded proper respect, it reaps tremendous
vengeance. Out of this division of body and soul comes "an unbalanced, unnatural, even inhuman existence.... I refuse to believe that the spiritual life as willed by God, is nothing better than masochism." 

This dichotomy causes such frustration that people become ill. He is therefore insistent that artificial trials should not be created to 'test' the novice. Life holds enough hardship. Again his realism is evident. There is much real suffering in the world. Artificial trials encourage the martyr-victim syndrome which is not healthy, neither does it lead to a mature rounded person. The mature person acts out of realistic self-knowledge, making himself out to be neither worse nor better than he is.

Ernesto Cardenal, one of Merton's novices from Nicaragua, writes that when he went for a spiritual direction session with Merton, he was faced with a series of probings about his home. At first he thought this very strange. On reflection, he realised that Merton was making him evaluate his position in an effort to expose the heart of his being. After he left Gethsemani he regularly corresponded with Merton. When he was informed of Merton's death he immediately penned an unsentimental poem which reflected his deep regard for Merton, the master who pointed to the 'Way, the Truth and the Life.'

When Merton first became master of scholastics he requested permission to change the

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231 Cardenal did become a priest. He got involved in politics and was appointed Minister for Culture in Nicaragua.
format of some of the classes to allow the use of the Socratic method. He encouraged the students to give presentations and arranged discussion groups.

This would minimise the danger of boys going off and cramming their heads with facts and cracking their brains with memory work and just generating a whole lot of nervous tension without any outlet or expression for what is going on inside their heads. I believe that is one of the big sources of nervous trouble in our life.  

In May, 1949, he wrote to the abbot to thank him for a day spent in solitude in the woods. This experience of withdrawal and solitude gave him back his balance and perspective. He was able to return to the monastic horarium, refreshed and calm. His wish was that his young people would also enjoy this release of tension through this same simple remedy. He suggested that the abbot build a grange in the woods where the scholastics would be renewed by spending retreat days there in seclusion. The grange was never built. His hermitage of later years was perhaps a development of the grange idea.

Merton knew that the older monks were critical of his new ideas and methods of dealing with the scholastics and novices. Despite their disapproval, he brought the young people out to work and walk in the woods as often as he could. His counselling/spiritual direction gave him an insight into the interior struggles of the idealistic scholastics. "In my opinion any tendency to strain is sufficient for rejection, unless it can be corrected in the noviciate." He then outlines the difficulties of these young people. They come into


233 Ibid. p.57.
Gethsemani unsure of themselves, with a false idea of perfection. They want to become saints overnight. They think everything depends on their efforts. In reality God is the giver of sanctity. He acts in His own time. "Their is the vice of perfectionism for "they are obsessed with their own miserable little 'perfection' and 'imperfection'."\textsuperscript{234} The result of this striving and straining is burnout unless wise restraining direction is at hand. Merton ends the letter on a positive note: "Some of them actually have a little common-sense, which makes their fervor and their spiritual idealism really something staggering at times."\textsuperscript{235}

He is concerned about the mechanisation of the monastery. He sees machinery as essential to the welfare of the monastery. His counsel is that a balance should be arrived at between a communist type collective mechanised farm and a situation without machinery where the monks are worn out by physical exertion. The former, he feels, sacrifices the good of the community to that of the common good. His fear is that work will take over and that the monastery will become work not God centred. Some machinery to run it economically must be in use nearly around the clock. This impinges on the spiritual life of the monks.

I have had a chance to verify the effect of machine work on the spiritual life of individuals. They can maintain a rather artificial and strained spirituality - a prayer of ejaculations forced through the clenched teeth of

\textsuperscript{234} Ibid., p.58.

\textsuperscript{235} Ibid.
His realism makes him comment

The monk is not of this world but he, nevertheless, is in the world, not as a museum piece but as a living and organic and functional member of the human race in which he makes present the mystery of Christ.²³⁷

3.7. Contemplari et Contemplata Aliis Tradere

He wrote to Jaime Andrade, an artist from Quito, Ecuador, in March, 1958. He wished him to make a statue of the Virgin and Child for the noviciate (He had become master of novices in 1955). Merton sees both the monk and the artist as having a prophetic vocation as "witnesses to truth, not only to intellectual truth but to mystical truth, the integral truth of life, of history, of man - of God. The Nativity of God in the world develops in the history of man."²³⁸ The statue of Our Lady he wished the novices to see is "the Virgin Mother of the Indian of the Andes, holding in her arms the Christ incarnated in the flesh and blood of the true America, and of the Indians who received us and fed us centuries ago."²³⁹ His intention is not to shock but to leave behind the art of near defunct Christian Europe with its unreal Madonnas. Rather the statue should reflect the vibrant spirit of the

²³⁶ Ibid., p.69.
²³⁷ Ibid., p.68.
²³⁸ Ibid., p.108.
²³⁹ Ibid.
new world particularly of South America.

In July of that same year he wrote again to Jaime Andrade. This time he is thinking in terms of his living as a monk in Ecuador. He thinks that the contemplative monk does not need to have a specific apostolate. His should be a mission of witness, a witness to the spiritual dimension in the world. He would pray, read, do manual labour and converse with God and with intellectuals, artists and politicians. In fact he would be a friend to all "interested in spiritual things be it art or prayer." He would in all things be a man of God. The apostolate, he thinks, is actually a barrier. This barrier is saying that "I, the missionary, have no need of you, but you have need of me." This is true in so far as the priest has the sacraments. In all other respects

he is a man like every other and it is good that he realise it. Also we are all alike struggling for truth in the world, and possession of spiritual formulas still does not enable one to see especially clearly in the darkness of the political and intellectual chaos.\textsuperscript{240}

This concept of mission shows how far-seeing Merton was. He wrote this letter in 1958. Vatican Two stressed respect for all cultures and the need to incorporate into worship local traditions, music and dancing. Some religious sent out to Iran and India after Vatican Two found that Pope John XXIII's idea of finding what unites rather than what divides in religious traditions, was the only road to ecumenism. Merton, in his study of Zen and Buddhism, firmly believed that the search for the Absolute is universal. In his talk

\textsuperscript{240} Ibid., p. 111.
in Calcutta, in October 1968, to the members of the Temple of Understanding he ends with this observation:

The deepest level of communication is not communication but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words, and it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity. My dear Brothers, we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are.

This is the spirit in which he wrote to Jaime Andrade, the spirit that he tried to impart to the monks of Gethsemani; above all he wished for respect for every creature, for everything as a part of Being.

Father Mark Weidner O.C.S.O., novice master at Our Lady of Guadeloupe, the Cistercian Abbey in Oregon, requested some advice about the programme of studies for the novices. From his reply (1959), Merton's views on education can be seen in his selection of reading matter for the novice master. It is very catholic in the generic sense of the word. He includes the monastic classics, works by Don Jean Leclercq, some conferences on obedience, poverty, chastity, common life and other problems of the religious life issued by the French Dominicans and some Carmelite studies published in English by Sheed and Ward. The Cistercian Fathers are essential reading also Cassian, the Desert Fathers, Scheeben and Vonier and some medieval texts, also Conrad Pepler. He adds:

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241 These were leaders of the different religious groups in Asia, sponsored by American businessmen in the interest of world unity and peace.

I suggest that for background you should be somewhat acquainted with such odd and disparate subjects as Gandhi (very important, I think), Dorothy Day, psychoanalysis (Karen Horney is a useful author for us), liturgical art, and the spirituality of the Oriental Church (Fedotor's *Treasury of Russian Spirituality* is fine).\textsuperscript{243}

### 3.8. Merton: Director of Scholastics and Novice Master

Merton struggled with the problem of how to help young religious settle into Religious Life. He believed it must be life-giving. If this was not the novice's experience, he should either depart or be sent away before his spirit was broken. Merton questioned the procedure for admitting candidates to the monastery. This, coupled with his natural curiosity, made him read some of the works of the psychoanalysts. His correspondence with Erich Fromm shows his desire to become conversant with psychological literature. His position as Master of Scholastics (1951-1955) and Master of Novices (1955-1965), led him to explore psychology further. He wished to be able to give the Rorschach test himself. His belief was that if the candidates who presented themselves at Gethsemani were properly screened, much subsequent heart-break would be avoided.

Merton had a deep interest in psychoanalysis. The writings of Freud, Karen Horney and later the Persian analyst, Arasteh, were of great value in helping him understand man,

\textsuperscript{243} Ibid., p. 119

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both general and particular. The logotherapy of Victor Frankl seemed very spiritual to Merton in its outlook. Merton explored any avenue which would help him carry out his duties better to the people under his care. It must be said that Merton's insatiable thirst for knowledge led him to study works which other spiritual directors would shun as totally irrelevant or even harmful in spiritual direction. He makes no secret of the sources he uses in his preparation for spiritual direction. This is shown clearly in his letter to Dom Mark Weidner O.C.S.O.

Mark Van Doren was the professor of English at Columbia College, New York. In 1939, he was awarded the Pulitzer prize for poetry. Merton and Van Doren became close friends. Their correspondence spanned the period 1939 - November 1968 when Merton wrote his last letter to Van Doren from Darjeeling, India. Van Doren wrote the introduction to Merton's poetry, Selected Poems, (1967). Merton wrote to him about life in Gethsemani: "...The life is a real unity, because the foundation of its unity is God's unity: the ontological basis of our life is the simplicity and the purity of God." Just before his ordination to the priesthood in 1949 Merton wrote "it is making me what I was always meant to be and I am about to exist." In 1953 he wrote Van Doren that he was using Paul Hindemith's record of the Four Temperaments in Spiritual Direction: "I play it to them and get them to figure out what temperament they are." Later Van Doren

245 Ibid., p.23.
246 Ibid., p.25.
commented that Merton had not changed much. Merton replied "Why should I? Here our
duty is to be more ourselves, not less."\textsuperscript{247}

In July, 1956, Merton wrote to Van Doren from St. John's Abbey, Collegeville,
Minnesota. He and Dom John Eudes Bamberger were attending a conference on
psychiatry for Religious. Abbot Dom James Fox also attended part of the conference.
Merton wrote:

You have no idea how good and how right the approach has so far been. Far from trying to teach us jargon, they have not hesitated to purge those of us who brought a little with us. They have been sternly opposed to tendencies to diagnose and pry, to 'peep and analyse' on the grave of a human value. They have made us want not to have technical means of manipulating people. On the contrary they have kept up a magnificent emphasis on human values, on getting into real contact with a person who is in trouble and needs your help and on really giving him the help he needs instead of something he does not need from you.\textsuperscript{248}

The psychiatrist, Dr. Gregory Zilboorg, was the chief lecturer at the conference. Merton had written an article entitled "\textit{The Neurotic Personality in the Monastic Life.}" His agent, Naomi Burton Stone, asked him could Bob (Giroux) show it to Zilboorg before publication. Merton agreed. At the conference there was a confrontation between Zilboorg and Merton.\textsuperscript{249} This occasioned Merton's letter to Naomi from St. John's. He begins the letter by saying "Zilboorg was terrific". He continues with some of the content in Van Doren's letter. Then he writes:

\textsuperscript{247} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{248} Ibid., pp. 29-30.

\textsuperscript{249} For details of this encounter see Chapter One, p. 19.
As for my own personal problems - clearly Zilboorg is the just one who has really shown conclusively that he knows exactly what is cooking....okay. I will never give anyone any trouble about vocation or stability again....Finally Zilboorg is absolutely against publishing *The Neurotic Personality*.... He says it is sheer trash and can do nothing but harm and I shouldn't even revise it. I should put it on the shelf and get busy really learning something about the subject.250

Zilboorg's comments gave Merton much food for thought. As a result, he visited the psychiatrist Dr. J. Wygal in Louisville, to be reassured as to his soundness of mind.

The paper was published posthumously in *The Merton Annual* Vol. 4, 1992, edited by Brother Patrick Hart O.C.S.O. who prefaced it with a short introduction. He writes "Since Merton did not list this manuscript among those which should not be published, but had in fact revised it considerably, we felt that the time had come for this document to see the light of day."251 This paper provides a counterpoint to Merton's *Spiritual Direction and Meditation*. The latter is positive in dealing with the subject of spiritual direction. This paper, on the other hand, treats of the negative, outlining the weaknesses manifested by the novices and monks in the monastery.

3.9. The Neurotic Personality in the Monastic Life

Merton was a Christian humanist. He wished to penetrate the human mind in order to tailor his message better to his readers as well as to his students. His writings are directive


in nature, each with an apostolic thrust. Therefore it was logical that Merton should try to develop some model for screening the young people who wished to enter Gethsemani. He was writing in the post-war years when idealistic youth were joining Catholic Action, the Communist Party and the infant Civil Rights Movement. The colour question would be explosive by the end of the 1950's. The Korean war ended in 1953. The conflict in Vietnam, which was to arouse such opposition in America, was in the future. This is the social climate of *The Neurotic Personality in the Monastic Life*. 

It is a matter of experience that many of the problems that most deeply affect souls in the cloister are psychological rather than ascetic. Since an increasing number of religious are more or less affected with neurotic anxiety without being subject to a serious neurosis, it is important to realise what the neurotic character is, know how to recognize it, as well as how to help this character in the solution of problems.  

Merton states that the whole community will suffer if an unbalanced character is not helped. "There is also a danger of a seriously neurotic person eventually becoming psychotic." These people should not be allowed to remain in the monastery. The symptoms they exhibit are hysterical episodes, deep-seated obsessive compulsive neurosis and hypochondria which manifests itself through extreme fatigue which is a form of neurasthenia. Any sign of schizophrenia, paranoid delusions or persecution obsessions is sufficient reason to ask a subject to leave the religious life. The neurotic depressive is not to be judged as seriously. Life for him however, in the monastery will be very difficult.

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253 Ibid.
"particularly in the contemplative life where the suppressed hostility, which is the root of the trouble, will be aggravated by the lack of normal communication with others."\(^{254}\)

Some people manifest neurotic immaturity which shows in dependency. This may flatter superiors but it is unhealthy. This emotional dependence should be discouraged. The neurotic person is always to be treated "as a suffering member of Christ and not treated with indifference, patronage or contempt."\(^{255}\) He should not be made feel guilty or a freak. Merton draws a distinction between the neurotic person who should not be kept in the monastery and the person who will settle down with the help of a psychiatrist. Often the problem is that these religious strive for perfection in an unhealthy way which increases their frustration.

While both psychiatry and asceticism aim at the maturing and perfection of the human soul, they do so in different ways and indeed in different spheres. For although in a sense they face basically the same problem which we may call the problem of inordinate self-love, they face it on entirely different levels.... The aim of asceticism is to enable a man to grow in his supernatural and spiritual likeness to Christ. In other words, it aims to develop a man's personality in view of his supernatural end.... The aim of psychiatry is less exalted.... It looks solely at the normal, natural maturity of the human soul. Psychiatry aims to make a man function normally and smoothly as a human being. It seeks to liberate him from emotional and mental dysfunctions .... to the point where he can get along without being a neurotic. For the neurotic is "attached" to his wrong attitudes.... Asceticism cannot detach him from these wrong attitudes but psychiatry can. Psychiatry teaches the soul to solve the ordinary emotional problems of life on a mature rather than on an infantile level.\(^{256}\)

\(^{254}\) Ibid.

\(^{255}\) Ibid., p. 6.

\(^{256}\) Ibid. p. 7.
In fact it is a case of grace building on nature. Asceticism can make a mature person spiritual but it does not work in reverse. In reality, the ascetic exercises tend to make the neurotic more dependent. This dependence is not healthy nor is it straightforward. Often he misrepresents the directions of the superior with unhealthy and abnormal consequences. When he finds himself in the wrong, he cannot understand why. Injured "martyrdom" results. He is influenced by every passing fancy and this perpetual motion causes great inner turmoil. If the person in need of psychiatric help is not helped before setting out on the road of asceticism, the strain will prove disastrous as he has not the inner mechanism to tackle the challenge. Breakdown results.

The director who lacks understanding of the natural progression from healthy maturity to sanctity may urge the person to pull himself together and not to give in - in fact all he need do is use his willpower. Here the director is calling on will power to remedy the situation when in fact the source of the trouble is precisely his will or rather his lack of will-power. A mature person, when he is corrected by a superior will take it in his stride, and try not to repeat the fault. The immature and infantile see the superior's frown perhaps as the wrath of God and further dissolves into self-pity.

For the integrated person the monastic horarium of prayer, work and study provide sufficient outlets. The immature person, is dominated in his relationships by the emotions of fear and love. He fears to be excluded from the group, therefore he conforms. Similarly, he conforms lest he lose the love and respect of the group. " In other words, the basic emotional conflict of modern man seems to center on his sense of his own worth
as a person and as a member of society and on his ability to harmonize his life with that of others. Fromm calls this the solidarity of the "mass society".

Merton feels some neurotic types join religious life as a refuge from reality. They think that in the monastery, they will be afforded a measure of respect by others. They enjoy conformity as it saves them the exertion of thinking. Conformity is everything. Therefore, if anyone steps out of line or questions the status quo, they immediately rally to the defence of authority and tradition. They become quite angry depending on the make up of the opposition. If it is too strong, they withdraw into themselves in deep depression. Change is not to be tolerated. Change makes them fearful and unsure. Their only refuge, in the case of unavoidable change, is the fact that it is laid down as obedience, and that everyone is included in the change. Thus a new conformity replaces the old. This is a precarious existence as their peace of mind has no inner source. Everything is conditioned by the behaviour and attitude of the other. Eichmann's camps might have suited them. The difference is that Eichmann was sane, assured and rational. Their inner light is unreasoned and easily dimmed. It would be much easier to convert them to a new way of thinking than Eichmann.

3.10. Horney's "Idealized" Image

Karen Horney analysed the ways in which a person responds to society. He can move towards others, or away from them or be antagonistic towards them. To the extent that

\[ \text{\textsuperscript{257}} \text{Ibid., p.11.} \]
these movements are flexible and spontaneous, the person is free. When they are inflexible and rigid he has become entrapped. When this happens, Horney uses the "idealized" image to describe the person's mindset and subsequent behaviour. The "idealized" is unreal. The person feels useless. Yet he has a picture of himself as capable of greatness if people would only allow him to act. As the reality is so different, he feels guilty and angry at being a failure in his own eyes. The guilt further clouds his thinking. The skilled counsellor's task is to reach below the anger, fear, frustration and guilt.

Merton develops the "idealized image" of Karen Horney. Everyone has an idealized image of themselves which is somewhat unreal. Depending on the degree of anxiety, the idealized image becomes closer or nearer to reality. The mature balanced person is able to distinguish between fact and fantasy. The child sees everything as an extension of himself. He is the centre around which the world revolves. As he grows older the unreality of this scenario becomes clear to him. The neurotic, in contrast to the balanced mature person, still in his mind places himself at the centre of the universe. Thoughts of his power in his imaginary world give him strength to act out the charade of maturity in a socially acceptable way.

This playacting has serious repercussions. His world becomes full of "shoulds". He should be saint. He should be able to pray all night. He should be universally loved. The fact, that he is unable to carry out these tasks, is a source of great anxiety. His refuge is to blame others for his failure to perform these great deeds. His superiors, the Order, everyone in his judgement, are all wrong. Self-will keeps him buoyed up in the struggle.
It provides the violence and force with which he represses his anxiety and hides the truth, but it is also the chief source of the anxiety and emotional tension. The more self-will resists the truth, the more the reality of man's nature protests against it. And this is the cause of most of the nervous tension in the monastic life. St. Bernard said: 'put an end to self-will and you put an end to Hell'\textsuperscript{258}

Merton agrees with Otto Rank who opposed Freud by saying that the real trouble is not that the will is too strong, in reality it is too weak. This weakness leads him to do wrong and still be able to feel the injured party blamed in the wrong. The degree of culpability is lessened in the case of the neurotic. "Like the infant, he wants to continue to substitute emotion for will and desire for judgement."\textsuperscript{259} If he appears rebellious and self-willed, in reality he is seeking attention. This attention is rightly afforded to the babe in arms but not appropriate for the adult. The superior's punishments in a perverse way, bring him happiness as he has departed so far from reality that he has no will to break. Again he resorts to the realm of fantasy, thinking himself a wronged person and a saint canonised, before death, in his imagination. The only remedy is to help him to distinguish fact from fantasy. To get him to recognise his false self as false is a major operation, as he has considered this self his real self for so long. He is in need of constant direction and a superior or director with the patience of Job. "The director is usually indispensable - for he alone can see to remove the obstacles which hinder the works of \textit{gratis sanans}."\textsuperscript{260}

\textsuperscript{258} Ibid., p. 16.
\textsuperscript{259} Ibid., p. 17.
\textsuperscript{260} Ibid., p. 18.
Merton explores, finally, the notion of transference. The neurotic transfers to the superior the attachment or abhorrence which he felt towards an authority figure in the past. The transference is not one way only. The superior, as he becomes involved with the neurotic, unconsciously develops counter-transference. It is here that the trained psychologist or psychiatrist must intervene if damage is to be avoided. With understanding, many of the neurotic's fears can be allayed and his balance restored. St. Benedict regarded the abbot as the Father of the community. The Father, in his teaching, needed to be patient, kind and understanding towards all the people in the monastery under his charge. Merton draws out one further possible incidence of transference - the transference to God of the attributes of the human father. Merton concludes by praising the intuition of the monastic fathers who foreshadowed psychiatry by many centuries.

Nevertheless, the clear scientific findings of our time can offer us considerable help in solving the problems of the eccentric, immature or hypersensitive religious, provided we have the humility to remember that no one man is expected to solve all problems - even his own.261

3.11. Merton and Fromm

Merton started to correspond with Erich Fromm in October 1954. In Fromm's books, Merton finds much that is Christian, for Christianity is fundamentally humanistic. The purpose of Christianity is to lead man to maturity and to find his true self in Christ.

261 Ibid., p.19.
Merton says that due to his reading of Fromm and the writings of Karen Horney, he finds much common ground between the roles of the psychoanalyst and the Catholic priest. Governments throughout the world, it seems to Merton, are disregarding man's basic freedom and dignity. In this atmosphere it is important that people who try to foster genuine human solidarity should support each other even if there are doctrinal differences.

What is at stake is the very notion of man as man.

The more conscious (the spirit of man) becomes of His reality and of His "otherness" the more also it becomes conscious of the union and "sameness" which unite Him to itself, and this is the great paradox without which mysticism would become schizophrenia, splitting man's whole personality and destroying him, instead of unifying and integrating and perfecting him in the highest degree. When we speak of "life in Christ" (Gal. 2:20) we are speaking not of self-alienation but of our discovery of our true selves in Christ.262

Merton in a letter to Fromm refers to his own work as a spiritual director:

I fully realize the wisdom of what you have to say about types of conscience and modes of conscience formation and malformation. You can well realize that I run into all kinds of difficulties and problems, precisely where an 'authoritarian' conscience is allowed to have its way. It is pitiable to see the harm that can be done in potentially fine monks by the pettiness and formalism they can get into as a result of making their whole life depend on the approval of another.263

St. Benedict stresses obedience and humility. Merton, while accepting his spiritual Father's Rule, also draws on the writings of the Early Fathers of the Church who help him


to interpret St. Benedict. Obedience for obedience sake is both arid and crippling. St. Benedict's Rule most certainly is a basis for genuine freedom, fully respecting the spiritual humanism of modern man. The novice needs to be told what to do as he is totally unfamiliar with the mores of religious life. This strict training should lead to an interiorization of the Rule and practices. Their free acceptance is the only ground for religious profession. The mature monk is self-motivated, freely choosing his way of life. His should be a service of joy. His mission is to pray, work and study. If he becomes more united with his Creator, the more able he will be to help his brothers and sisters who have not got the luxury of seemingly 'endless' free time. He acknowledges that Fromm is writing of obedience in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Merton disagrees with Fromm when the latter says that mystical religions are indifferent to the objective existence of God. "The majority of true mystics stand or fall with the existence or non-existence of God."  

Fromm joined with 'the Committee of Reason' to have a statement published in the New York Times stating their abhorrence of war. He wrote to Merton asking him to sign the statement. Merton was totally against war. He felt that the concept of the 'Just War' was not tenable to-day when the weapons of destruction made wastelands of people's homes. Nuclear war can never be just. "What we are about to do is 'destroy' God over again in His Image, the human race." Abstract reasoning enables people to transcend human

\[^{264}\text{Ibid.}\]

\[^{265}\text{Ibid., p. 311.}\]
implications. "We have been trying for so long to turn ourselves into machines that we have finally succeeded. The logical consequence is to destroy everything."²⁶⁶ Merton declined to sign as it would have been understood that he was signing on behalf of his monastery. In addition, he did not see the newspapers nor listen to the radio. He recommended Fromm to write to Jacques Maritain.

Merton's next letter to Fromm focused on Fromm's *The Sane Society* in which he analyses the position of man in modern society. Fromm makes the point that in this anonymous society the psychiatrist is co-operating with the bosses to control their workers. "I certainly agree with you that we ought to scrap the notion that mental help is merely a matter of adjustment to the existing society - to be adjusted to a society that is insane is not to be healthy."²⁶⁷ Merton reiterates this in his discussion of Eichman. Merton is troubled by the current "return to God". He sees it as false, superficial and irreverent, like the biblical golden calf. He challenges Fromm on his statement that "the original idea of Christ was an adoptionist one."²⁶⁸ Merton points out that the Fathers of the Church were insistent that Christ was truly God and truly man. "All our ideas about the dignity of man, all our 'humanism' flows from the right understanding of the mystery of the Incarnation and of the recapitulation of all in Christ."²⁶⁹ Merton adds that Pope Pius X11 was strongly

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ Ibid., p.313.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., p.314.
in favour of psychiatry, recommending the reading of the sapiential books of the bible to
discover the biblical psychology of man. In this regard, The Book of Ecclesiastes is the key
book in Merton's view.

In a later letter, Merton says that many of the issues dealt with in his book Disputed
Questions reflect their dialogue. He bemoans American naiveté over Cuba. This "serves
as a cloak for so much injustice. Unfortunately it hides us only from ourselves and not
from the rest of the world." 270

In September 1961, Merton writes to Fromm about Freud and Marx, saying that Marx'
view of man's alienation needs an injection of personalist philosophy. In America,
however, this personalist philosophy has resulted "in our reliance on the big hypostasis of
nature which is the anonymous crowd." 271

Merton sent Fromm a copy of his Open letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra concerning
Giants. In it, Merton denounced both the Soviet Union and the United States, whom he
labelled Gog and Magog. "Gog is a lover of power, Magog is absorbed in the cult of
money: their idols differ, and indeed their faces seem to be dead set against one another,
but their madness is the same." 272

270 Ibid., p.315.

271 Ibid.

272 Thomas Merton. "A Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra concerning Giants" in Blackfriars February
In 1962, Fromm wrote *The Psychological Causes of War*. He asked Merton to review it. In his review Merton starts with a statement endorsing man's dignity and his destiny. Man is a self transcending being. As long as he acts only as a member of the human species he is in danger of spiritual alienation. His freedom is measured by his development as a "spiritual person with all the perfection and autonomy implied by that concept."273 Man to-day is bombarded by the media whose message is that total happiness is within his grasp.

Current popular religion does not touch reality. It is frothy and emotional. Its jingles are "every bit as hollow and as false as those of soap salesmen, and far more dangerously deceptive, because one cannot so easily verify the claims made about the product."274 Religion has lost its strength as it has lost its prophetic voice. Man has developed the means to eliminate misery and poverty. Matter has been subjected to man. Merton contends that man was true to his inner spirit when he had to struggle against a hostile nature. The tragedy is that man may seem to have conquered matter but "we have also yielded ourselves to it, so that we no longer expect life and joy from our own spiritual 'center' but from things outside us and alien to us."275

The affluent society is like a boomerang. It stuns man's spiritual searching with a surfeit

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274 Ibid., pp. 116-7.

275 Ibid., p.115.
of material goods. There is a "complacent and beatific sort of counselling that aims only to remove 'guilt feelings' and adjust the empirical self to a society of which Fromm has, here and elsewhere, questioned the basic sanity." Merton asserts that no more powerful weapon has been found to control man than sedatives and stimulants. With the help of psychology, wrongly applied, the thinker, the searcher is labelled insane. Merton strongly asserts that the assuaging of guilt feelings is false and a source of illusion and delusion. With so much suffering in this world of the 'Cold War', man should feel guilt. He should shed his inward infantile self-preoccupation and recover the basic human values consistent with his dignity. A brief return from his ostrich like stance will re-kindle his inner fire whose heat will reach out to the suffering people of the world. "The delusions of a fat society glutted with the profits begotten by its own death-wish hardly dispose us to respond to the Creator Spiritus, the Cantor Sapientissimus, without a fundamental re-orientation of our thought and life." This review is concerned indirectly with counselling, as it both faces the symptom and proposes the remedy. Merton is saying that the holistic re-integration of man is the only solution to the human crisis. To effect this he sees the need for a "spiritual upheaval such as we seldom see recorded in history." This black pessimism is lightened only if man realises he is not alone but a searcher among many. Search he must, as the divine

276 Ibid., p.113.
277 Ibid., p.118.
278 Ibid.
dissatisfaction is rooted in the ground of his being. This is one of Merton's basic themes.

3.12. Anxiety

Merton defines anxiety as "the psychological tension produced by undischarged emotional energy - that is to say by emotional energy which remains pent up beyond the point at which it should normally and naturally be discharged." He distinguishes between felt anxiety which is like a disturbing atmosphere and conscious anxiety which is attached to definite circumstances or actions which cause a reaction in the body of "sweating, trembling, dryness of mouth." Sometimes people do not know they are suffering from anxiety. Then the anxiety surfaces as stomach ulcers, colitis, palpitations, tightening of the chest and other psychosomatic sicknesses. If these illnesses do not occur the person affected takes refuge in sharing the anxiety. Thus discontent is spread through the community. The superior, it is asserted, is not following the Rule as he should. This laxity is, in this critic's mind, deplorable. Nothing is right. He has the satisfaction of playing Cassandra's part as a prophet of doom. When things do go wrong, he prides himself that he was the only one to read the signs of the time correctly. Without this "consolation" a breakdown seems inevitable as his motives are unconscious even to himself. Merton sees unfelt anxiety breaking through the carefully erected defences. He agrees with Freud that a

280 Ibid., p.9
person whose sexuality is repressed or immature will suffer from nervous disorders in the monastery. The whole person must be integrated soul, heart, mind and body. Otherwise the resulting tension will be explosive.

Merton says that anxiety is universal. If a person were not to experience anxiety in these war-torn days, something would be amiss. Anxiety must be examined and faced. One anxiety stemming from the maladjusted person is "the basic evil which is sin." At all times the anxiety must be occasioned by reality and the anxiety level should be in proportion to the actual feared danger. If a person experiences extreme anxiety as the result of a minor incident, then that is indeed neurotic anxiety. A second manifestation of neurotic anxiety is the constant washing of hands, checking doors and the minute carrying out of ritual observances. This person is being eaten away by scruples. Reality has no place in his self-created world. Thirdly the neurotic cannot be himself but adopts a persona in order to be accepted. Finally neurotic anxiety leads to the creation of a false self. The person lives in his own shell, a shell which protects him from the rest of the world. He is unreal in his outward display. The effort to maintain the 'persona' in turn causes neurotic anxiety. In the end, he has lost all sense of himself. Thus he feels slighted if passed over for appointments and reacts with a "Uriah Heep" style display of false humility. He is, in Merton's example, a singer who refuses to sing in the choir as, by right, his should be the solo part. These feelings are unconscious. A person who has insight to penetrate the shell finds guilt, resentment and fear.

Anxiety is both positive and negative. Dr. Reza Arasteh, a Persian psychoanalyst,
distinguishes between neurotic and existential anxiety. The former is a commitment to
defeat, the latter is a healthy pain which generates energy to unblock the inner channels in
man. It gives strength to disregard prejudice and convention. In fact, this energy enables
man to find his true identity. Merton, citing Dr. Arasteh, says that "birth on this higher
level is an imperative necessity for man." It is one path to final integration.

3.13. Final Integration

Merton in his study of the human condition draws on many sources These include the
writings of Erich Fromm, Victor Frankl and Dr. Reza Arasteh. The search for integration
is rooted in the very ground of man's being. There is a thirst for transcendence. Some seek
that state through drugs. Drugs create illusionary moments, essentially transitory as they
do not effect any interior deepening. Arasteh writes that today the search for final
psychological integration is "becoming a need and aspiration of mankind as a whole".

People enter the monastery to attain the state of final integration. In the monastery, there
is, of necessity, an accommodation with the world, for the monk although apart, is in the
world. This twentieth century world is beset by problems which make men saints or
beasts subject to nothing other than their will to power. The idea of re-birth is

\[^{281}\] Ibid.

fundamental to Christian theology and practice. This is the true meaning of the sacrament of baptism. This concept of "re-birth" is to be found in many Eastern religions. Zen expresses it as becoming "your original face before you were born." What is involved is not a cure of neurosis by helping a man adapt to society, but to reach inner maturity.

The infant is absorbed with self-centred narcissism. The mature adult is other centred, achieving his inner completion only in union with others, finding the apex of being in the Absolute. The result is cosmic and universal man whose empirical ego is totally under control. This stage of integration is only achieved after years of struggle. Man advances from subjection to his senses to subjection to reason. He matures socially, conforming to the social mores of society. Eventually this state is not life-giving. Something further is needed. He comes to realise that he is distinct from his environment, as he is from others in society. Arasteh says that once he has arrived at the concept of 'not-I' and the universality of man, he enters the stage of alienation. "This existential alienation is the dawn of rebirth in final integration in the adult personality."284

In final integration man realises his connectedness with matter and with his fellowmen. Conversely he realises he is alone. Death is the great teacher of the reality of this loneliness. In solitude integrated man reaches existential awareness. He becomes a void ready to receive the gifts of the Spirit. The adult personality in final integration has

283 Ibid., p.221.
endured suffering. Then he finds his real identity. Frankl says the truth is that

love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought have to impart. The salvation of man is through love and in love.285

Merton the spiritual guide and counsellor is optimistic. Man will achieve final integration with the help of the Spirit, through grace building on nature. In direction, Merton gently guides the client to seek self control, to look and work for a solution to the problems of life. Suffering is the common lot of man. Man can either be Job or Jonah. " For the Christian a trans-cultural integration is eschatological. The rebirth of man....is a rebirth into the transformed and redeemed time, the time of the kingdom, the time of the Spirit, the time of 'the end'."286

Man is made in the image of God. That is to say he is made to be united to God and to his fellow-man in the sharing of a common vision of God's truth. This is his true destiny, and in this alone can he be truly happy....Our salvation is a corporate work: we learn the truth from one another....But for this corporate work of our salvation to take place, we depend on the use of a divinely given instrument: language.287

Merton spent his life using language, both spoken and written. His writings are a quest to find true freedom and one's true identity. The practice of departmentalising man's life into watertight sections has resulted in fragmentation. There is a great need to see man as a

whole or rather for man to see himself as a whole, to see himself as an 'I'. Often the person is not articulating his own views but a socially acceptable collective version of things. "This is to say, you reach out for what you have been made to want."288

The real 'I' is a very shy creature and very different to the exterior self which manipulates objects in order to take possession of them. The inner self does not want control or power. "He seeks only to be, and to move (for he is dynamic) according to the secret laws of Being itself, and according to the promptings of a Superior Freedom (that is, of God) rather than to plan and to achieve according to his own desires.289 The exterior self is devious and does not surrender his position easily.

He fabricates a contemplative identity covering himself with a protective covering to hid his inner nakedness. It is only when the 'I' accepts this stark inner nakedness that the interior 'I' can emerge. When the exterior and the interior 'I' merge then the real 'I' is present. An awareness of the person one really is meant to be emerges and this awareness is not so much something that we ourselves have, as something that we are. It is a new and indefinable quality of our living being.290

The divinely given instrument 'language' must serve the interests of truth. Man is led astray by fictions. Society and the media combine in conditioning the individual to renounce his highest dignity and become a puppet-robot. Misfortune leaves man insecure. Inner stirrings disturb in spite of the panaceas produced by society. Then the search for


289 Ibid. p.296-7.

290 Ibid. p. 298.
One thing I do know, is that anyone who is interested in God who is Truth, has to break out of the ready-made shells of the 'captive' positions that offer them convenient escapes from freedom.  

The truth brings freedom. Man, the stargazer, now moonwalker, can stand erect in growing self-knowledge. He is both a realist and a lover of truth.

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Chapter 4. Spiritual Direction by Correspondence

4.1. Merton's Letters


Merton was a master letter writer. Evelyn Waugh, who edited *The Seven Storey Mountain* as *Elected Silence* for the English market, advised Merton to concentrate on writing letters. He felt that Merton had a special gift in this genre. Peter Kountz in his book, *Thomas Merton as Writer and Monk, A Cultural Study*, says:

Merton needed to write every day, and I suspect he was shrewd enough to realize that those to whom he wrote would keep his letters. He was also, by virtue of his monastic vocation, compelled to connect with people
by mail. It must also be said, however, that Thomas Merton was one of those beings who was most comfortable psychologically with intimacy by mail. Such a method is safe and, as John Howard Griffin put it, allowed Merton to "keep the back door always open." Nevertheless, these letters exhibit the breadth of Merton's interests and knowledge, his generosity with the written word for even the first-time correspondent, the constancy of his authenticity of word and spirit, and the variety of those individuals with whom he corresponded.

There are numerous descriptions of Merton carrying his letters to the hermitage in a suitcase. The secret of Merton's success as a correspondent was his ability to speak to every person as if he/she were present. His focus was so keen that in the very act of writing he spoke directly to the correspondent in a language that was suited to every person. Canon A. M. Allchin, who visited Merton several times, remarked on this priceless, personal quality in Merton.

The selection of letters which are examined in this chapter reflects this remarkable ability of "being all things to all people." Contrast the simplicity and directness of approach in Merton's letters to Sister Anita and the use of classical terminology and Greek terms in the correspondence with the Anglican theologian, Etta Gillick. The author has found no other letters in the five volumes which contain the type of language used to Etta. Merton's deep personal respect shines through the letters to Linda Parsons Sabbath. As the

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correspondence lengthens and deepens, the topics discussed become more intimate and personal. Through the gradual building up of trust, Merton ventures to suggest that Linda is straining for the extraordinary. For Merton, the ordinary, done extraordinarily well (which was the motto of St. Therese of Lisieux, a saint who filled Merton with enthusiasm) was always to be preferred. The letters to John Harris continued as long as Merton felt he needed support.

Merton's letters to Jacques Maritain or those to the feminist theologian, Rosemary Radford Ruether have not been discussed. Merton was introduced to Maritain by Dr. Dan Walsh, while he was still a student at Columbia University in 1939. They became close friends. Merton translated some of Raissa Maritain's poetry. Raissa was Maritain's wife. Both Raissa and Maritain were converts to Catholicism. In October 1952 Maritain pleaded on Merton's behalf to the Abbot General, Dom Sortais, to allow the publication of The Sign of Jonas. It was published in 1953. Maritain visited Merton in the hermitage in 1967. They conversed in French as this was easier for Maritain who was old and frail. "Merton and Maritain sat on each side of the fire, warming their feet at the hearth, and simply basking in each other's presence."294

The correspondence with Rosemary Radford Ruether is no way directive on Merton's part. Rosemary challenges him to examine his position as both priest and monk. Merton, unused to forthright criticism of such a personal nature, first replies in an almost "little boy

lost" fashion. When Rosemary presses him to be a man and to leave the monastery, he changes and replies defensively to her challenges. This correspondence shows Merton's weakness in relating to women. Merton, perhaps, sees shades of his mother in Rosemary. Monica Furlong, in her biography *Merton*, suggests this. Merton was unaccustomed to being challenged so vigorously. In a certain sense, Rosemary directs Merton. The guru became the neophyte for a time. Merton is resilient and sees weaknesses in Rosemary's condemnations. When Rosemary says "You have not withdrawn from the world into heaven, you have withdrawn from creation into hell," Merton is angry at this blanket condemnation of monastic seclusion. He says:

This is not sub-human nature out here, it is farm country and farmers are people with the same crucial twentieth century problems as everybody else.

....And while we are on that, another thing. I wonder if you realize that you (at least from your letters) are a very academic, cerebral, abstract type. You talk about God's good creation, the goodness of the body, and all that, but I wonder if you have any realization at all of the fact that by working the land a person is deeply and sensually involved with matter.

The timing of the correspondence is significant. Merton the "Margie trauma" had

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297 Margaret Smith was a student nurse. She was assigned to care for Merton after his surgery in Louisville hospital in March 1966. Cf chapter one, par. 4. The most detailed account of their relationship is to be found in *Thomas Merton: The Hermitage Years* by John Howard Griffin, pp. 56-87. On 8 September 1966, Merton made a commitment "to spend the rest of my life in solitude in so far as my health may permit." (Ibid., p. 86). Merton saw his relationship with Margie as one of great enrichment and growth in understanding himself and others. It greatly increased his compassion for others. This is reflected in "Love and Need- Is love a Package or a Message" in chapter three of *Love and Living*. London: Sheldon Press, 1979. Margie is happily married.
occurred in this same year, 1966. Furlong attaches considerable importance to this exchange of letters. Mott in his biography The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton, and Shannon in his biography Silent Lamp, in contrast, attach very little coverage to the Merton/Ruether correspondence. Perhaps Furlong, as a woman, was, perhaps, more perceptive and intuitive in relation to this interchange of letters.

The letters to and from Lax reflect a deep and enduring friendship, as do the letters to Mark Van Doren. The correspondence with Milosz\textsuperscript{298} is interesting. Initially it is directive. As their mutual respect grows, Milosz acts as "soul friend" to Merton in his turn.

\begin{quote}
I enjoy writing to you and hearing from you in return, and believe that it is very important for both of us to correspond like this, not with any arrière pensée connected with the Church, for such baldly(sic) external ways of considering spiritual things are not meaningful to me. Friendship is the first and most important thing, and is the true cement of the Church built by Christ. I am solitary enough to value genuine contact highly, and I assure you I have not very many. There are only very few in the monastery to whom I can talk as I talk to you. \textsuperscript{299}
\end{quote}

Merton himself was conscious of the lack of the face to face dimension in direction by mail as he could not read a person's body language. Instead in his direction he was forced to read between the lines. It was his great gift to be able to penetrate to the heart of the

\textsuperscript{298} Czeslaw Milosz was born in Poland 1911. During World War Two, he joined the socialist resistance and wrote for the Polish underground. Merton saw him as "one of the most important Polish poets of the twentieth century." He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1980. He now lives in the United States.

Merton’s writing has such vibrancy that the pulse of life, like the ebb and flow of the sea, beats authentically and genuinely in it. He always seeks the "pointe vierge" which will reach out and touch his readers and correspondents.

The pointe vierge of the spirit, (is) the center of our nothingness where, in apparent despair, one meets God - and is found completely in His mercy.

...It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely....I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere.

As reflected in the above quotation, his concept of man urged him to give life-bearing knowledge, which would lead man to self-transcendence.

This chapter examines a selection of his letters to both laity and to religious. Their situations and their problems are varied. These letters illustrate Merton’s gift of treating every person who looked for help with great dignity and compassion. Merton’s advice may seem repetitious. In the letters that this author has chosen, this repetition shows both his consistency and authenticity. A nightingale has only one song to sing. It was so with Merton. His language is suited to each correspondent. Dom Jean LeClercq says:

He wrote with his entire being....There were in him, not two men - for few personalities have been as well integrated as him - but two spheres of


301 Ibid., p,158.
activity: that of the writer—what he called with self-deprecating irony, "being an author"—and that of the close friend. He excelled in making the reader feel that he was close to him, that he even identified with him. That was the whole secret of his appeal.302

In reading case studies by Carl Rogers, one finds a sameness of response, despite the varying problems. For Rogers, the *vade mecum* of the counsellor/therapist lies in the three basic conditions of congruence, unconditional positive regard and empathy. Frankl would agree that these three attributes are the *sine qua non* of the counsellor. Merton, to a profound degree, approached everyone who sought his help with the same awe and reverence implicit in these three attributes. To this triad, Merton added simplicity, balance, clarity, discernment and patience.

4.2. Letters to Religious

Brother Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O. selected and edited *The School of Charity*, Merton's letters on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction. He writes:

When I began to gather letters that would fit into this category nearly ten years ago, I found that the subjects of renewal and spiritual direction were often intertwined. Merton was sometimes seeking counsel, as in the case of the letters addressed to his Abbots, or to the Abbot General in Rome, or to some trusted friend. But more often he was responding to another person's written request for a word of advice and direction during a

difficult period.

In *The School of Charity* he writes to his superiors, both to his abbot at Gethsemani and to the abbot general in Rome. Those letters addressed to the latter often were concerned with the question of the censorship of his writings. As his focus widened with his reading and involvement with various groups outside the monastery, the censors became very critical of his writings. His subject matter did not conform to their idea of issues with which a monk should be concerned. Often Merton would have sent the manuscript to his publisher. The printing presses awaited only the vital "nihil obstat." Therefore, as the censors became more obstructive, he used the argument that people would stand to lose money if permission to print were denied.

The letters to his abbot tended to illustrate his longing for greater solitude. His desire to join a stricter order frequently surfaced. The pull towards greater solitude was like the ebb and flow of the tide. The abbot appointed Merton as fire ranger, gave him a vault to write in, allowed him to roam the woods and finally built him a hermitage. All of these 'concessions' were a result of Merton's pleas to his abbot to be allowed more space and solitude. One of the reasons, albeit a very secondary one, for accepting the post of Master of Novices in 1955, was that the office provided a room for sleeping, away from the common dormitory. Insomnia was a major problem for Merton until he started to sleep in the hermitage. The other letters in this volume are replies to religious who have written to

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him for help. These letters are spiritual in subject matter. Merton himself defines the word "spiritual":

You can see that this work has a highly spiritual meaning, in the true sense of the word "spiritual" - spirit is life, reality, reflection of the transcendent reality of God in its image, man. If I have the mission to form contemplative monks - above all Ibero--American vocations, I have the duty to form them not according to a dead formalism, but according to the inspiration of the Spirit of Truth, who speaks not only in words and abstract ideas but above all in the concrete, in the "incarnation" of the Divine Logos in humanity. This view of his work shows his philosophy of life.

4.3. Merton's Letters to Sr. Anita

In 1952 he began to correspond with Sister Anita - a Carmelite in Cleveland. Her brother, Edmund, had entered Gethsemani. He and Merton became close friends. The family adopted Merton. His correspondence with Sister Anita is significant. The letters date from 1952 to December 1967. This passage of time marks a development in Merton's religious outlook. His direction is straightforward. His counsel is to use common sense and the gift of faith. "It is Jesus that you seek. If you believe you will find Him in Carmel, go there." He does not falsify the difficulties of Religious Life, which are born of routine, fatigue and disillusionment. Life will be monotonous "but under the

monotony is deep peace and pure joy...which is worth any sacrifice." His next letter is devotional and suited to a neophyte in the Little Way. His theme is that we are nothing, Jesus is everything. "But we must take our eyes off ourselves and realize that all our joy comes from Jesus and from Him alone.... You have come to Carmel only to seek His love and to let Him love you."306

In his next letter he says that initially religious life is a strain. It takes time to find a "balanced and well proportioned view of the life."307 The need for balance is one of Merton's cornerstones. The purpose of observances is to be a means to an end - to lead to Jesus. He remarks that when she prays simply it is more natural. He is wise to advise her that if certain sins are not hers, then she should forget them and concentrate on reality. His view of meditation is homely and consistent with his writing to one who is treated almost as a family member.

The purpose of meditation is to get in contact with Jesus. It is like making a phone call. When you have got the person you want to talk to, you don't hang up immediately and then ring up all over again. Sometimes the line is busy, however. Then you ring again. Only make sure that the line is not busy at your end when He is trying to reach you.308

In May, 1953, he writes to reassure her that being ordinary and living an ordinary life well
is all that God requires. He feels that many religious are unwilling to accept this. Instead they seek "strange and non-existent possibilities. What is valuable is what is real, here and now." He advises her to be natural in her prayer and life. God is the Creator. Therefore everything reflects his glory and power. The flowers, the trees, the people, all mirror His goodness. Appreciation of their worth is another way of praising God.

Just let the reality of what is real sink into you, and you find your soul spontaneously begins to pray again, for through real things we can reach Him Who is infinitely real. At the same time, we never forget that their reality is also relatively unreal and that we must not become attached to it.

He tells her to relax and to stop trying to find problems during her spiritual direction sessions. As regards reading, the basic diet should be the New Testament mixed with a variety of authors, not exclusively St. John of the Cross. In November, 1953, his advice is:

"The first rule of all life is to be yourself, because that is the only way we can be real." In the letter before her profession in 1954 he again focuses on what is real.

The closer we come to God, the more we begin to be the person we have always been.... The 'old man' we put off is not our real self, only the false self we have created for ourselves in our effort to improve on God's work....Do not feel frustrated then, if you cannot be someone other than yourself.

Before Lent 1955, he writes that "our way of silence and poverty is the surest and happiest

309 Thomas Merton, The School of Charity, pp. 60-61.
310 Ibid., p. 61.
312 Ibid., p. 182.
Her brother was ordained in June 1955. At his first Mass, Carol, their sister, was married. Merton writes to tell her about the ceremony. In his conclusion, he asks for her prayers as he has hopes of being allowed to withdraw into solitude. Sister Anita's profession day was 27 May 1957. Here again direction is given with the stress on realism. He advises her to focus on the reality of God's love as seen in His creation rather than on an introspective examination of personal failures. Religious life must be "really a life and not just a living death." Above all she must "rise above the pettiness and triviality and prejudice and half truths that tend to narrow everything down in this world, even in a genuine life of faith."

He feels that Religious have become too pessimistic and passive in their lives. They think that being depressed and discouraged is a virtue and that life is to be endured not lived. Sister Anita must now, having made solemn profession, think of what she can do to build up her community. Her concrete exemplar should be St. Teresa, her foundress. "And don't ever lose either your common sense or your sense of humour. I hope you will love Jesus as she did, (St. Teresa) with as much drive and joy and self-forgetfulness and naturalness and good balance."

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313 Ibid., p. 183.
314 Ibid., 185.
315 Ibid.
316 Ibid., p. 186.
In 1959, he tells her he is studying the Desert Fathers. "That is real spirituality - so simple and down to earth and far removed from the cerebral and gabby 'spirituality' that flourishes among us these days. Acts, resolutions and all the rest."317 In November 1959, his advice to her is to take her new work calmly, not to fear making mistakes. "Just let the job get peacefully integrated into your life...so begin by really believing in the presence of God."318 His last letter, dated December 1967, again directs her in a balanced way. "We all have to be realistic about the fact that we need human love and often do not realize how that need creeps in to other things we do." 319 In the end this "falling in love" will serve to make religious reaffirm their vows to God. Renewed and re-focused, they can face life trusting in the love of God. Merton is writing to Sister Anita from the depths of his own struggle, as he refers to his own experience of a love-relationship. This is a measure of his trust in Sister Anita, for in very few of his letters at this time, does he mention falling in love.

Throughout this correspondence he stresses the need to be real, to develop into the person God means her to be. He never loses sight of the purpose of religious life which is union with God. Common-sense and balance are two necessary foundations of a solid religious life. If these foundations are laced with humour, it is most likely that God, not self, will be served. His counsel is sure, suited to the different stages of her religious development.

318 Ibid., pp. 187-188.
319 Ibid., p.192.
His experience as novice master makes him sensitive to the artificial surges of excessive dedication. Always his advice is rooted in reality, pointing to the one Reality, the source of all life.

In summary, Merton's advice to Sister Anita was balanced, honest and realistic. He continually showed her unconditional positive regard. Their relationship flourished. Sister Anita's brother left Gethsemani. That must have caused her pain. Merton discussed it in his letters. Such was the empathy between them that she was one of the few he confided in about Margie. Merton challenged her to self transcendence and urged her to strive for maturity and to become "the person she was before she was born" He respected her by treating her as a mature adult. He considered her ready to contribute to the well being and life of the community when she made solemn profession. There is simplicity, humour and ease in the Sister Anita - Merton counselling / spiritual direction.

Buber disagreed with Rogers on the possibility of an equal 'I-Thou' relationship between the counsellor and the client. They certainly agreed on the need to reject any trace of an 'I-It' relationship. Buber held that the client and counsellor could not by the very nature of the relationship, be on an equal footing. This Sister Anita/ Merton relationship, in this author's opinion, is very close to the 'I-Thou' situation, desired by Rogers, despite the unequal appearance of the relationship.

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320 His view of original sin is that man is basically good but he has inherited certain weaknesses which must be removed before man finds his true identity, which is hidden in God. This is achieved in the "I-Thou" relationship between the person and person, and the person and God.
4.4. Letters to other Religious

In a letter to Father Thomas Fidelis Smith, O.C.S.O. of June 1963, he again recommends balance. Father Smith had inquired about the constant use of the "Jesus prayer". Merton reminds him that this prayer would be in addition to the normal monastic requirement which is considerable. There would in his opinion be a risk of overload here. This prayer is useful when one is plagued with distractions in prayer or one is unable to sleep. In answer to a question regarding breathing, he recommends him to read and use Dechanet's *Christian Yoga*. Merton advises him to try to just 'be' in the Lord's presence. The *Bible* to his way of thinking "is a much richer source of light than the Jesus prayer". It is best to live not trying to pigeonhole intellectual life in one section of one's mind and placing the life of prayer elsewhere.

Life to be wholesome should be integrated. Artificial barricades are obstacles to union with God. Depending on the circumstances the balance between intellectual life and prayer life changes. In theory there may be an ideal proportion. For everyone in practice this proportion is according to his need. The map of life for everyone is different. Peace

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321 The "Jesus prayer" is a Russian and Greek form of prayer. It involves control of one's breathing as a self quietening technique. In this calm, one says interiorly "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God have mercy on me a sinner. Merton explains this form of prayer in detail in his letter to John Harris of 22 June 1959, in *The Hidden Ground of Love*, p.392. cf. par. 4.7. of this chapter.

322 Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity*, p.177.
of mind follows acceptance of this fact.

The same advice about the *Bible* is sent to Dame Marcella Van Bruyn O.S.B. in January 1964. He agrees with her that man constantly asserts himself and that sin is a present reality. "Hence our life is a constant struggle with unreality, and the thing that complicates it is that the unreality in us is what seems to itself quite sincerely to be struggling for the truth." 

Merton was deeply concerned about the changes consequent to Vatican Two. He felt that there was too great haste in seeking change. He was afraid that change for change sake would become the driving force. The desire to arrive at a definitive answer and instant solutions, was, in his view unwise. Life itself is based on uncertainties. "Even the life of faith, in practice, is full of contingencies, and rightly so. That is why it is a life of faith. And its certainties are dark, not absolutely clear." Now it could seem that the monk comes to be, for the sake of the monastery, and not vice versa.

In another letter relating to change in October 1964, he observes that no amount of institutional structural change will be effective unless people change themselves. "And I think the crucial thing in all this reform is the deepening of faith in the individual monk."

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323 Dame Marcella Van Bruyn O.S.B. entered Stanbrook Abbey in England at the age of forty-five. After twenty-three years of monastic living, she left the monastery to lead a solitary life.

324 Ibid., p. 191.

325 Ibid., p. 191.

326 Ibid., p. 249.
God is the guiding light, not solely man nor laws. This is Merton the counsellor, grounding the reforms in faith, hope and love, under the over-shadowing wing of the Holy Spirit.

Illtud Evans O.P. was coming to give the annual retreat at Gethsemani and he asked Merton for guidelines. Merton suggested concentrating on "the great realities of the Gospel and of life, and the reality of the position of the monk, so that we will not simply let go one system of fantasies in order to attach ourselves to another." He is able to cut through the verbiage of changing customs and to focus on reality. This is vital. Merton sees the identity crisis as one of the most important problems for the novices and indeed for the whole Church. This identity crisis is accompanied by tremendous insecurity. Merton believes that one finds one's true identity in relationships, in the relationship between the person and God, and in the relationship with others. The need to discover one's identity is crucial. When a person finds his true self, he finds God.

The big problems all center around their identity, I think. Once they (the novices) are convinced that they are real, and that they don't have to do something at every minute to prove it to themselves, they settle down and are quite happy, except for those who must inevitably devise new plans for rebuilding everything, reforming everything and inventing five thousand new schemes for putting the Church at last in order. The chief problem is that of freedom of the spirit, and allowing the Christian to develop and

327 Ibid., p.253.

328 The "identity crisis" has two facets. Firstly, the person must find out who he really is. Secondly, the Second Vatican Council initiated many changes in the Catholic Church. These changes left many Catholics unsure of their beliefs. They were confused by the changes in the Liturgy. Merton worried that changes were being made just for the sake of change, without any firm justification. A strong grounding in one's religious beliefs is imperative in a climate of change.
Writing to a Carmelite hermit, he states that when the ascetic life is serious there is a genuine all-round development of the whole man. This can be accompanied by a real flowering of human, intellectual and cultural values. Another Sister writes to him for advice about mental prayer. In answer Merton says: "Our interior prayer is simply the most intimate and personal way in which we seek the face of God." The Lord is to be sought in faith. In prayer she should seek Him. It is counterproductive to analyse and examine oneself. Union with God does not happen overnight. Part of the pain and anxiety is the waiting, a wait which is hard as the darkness seems impenetrable. His views on the contemplative life are clear. As regards enclosure he feels that it is imperative to provide a quiet atmosphere where contemplation may grow. "But this surely does not require grilles and other medieval showpieces which are mostly for psychological effect. For modern women, the prison mentality is not much help."

As regards other nuns joining the contemplative sisters for retreats, his counsel is founded again on the universal love of God. "Silence is the greatest luxury in the world to-day and it is a true alms for contemplatives to give others a share in what they have." To another he writes that community and person are correlative. There is no community

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329 Ibid., p. 268.
330 Ibid., p. 297.
331 Ibid., p. 333.
332 Ibid., p. 334.
without persons and no person without community. If community life is too institutionalised both community and persons' suffer. He feels strongly that community should not be task orientated but life-centred and person-centred.

As regards the modern generation and penances, he is sane and realistic. They are no longer effective, as they are artificial and foster self absorption, rather than self forgetfulness. One wonders whether these archaic practices ever had a value. St. Francis de Sales, in the sixteenth century, believed a spoonful of honey was far more effective than a barrel full of vinegar, in helping people to grow in the knowledge and love of God and of humankind.

In tune with his saying that silence is the greatest luxury in the world to-day, he is definite that the prophetic and eschatological witness of silence and poverty must be recovered. It will not become present through barriers of walls and grates.

The reality of silence and solitude are of course essential. But it should be in a kind of dialectic with charity and help to your neighbors there.... It should manifest a compassion that is rooted in an intimate awareness of the sufferings of Christ. The fact that you will see Him suffering concretely in the poor there ought to help your contemplative prayer to be deeper and more real.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, p.377.}

To another he writes "It is true that the yen for absolute solitude is often vitiated by pure narcissism, regression, immaturity and is utterly sick."\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, p.396.} He is convinced nevertheless
that there are vocations to solitude.

4.5. Letters to the laity

His correspondents were legion. They came from all walks of life. If they had a problem, that he could help solve, he did not hesitate. His was a vast literary apostolate. He was at great pains to guide all of his correspondents to find their true selves in God. The laity did not have the support of a religious community. Thus they needed more frequent communication. Merton saw the end of communication as communion with both man and the Absolute. Just as the correspondence with Sister Anita matured over the years, that with Etta Gullick, John Harris, and Linda Parsons Sabbath, reflect the growth of the relationship. These three are examples of Merton's desire to help people to become their true selves. His ability to use language to penetrate to the very heart of a situation was one of his great gifts. Merton, the spiritual director/counsellor is clearly counselling these three correspondents, endeavouring to help them find inner harmony.

4.6. Merton's Correspondence with Etta Gullick

Etta Gullick was an Anglican theologian. Her spiritual guide was the Abbot of Downside, Dom Christopher Butler. He suggested that she read the Rule of Perfection by Capuchin Benet of Canfield (1562 - 1610). She began to prepare an edition of the third part of the Rule, which was then unavailable in English. This venture brought her in contact with Thomas Merton in 1960 or 1961. The first published letter from Merton to
Merton writes to Etta about contemplation. He does not think that people should strain after this. It may come to those who wait. As for the call to solitude, sometimes it is unavoidable. At times it is forced on people, perhaps through a breakdown in marriage. Again solitude has its own way with people. As regards the love of God involving an element of self preservation, Merton replies:

Beyond all is a love of God in and through all that exists. We must not hold them apart one from another. But He must be One in all and Is. There comes a time when one loses everything, even love. Apparently. Even oneself, above all oneself.336

In another letter she and Merton discuss Christ suffering in the 'other' in the Dark Night337 of the soul. In the Night of Sense the person suffers in his emptiness.

In the Night of the Spirit he is emptiness in us, exinanivit semetipsum. The special awfulness of that seeming void can certainly be taken as a personal presence, but without duality, without too much of the subject-object relationship. But above that.338

In emptiness man clings to life as the present reality. The threat of war makes one fearful that the sentence of death is about to be carried out. Later he recommends her to study

336 Ibid., p.346.
337 The 'dark night' of the soul is an experience of dryness in prayer. The presence of God seems dimmed or absent. It is a stage on the path to spiritual perfection. Both St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross wrote extensively about this 'dark night' experience.
338 Ibid., p.350.
Julian of Norwich, as she writes of the 'dark night'. Merton says that a lot of the suffering in the 'dark night' comes from "unconscious involvement in the general evil." He reassures her that she is understood by Christ. The day will come when what matters least, is to understand oneself well.

In a letter of July 1962 after Etta had an operation he replies to her letter and advises her against reading Ruysbroeck, when she is undergoing the dark night. He recommends instead sessions with Sophocles or Aeschylus as they challenge one and force a reply. He finds Antigone or Oedipus Colonus helpful. As regards evaluating spiritual values one against the other, this is a fruitless occupation when one is in the midst of the night. Delving into Greek Tragedy is much healthier "than our obsession with the fear that if we are not somehow optimistic we are lost. In the 'night' optimism and pessimism are both meaningless."

In August 1962, he writes: "as to epectasis : I do not consider it a "state" at all but so to speak a basic law of the spirit, a kind of expression of the very nature of the spiritual life." Epectasis is the lengthening and prolongation of religious experience, penetrating further into the unknown. This a favourite theme of St. Gregory of Nyssa. It is

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339 Ibid., p. 351.
340 Ibid., p. 354.
341 Ibid.
342 Interpretation of interview with Canon A.M. Allchin on 8 June 1997. He knew Etta Gullick well as they both lived in Oxford. She and Father Michael Hollings published a book of prayers for young people in 1970s. This was another example of Ecumenism in action.

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necessary to let go of everything known and tangible. This sinking into the void is a passing into the unknown.

The hunger for God cannot be satisfied except in the sense that an entirely new dimension makes the void itself our satiation, and this is nonsense as expressed here.... Why not cry out to God in any way you like, as long as you don't expect it to console you. 343

In the next letter he feels that her reading matter is not helpful in her spiritual condition. Seemingly she complained of spiritual dryness. Merton is businesslike and says there is too much introspection in the spiritual life to-day. The counting of stages is not helpful as one does not really know, in the spiritual life, where one is anyway. Better to let go of the will and of self and to rest in the God who Is. Perhaps one should be content with one's pay even if it is too dark to count it. One should be neither buoyed up nor cast down.

In January 1963, he again returns to the topic of the spiritual life. Merton deplores the compartmentalising of man into a spiritual sphere and a remainder. The implication here is that everything else is written off as so much dross. This is an error. The 'life of the spirit' includes the whole of man's life for life is God's gift. Merton says that it is necessary to follow the Spirit where He leads. He may lead one in uncharted waters if He is allowed to act freely.

The comfortable and respectable existence that you and I lead is in fact to a great degree opposed to the real demands of the Spirit in our lives.... We cannot say that our bourgeois existence is purely and simply the "will of

This war within is a cause of darkness and desperation especially when one is trying to live up to the promptings of the Spirit. The "comfortable and respectable existence" militates against the total gift of self. Neither he nor Etta suffer the deprivations that the poor and the outcast endure. In place of this real suffering, he suggests, they make up hardships. This results in interior frustration, as in the depths of their heart they know that their sufferings are not totally genuine. They do really suffer, it is not total illusion. There is a paradox here and a tension between the real and the unreal.

In April 1963, when she writes about the sufferings of Brother Raymond Molineaux, he assures her that taking on part of his suffering is simply sharing in the suffering of Christ. This idea of union with Christ is a very real one and is worthy of being meditated on. Union with Christ is the work of the Spirit. In July of that year, Merton says that there can be no real contemplative life without suffering. Suffering is inevitable in the contemplative life as it is counter-cultural. The contemplative stance makes one critical of the pretentiousness of society. This is seen as a rebuke by the powerful. The contemplative, then, must be punished for his overbearing pride in criticising the status quo. Merton advises her to adopt some penitential exercises as a "kind of affirmation that the accepted standards all around one are not the real ones." There is danger here too, as the penances can be mere self-seeking. Instead, perhaps, an acceptance of the absurdity

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344 Ibid., p.357.
345 Ibid., P.361.
and contradictions inherent in life are sufficient penance. He concluded that active charitable works are beneficial for the contemplative spirit, as long as they are not an escape through activism.

The secret of the contemplative life is to try to be one with the will of God. Often in darkness, it is not seen nor understood as God's will. A direct revelation would remove the pain of uncertainty. In his opinion, this is not often given. Neither is it to be desired. Merton, the realist, assures her that in the life of prayer, one has to accept one's station in life, be it marriage or monastic living. The acceptance and the following of God's will within one's state of life will bear fruit in the life of prayer.

In January 1964, in reply to her request for a reading list, he suggests Bultmann's *Essays*, Jaspers' *Way of Wisdom*, the works of Merleau-Ponty, the works of a Spanish Jew of the eleventh century, Bahya Ibn Paquda, and Martin Ling's book on the Moslem mystic, Shaik Ahmed Al Alawi. The letter of February 1964, says that it is good to have a director to talk to as direction by mail is very limited. This does not deter Etta. She says that she has defects while knowing about the life of prayer. Merton says that everyone has defects. These can be turned to good effect, if they are accepted positively. Defects challenge one to examine them to see are they really part of one's make up, or things, accepted from one's environment. If they are the latter, is it due to laziness or complacency that they are accepted as 'natural'? No one is without faults. Merton then refers to her darkness. He faces this head-on. He says that if she really wanted the 'dark night' to disappear, it would happen. He suggests that she has become comfortable in this
darkness, perhaps secretly preferring darkness. He does not know how to get rid of it.

"But a thrust of higher liberty would get you out."\(^{346}\)

In June, 1964, the subject matter of the correspondence is contemplation, which he feels, cannot be taught. He does say, however, that a master can awaken an aptitude for it when he knows it by experience himself. "Not by the example of doing, but the example of being, and by one's attitude towards life and things."\(^{347}\) Merton writes later describing his 'teaching' of contemplation to the novices.

I try to make them love the freedom and peace of being with God alone in faith and simplicity, to abolish all divisiveness and diminish all useless strain and concentration on one's own efforts and all formalism.\(^{348}\)

In another letter he recommends the simple prayer of petition. Later he writes about purgations. Merton, the realist, says that everyone gets enough penance in life. There is no need to invent artificial trials. This smacks of introspection. A person's feelings make a distinction between consolation and desolation. Is there, he ponders, such a huge difference between the two? As regards the feeling that she does not love God- that may be perfectly true. The important thing is that God loves her.

Again she writes about progress in prayer. Merton is reluctant to write about this, as the self-awareness involved in introspective measurement, is counter productive to progress

\(^{346}\) Ibid., p.366.

\(^{347}\) Ibid., p.367.

\(^{348}\) Ibid., p.368.
in prayer "In the long run, I think progress in prayer comes from the Cross and humiliation and whatever makes us really experience our total poverty and nothingness and also gets our mind off ourselves." 349

Etta in another letter is disturbed that union between Anglicans and Catholics again looks hopeless. Merton says that all that really matters is for people to be united in love and the Holy Spirit.

But where there is a sincere desire for truth and real good will and genuine love, there God Himself will take care of the differences far better than any human or political ingenuity can. Prayer is the thing, and union with the suffering Lord on His Cross. 350

The last letter in the collection, dated April 1968, ends in a way that is in keeping with the tone of the whole correspondence:

As to your own desolation and loneliness: what can anyone say? It is the desolation of all of us in the presence of death and nothingness, but Christ in us bears it for us: without our being consoled. To accept non-consolation is to mysteriously help others who have more than they can bear. 351

This correspondence is interesting as it is much more specific than any of the letters to the religious. Recognising Etta's theological background, he writes of 

pectasis

and frequently refers to the German and English medieval mystics and The Cloud of Unknowing. St. John of the Cross is not omitted. Merton writes of the 'dark night' of the

349 Ibid., p.376.
350 Ibid., p.378.
351 Ibid., pp. 379-380.
soul in language that is suited to a person versed in both medieval manuscripts and mysticism. While he says that direction by mail is not very good she obviously did not agree with him. She continued to include personal matters after her discussion of medieval texts. Merton does, in truth, counsel her by means of the written word.

4.7. Merton and John Harris- A Counselling Correspondence

John Harris, a Devonshire school teacher, came in contact with Merton through their mutual correspondence with Boris Pasternak. After the publication of Dr. Zhivago, Merton had written to congratulate the author as did John Harris. Pasternak wrote to John Harris in November 1958 and asked him to contact three people - one of them Thomas Merton "whose precious thoughts and dear bottomless letters enrich me and make me happy."^352

Merton was delighted to hear from Pasternak whom he regarded as "a sign of hope and perhaps the first star of a new dawn for mankind."^353 Merton wrote his first letter to Harris in December 1958. They corresponded for ten years. As usual one can infer the subject matter of Harris' letters only from Merton's replies. In January 1959 Merton says that he is not writing from the safety of an infallible Church to tell everyone else they are wrong.


"For Christ speaks in us only when we speak as men to one another and not as members of something, officials, or what have you." Harris' problems are in Merton's view, personal and no way matter for "official declarations." Also there is no official salvation.

Merton tells Harris that he is not going to try to solve all his problems because he feels that they are not as real as he thinks. Much harm, in Merton's opinion, is done by people purporting to give "official solutions." There are undoubtedly official decrees. The person, however, does not reach God, who is in the depth of his heart, through decrees. Merton presumes to state that Harris is inaccurate in saying he does not believe in God. In reality, Merton contends, he does not believe in God as officially presented. Harris had read some of Merton's books and Pasternak. This is sufficient grounds to see Harris as a spiritual person and a friend. All that matters is "the reality of your life in Christ."

Merton recommends him to go to Buckfast Abbey and to ask to speak with Hubert Van Zeller. He would tell him something about monks and the Church. Merton says that Harris is basically a Christian who has allowed himself to be overcome by incidentals. No one, Merton says, will try to push him into the Church. Merton's word is 'shove.' He tells Harris to feel free to write to him, whenever he wishes. What is important is who one is.

It is immaterial whether he had a problem or not.

For, you see, when "I" enter into a dialogue with "you" and each of us knows who is speaking, it turns out that we are both Christ. This, being seen in a very simple and "natural" light, is the beginning and almost the

354 Ibid., pp. 385 -6.
From Merton's March reply to Harris, it is obvious that Harris has decided to become a Catholic and has given Merton reasons for his decision. Merton feels he is doing the right thing because "you are, in any case, seeking to become what you already are in so many ways." Harris, to Merton's great pleasure, had found someone helpful in Buckfast Abbey. As Harris was worried about evil, Merton refers to the parable of the wheat and the cockle. Both grow together until the harvest. There is a temptation to root out the cockle before the time is right. How can one be sure which is which, poses Merton? The business of judging is not theirs.

To look for an absolute assurance that one is pure wheat is to fall, after all, into the same old pharisaism. Dostoevsky saw it straight. We are sinners and we have to be very glad to take upon ourselves all the evil in the world as if we were responsible for it ourselves, and to love everyone else in their sins. In this way only is evil overcome and destroyed. But when it is always rejected and judged and pushed off onto others - it survives and flourishes mightily.

It seems from Merton's reply of May 1959, that Harris has come up against some canonical obstacles concerning his marriage. Merton admits that he knows very little about marriage law. Merton tells Harris: "the best I can say is, be patient: God is not bound by

\[\text{fullness of everything.}^{355}\]

\[\text{Ibid., p.387.}\]

\[\text{Ibid.}\]

\[\text{Ibid., p.387-8.}\]
the stupidity of theologians and canonists. The important thing to hold onto is that he and his wife are truly married. The law is there. There is nothing wrong with law. It is important to remember that love fulfils the law, but love also transcends law.

Harris told Merton that Hubert Van Zeller gave up reading Dr. Zhivago "when adultery came into the picture." Merton remarks that "he would have to close Genesis as soon as bigamy rears its ugly head, or as soon as Abraham palms Sarah off on Pharaoh as his 'sister.'" They heard from Pasternak again. Harris had compared him to Donne. Merton compared his writings to The Book of Oracles called the I Ching. The I Ching had also influenced Jung. Both Confucius and Lao Tzu many centuries earlier had also been inspired by this same book. It is a dangerous book for the undiscerning as in it a very fine line is drawn between fortune-telling and analysis. Merton, though not an analyst, finds the work very interesting as he is intrigued by its symbolic patterns and the arrangements of groups.

But it is evident that Pasternak has, by his genius and simplicity, and by a kind of primitive quality, better archaic quality that is in him, reached down to these ancient springs.... You see that my concept of Christianity is far from being an old-maidish theology of hiding in a corner of the house and standing on chairs for fear of heretical mice.

Merton says that all these riches (as in the I Ching) are to be found in the Church but that it is too soon for Harris to search them out. He recommends him to read Conrad Pepler's

358 Ibid., p.388.
359 Ibid., p.389.
360 Ibid., p.389-390.
book *The English Religious Heritage* and Bouyer's *Life of Newman*. The *Bible* is the unequalled source as are the Fathers of the Church. Merton then uses Eckhart's terminology to say that all things are in Christ.

His June letter is aimed at reassuring Harris that everything will work out about his marriage. Merton also emphasises that catholic practices are just practices. As a convert it is natural to want to do everything perfectly. What is truly important is his motivation which in this case is to give glory and honour to God, not to the neighbours. Merton assures him that his is the freedom of a son of God. If he wishes to pray lying face down, that is all right. He does not have to enshrine this supine practice in tablets of stone. God is the giver of freedom. Above all, He is a loving God, not a legalist. "The thing to avoid is getting stuck in any small limited area of Christian life: if you want to fall down on your face before God one day, that is all right, but it doesn't have to become a system to be followed thereafter until your dying day."361 In Italy or France people pay little heed to externals. The English, in Merton's opinion, are extremely conformist.

Merton recommends the use of the 'Jesus Prayer'. This is a form of centring prayer of Russian and Greek origin. Sitting in a quiet place, one first controls his breathing as in Hata-Yoga. Then breathing quietly and rhythmically one says in ones heart "Lord Jesus Christ Son of God have mercy on me a sinner." When this prayer is said with faith, the divine indwelling takes over. Merton says that once this happens, he is no longer to be

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361 Ibid., p.392.
concerned with method. He should then pray as the Spirit moves him. Merton believes that the best director in the way of prayer is the Holy Spirit.

He tells Harris that at Mass it is best to use a missal. Devotion to our Lady and to her Rosary was also important. Merton sees her as "the most perfect expression of the mystery of the Wisdom of God. That in some way she is the wisdom of God." His final advice to him is to pray, believe and read the Scriptures. Harris calls him a prophet.

Merton in reply, says:

I am aware that I don't make for peace of mind in conventional groups, and I am wondering how long it is going to take for the average American Catholic to realize this,... And for the American clergy to jump up madly and say, "You see, that is what we have been trying to tell you about him all along! The guy's a radical."

One must always follow one's inner truth. Always be sincere. By September Harris' marital problems are not yet solved so Merton urges patience. This waiting should be charged with fruitful anguish, deepening his love for God. Harris had to wait for a solution until 1962.

In Merton's letter of June 1962 he writes to him about the Church. "One has to refuse to be disturbed by so many things (in the Church)." She is right in the essentials, in her

362 Ibid. This is a much fuller treatment of this form of prayer than that given to Fr. Fidelis Smith O.C.S.O. John Main O.S.B. who has popularised this prayer form found much of the substance of his teaching of "The Jesus Prayer" in Merton's writings.

363 Ibid., p.392.

364 Ibid.

365 Ibid., p. 398.
view of the purpose of life and death. Her voice is filtered through many who would stop all change. Merton says that Christians have a responsibility to attract the Church's attention to injustice and immorality. He says he has been told to write no more about war. His book *Peace in a Post-Christian Era* has been forbidden without it even going to the censors. In true Merton style, he adds that he will send Harris a mimeographed copy which he is free to use but not to publish. No wonder Christ told his disciples to be as simple as doves and as cunning as serpents!

The last letter from Merton to Harris is dated December 31, 1967. There is an editorial note which says that Harris sent Merton a photograph of his family and "his interpretation of the *I Ching* on Merton and Christmas. Part of the interpretation was "Departure towards the south brings good fortune."366 The tone of Merton's letter is easy and familiar. Merton refers to the Ernesto Cardenal367 foundation in Nicaragua and also to the Trappist foundation in Chile. Both are in the south and both have invited him to come and stay. There is an abbatial election very soon and who knows what changes that will bring. He remarks that racial tension is high and that the Klu Klux Klan is getting strong in his area. His last words to Harris and his family were "Happy New Year."

366 Ibid., p.400.

367 Ernesto Cardenal was one of Merton's novices. Cardenal returned to Nicaragua. They corresponded regularly.

Linda Parsons Sabbath was born of Ukrainian-born parents in Saskatchewan, Canada. In May 1963 she became a Catholic. Her conversion followed upon a series of vivid and even violent ecstasies, experience of joy and elation which she first interpreted as part of a manic-depressive psychosis, but which her colleague Dr. Raymond Prince\textsuperscript{368} insisted were religious experiences. She read Merton's Ascent to Truth. She and Merton corresponded and became friends.\textsuperscript{369}

The first letter from Merton, dated 25 April, 1965, deals with Linda's request for names of writers who are experienced in the study of mysticism. In the next letter Merton answers a question on Zen and Grace. Here Merton says that a genuine seeking for the meaning of life and a desire to reach one's true centre is to be regarded as a superior activity in contrast to "everyday, inauthentic existence." Grace, it seems to him, must be involved. He says that genuine Zen experience involves much self-emptying and selflessness. The void that is thus created, it would seem, is Spirit filled.

The next letter refers to Freud's place in the monastic life. Merton says "Why not?" Merton makes a proviso that the Freud suited to the monastery is not "orthodox

\textsuperscript{368} Dr. R. H. Prince was the professor of psychiatry at McGill University in Montreal. In 1964, with the assistance of Linda Parsons and Martha Crampton, he organised the R. M. Bucke Society. It was a time of widespread experimentation with mind expanding drugs and various practices (meditation etc.) of different world religions, as well as particular exotic sects or cults. The purpose of the R. M. Bucke Memorial Society was to study such phenomena from a scientific and cross-cultural perspective. Editorial Note in The Hidden Ground of Love, p.493

\textsuperscript{369} Editorial Note, The Hidden Ground of Love, p.516.
Freudianism" of the static variety. "We need to make our own adaptation of Freud to our own needs and see it in terms of the rich psychological insights of generations of monks." Linda sent him an article by Arasteh, the Persian psychologist who greatly interested Merton.

In December 1965, the focus in the correspondence is on ecstasy by use of psychedelics. In his letter to Linda, Merton says that the psychedelic induced state is like what in Zen is called makyo or the complex of illusions which are suffered until the person is able to get rid of them. His reservation about "psychedelics is that we want to have interior experiences entirely on our own terms. This introduces an element of constraint and makes the freedom of pure grace impossible." This links with his thoughts on liberty, in his reply to Huxley.

Some years earlier, in 1958, Merton had corresponded with Aldous Huxley about this matter. Huxley was interested in mysticism and mystical phenomena and his book *Ends and Means* evidenced this interest. In October 1958, Huxley published an article in the *Saturday Evening Post* entitled "Drugs That Shape Men's Minds." Merton had

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371 It was entitled "A Unitary Theory of Natural Experiences" in *R. M. Bucke Newsletter*, second issue, September 1966. Merton was very interested in the writings of Arasteh. He reviewed Arasteh's book, *Towards Final Personality Integration in Contemplation in a World of Action*. It is referred to in Chapter three, par. 3.

372 Ibid., p. 521.
corresponded with Huxley twenty years earlier. This letter of 27 November, 1958, is the only one that has survived. As regards drugs, Merton admits that he has no direct experience beyond ordinary household aspirin, coffee and also a barbiturate as an aid to get to sleep. Merton poses some questions:

1. Are you not endangering the whole concept of genuine mystical experience in saying... that a drug can induce a state in which mystical experience can be occasioned: a drug can remove obstacles in our ordinary everyday state of mind, and make a kind of latent mysticism come to the surface. But I wonder if this accords with the real nature of mystical experience?^{373}

Merton says that in his opinion a distinction should be made between an aesthetic and natural experience and a mystical and supernatural one. In the realm of the aesthetic and natural, the intuitive and spiritual core of man is touched. He experiences a "oneness" within himself and all beings, a flash of the awareness of the transcendent Reality that is within all that is real."^{374} Merton allows that drugs can help man reach this level of experience. He compares it to the aesthetic intuition which fills the artist before he creates a work of art. It is also the philosopher's intuition when he realises in a flash the basic unity of all being. A third example is the intuition of Being received from a liturgical act. (Huxley had discounted liturgy.) While Merton classes these intuitions as natural, the presence of God's grace within them is not thereby excluded. He then proceeds to treat of mystical and supernatural experience. In the first place this may lead on from the

^{373} Ibid., p.437.

^{374} Ibid.
aesthetic and natural, in the sense of raising it to a higher plane or dimension. He says that a fully mystical experience has in its very essence some note of a direct spiritual contact of two liberties, a kind of a flash or spark which ignites an intuition of all that has been said above, plus something much more which I can only describe as "personal" in which God is known not as an "object" or as "Him up there" or "Him in everything" nor as "the All" but as - the biblical expression - I AM, or simply AM. But what I mean is that this is not the kind of intuition that smacks of anything procurable because it is a presence of a Person and depends on the liberty of that Person.\textsuperscript{375}

If this state is induced by drugs, then the person loses his freedom. The cause, the drug, produces the effect, mystical experience. Merton uses an example of a person who has a genuine vocation to mystical union but then starts to take drugs. Following Merton's thesis above, a person is capable of achieving the aesthetic and natural level experience. Even if he reaches the higher plane, it will have no lasting impact. Instead since his interior life has not been deepened, he will need more of the drug to produce the same state.

This will produce a vicious circle of repeated use of the drug, renewed lassitude and guilt, greater need for the drug and final complete addiction with the complete ruin of a mystical vocation, if not worse.\textsuperscript{376}

He concludes by saying that he is interested in yoga and Zen "which I find to be the finest example of a technique leading to the highest natural perfection of man's contemplative

\textsuperscript{375} ibid., p.438.

\textsuperscript{376} ibid.
This letter to Huxley was sent in 1958. His views on the use of drugs has not changed as is evidenced by his letters to Linda. *Mayko* again features in his reply to Linda in December 1965.

About *mayko*, I think frankly that your approach is almost purely psychological....If all you are looking for is psychological integration, then *mayko*, OK, then maybe mescaline, God knows, I don't....When the development of the religious (and mystical) consciousness really gets going, all this *mayko*, visions, oceanic feelings, lights and music, rapture, etc. etc, is really irrelevant and can become an obstacle. Haven't you read St. John of the Cross?378

In January 1966, he says that she is "apparently focused more on the subject experiencing this and that rather than on God."379 He urges balance and the adoption of ordinary means to effect integration and transcendence. Linda obviously resented his saying that she was interested in psychology rather than in religion. Therefore, in his reply in January 1966, he urges her to focus on God. He acknowledges that it is all right to be subjective. There is a time and a place for that too. She fears she is becoming amoral. Merton's answer is "Why"? He continues by saying that he doesn't know what kind of 'guru' he will be. The fundamental thing in life is union with God's will as the ground of all being. Faith is necessary here. Feelings do not enter the faith scenario - one's simple *fiat* is all that is required.

377 Ibid., p.439.
378 Ibid., pp. 521-522.
379 pp. 522-523.
The interesting thing about this correspondence between Linda Parsons Sabbath and Merton is the frequency of his replies. In all, he sends her fifteen letters between 1 December 1965 and 5 July 1966. After that date, there are only three short letters on record, the last dated August 1967. The letters are important from the perspective of Merton and spiritual direction. He engages in this correspondence while re-iterating his thesis that direction by letter has no great value as he really does not know her. He writes "But if these suggestions come anywhere near being useful, OK. If not, ignore them."  

On 29 January 1966, he disagrees with her self-diagnosis as psychotic. Her new-found Catholicism, Merton believes, will help her get rid of her self-hate. Her use of the word 'psychotic' seems harsh. Perhaps she does need some treatment to untangle her confusion. "However, my job is that of a priest, and the help I can give you if any is spiritual. And simple." The Church is not interested in her past life. It is not good to keep comparing oneself with others. Merton does wish her to explain her feeling of being amoral. He thinks that when the concept of 'amoral' is sorted out, she will be released from the chains of self-hate. His advice is to stop reading clinical literature about religious delusions as it suggests only further symptoms of ills which she has not got. She is scourging herself for a whole lot of unreal things which he agrees are real to her. The label 'psychotic' is an example of this self-condemnation and of her seeing herself as an outcast.

380 Ibid., p.527.
381 Ibid., p.524.

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Merton is adamant that she can come in from her self imposed Coventry if she so wishes. She had become a Catholic only in August 1965 and then she went on a Zen retreat. His advice is caution and patience. The first thing she needs to do is to become fully conversant with the Catholic faith. He does not think the "average confessor" would be equipped to give her direction, so brevity is recommended. Her confession should be of realities, not conjectures. He writes of serious matter and full consent as the grounds for sin. Again his urging of balance is evidenced here. If she decides to go to a therapist, she should follow his instructions. To ignore the therapist's advice, even concerning religious matters, is unwise. He recommends that she use a Catholic therapist. Karl Stern, in his opinion, would be ideal.

In daily life everyone has to make choices. Being consistently positive and constructive is hard work. Above all she must stop blaming herself for the past. She should work and live in the 'now'. If her problems seem to overwhelm her, she should be patient. Time will explain and solve her difficulties. Live in the 'now' of God's will and love. His love is real. That is the supreme reality and the only anchor to be trusted. He ends the letter by asking her to explain her concepts of "moral" and "amoral" and her sense of being a fraud. He insists that she is definitely not a bad person.

And tell me more about the ecstasies. If we can smooth out some of the ambivalence about all this, it will help....Dear Linda, stop hurting yourself. Be at peace. Realize God's love and mercy and your own freedom.\textsuperscript{382}

\textsuperscript{382} Ibid., p.526.
Linda replied almost immediately as he sent her a brief note on 2 February and a long letter on 12 February 1966. He is now clear as to the meaning and implications of her use of the term "amoral." There is no need to make a public stand about issues. There is no parallel between her actions and Eichmann's. The whole business of judging people is a difficult one and is best left to God. The New Testament is very definite that judgement is the Lord's. His advice is to watch her own conduct and to leave the rest. "Respect life, truth, growth, meaning, in yourself and in others, and you are not amoral. I think you are just saying that you have ceased to be a legalist. For this there is nothing due but congratulations."383 She should avoid introspection and get on with life. "As to trying to think of something horrible so as not to be carried away with 'low-grade ecstasy', why do that?"384 His sane advice is to take every day from the Lord's hands. The ecstasies will cease when she gets tired of experiencing everything so deeply.

A month later Merton assures her that she is not pathological. Her efforts to rid herself of her ego will not work. As for dying, that is not the answer. God plants seeds in the ground of her being. It would be counter-productive for her to plant "weeds" by creating difficulties.

On 14 May, he tells her not to waste time looking for solitude. He fears that he has been harsh as he writes again, saying that all is not simple and easy in the solitary life. Linda

383 Ibid.
384 Ibid., p.527.
obviously questioned him again about solitude for this is his main topic on 18 June. Nothing about solitude is simple and easy. Every solitary must find his/her own way. Merton is not in the business of making route maps for anyone. His own path would not serve as a blue print as his solitude is mixed up with his being an author. It is necessary above all to accept the person one is. That is the only preparation. Then she should accept God's grace as it is given. Linda visited Merton 29-30 June 1966. The published letters from this time onwards are fewer in number. 385

Merton in his correspondence with Linda was true to the principles that are embodied in his counselling. Despite Linda's ecstasies or perhaps because of them, he focused on the need for inner balance and increased self-awareness. Above all he counselled self-acceptance. He had a profound respect for the client. Never did he make little of her problems. He was genuine and empathetic always. Otherwise neither of them would have continued the dialogue. In this counselling he did offer guidelines and he gave 'homework' as Linda was paralysed in her inability to make decisions. She was psychologically disturbed as well as being a very recent convert to Catholicism.

Merton says" persons are known not by their intellect alone, not by principles alone, but

385 Linda purchased land near Lake Magog, in Montreal, as a place where people of various religious traditions could go for quiet, prayer and contemplation. Soon after Merton's death, she set up the Merton Retreat Center there. She married Peter Sabbath, one of the many people who came for quiet and meditation. He became the head of the center at her invitation. The Bishop of Montreal requested that the Center be moved to Montreal city. It is still possible to go and spend a quiet time at lake Magog.
only by love." This is the motivating force in all his directive correspondence. He did not speak in abstract terms nor did he use jargon. His special gift was that through the written word he was so focused that he spoke to each one directly, as a friend. His was a holistic approach built on his belief that grace builds on nature. He was non-confrontational yet vigorous. He was strong in his efforts to move on people who were 'stuck' while always respecting their dignity. His aim was to strengthen not diminish their self-esteem. He did not encourage dependence on himself; he was always ready and happy to see people discovering the true ground of their being. His concern was to help people become the people that they were meant to be in the true sense of 'being.'

Balance and realism, coupled with generosity, were the hallmarks of his counselling. A sense of humour and common-sense were almost indispensable to the gaining of inner harmony and integration. In a sense his counselling has many parallels with the brief therapy model.

4.9. Merton's Circular Letters to his Friends

As evidenced by his enormous correspondence, it is clear that many people, both lay and religious, sought help from Merton. He tells some of them to enclose their letter in an envelope marked clearly "conscience matter". This would make it more likely that he

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would get the letter as Abbot James Fox censored his mail and did not approve of spiritual direction by mail. (He also feared that Merton would suffer burnout.) Pettiness had no place in Merton's vocabulary. Generosity was his hallmark. He was always ready to help by sending a book or notes.

In the end, Merton, unable to reply to all the letters used the device of sending "circular letters" to his friends. He made out a general letter containing a curriculum vitae for students who wrote to him. The genuineness of Merton and his respect for others shines through this letter. Others might have casually penned a reply. Not he. Following the autobiographical details, he explains why he is a contemplative monk. His life is a search for truth and meaning in life, the penetrating of the "illusions, confusion and deceptions of the world. He explains that there is nothing contradictory in being a monk and a writer and poet. It is his way of sharing God's gifts with the world. As regards politics he feels Americans must grow up and take an active part in political life. They should act in an informed way rather than react. There is an obligation on all to think, not to be zombies.

Liberty begins inside your own souls. Our souls cannot be free if we believe only in money and power and comfort and having a good time. I do not think that our present line of action is doing anything to keep us free.\textsuperscript{387}

This is not counselling in the sense that it answers an individual's problems. It indicates a general malaise and proposes a solution. Surely this is an example of his desire to set the next generation straight or they may become the last generation. He is perturbed in his

\textsuperscript{387} Ibid., p. 90.
Christmas letter 1966, about the Vietnam war and the fanatical stance of both Washington and Peking. He feels that much needless damage has been done in Vietnam that it is, in one way, immaterial, who wins the war. The Pope urges the seeking of an alternative solution. Merton's message is to learn to wait for solutions to problems. People have got used to instant everything. There is no instant panacea for problems of the heart. Faith which is rooted in the very ground of man's being is the source of the dawn light in the unknown darkness of incomprehensibility. Helping someone else is often a way of bearing the pain of the trials of daily life.

In his circular letter of Septuagesima Sunday, 1967, Merton says that Father Charles Davis's condemnation of Church authority was in some ways justified. Davis should be treated with compassion. Denunciation as heretical is counterproductive. He is still our brother. Merton feels that in Catholicism there is a

'compulsion to be always right,'...A compulsion which easily leads to witch-hunting and which, when turned the wrong way, hunts its witches in the Church herself and finally needs to find them in Rome. There are always human failures which can be exploited for this purpose.... The point is not just "who is right?" but "judge not" and "forgive one another" and "bear one another's burdens." This by no means implies passive obsequiousness and blind obedience, but a willingness to listen, to be patient, and to keep working to help the Church change and renew itself from within. This is our task.388

He concludes by saying that there are definitely times to speak out in a world of so many conflicts. His mission now is to pray. If people have urgent questions and problems he

388 Ibid., p. 96.
will try to make time to reply.

In Lent 1967, he answers charges that he is against technology. He states that he is not against technology. He thinks it is a myth that technology makes everything better for everyone. He appreciates modern medicine and thanks God for penicillin. "Penicillin saves lives for people whom society then allows to starve because it is not set up to feed them." Society could direct its technology towards feeding the starving but it does not.

To-day twelve per cent of the world's population (repeat twelve per cent) live in the appalling shanty towns and poblaciones that are seen in the outskirts of South American, African and Asian cities. What is technology doing for these people? It is not creating work for them, but is developing more and more labor-saving methods of production because technology in our society is not in the service of people but in the service of profit. What I am criticizing is the myth that this kind of "labor-saving" technology will turn the world into a paradise. It will not. Look what technology is doing in Vietnam!!!

... In our technological world we have wonderful methods for keeping people alive and wonderful methods for killing them off, and they both go together.389

He states that Mater et Magistra and the Council document Gaudium et Spes show how technology can be made to serve everyone. This runs counter to the free private enterprise society of capitalism. To tell suffering people that they will have their reward in heaven when they could, without others' greed, enjoy a reasonable life on earth is to subscribe to the kind of religious teaching which Marx rightly denounced as "the opium of the people." This stance is non-Christian. One of the seven deadly sins is greed. He ends

389 Ibid., pp. 98-99.
the letter by saying that Easter is the feast of Love. Can people inspired by Love use technology to better the lot of others? Hopefully they can do so, as technology alone cannot. In another circular letter he says that persons, not things, effect change. Also he considers it valuable to ask questions, even if one doesn't know the answer. Merton quotes Camus by saying "that the greatness of man consists in his ability to find something bigger than himself."390

In the Advent-Christmas letter of 1967, he is positive about the Church. It is God's Church. The dead wood needs to be pruned away. The fact of the Nativity of Christ is the source of hope for the world. Love needs to be both received and given. In 1968, he refers to the religious who have left religious life. He feels that they are still searching for whatever brought them into religious life in the first place. They need support. Their former communities should "remain in fruitful dialogue with them."391

Merton, in a later letter, refers to the current fashion of declaring that the religious life is a waste of good lives and that it is even unchristian. It is acceptable to be intolerant of outmoded practices. It is totally unacceptable and unjust to denounce those who have given their whole lives to God in good faith. Merton says that there were many practices in the religious life that were ridiculous, inhuman and warped. The religious of his generation realised this but put up with the situation as a following of Christ. Yes, many

390 Ibid., p.106.

391 Ibid., p.110.

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were scarred by these unhealthy practices and still labour under their burden. It must be admitted that some of these growth-stunting practices remain. Merton, in full realisation of these inadequacies, has decided that the monastery is where God wants him to be. That is where he will remain.

In Midsummer 1968, he writes of violence. Dr. Martin Luther King has been assassinated. President J. F. Kennedy and then Robert Kennedy suffered the same fate.

...the problem of violence in our society is now critical... (it) is endemic in the whole of society and more especially in the establishment itself, the military, the police, the established forces of "order" - they are all infected with a mania for overkill, rooted in fear. The future promises an era of force, suspicion, terrorism with more or less futile acts of protest, violently repressed. Unless we get some really intelligent and creative leadership, our future as a democracy is not bright.392

He comments on the Berrigan Brothers' actions as perhaps extreme, but he finds it very disturbing to hear a Catholic Bishop describing the war in Vietnam as an act of Christian love. Should that not have shocked people even more? "No, it was accepted as a bit strange, perhaps, but "normal"...a few like the Berrigans, in their desperation, try to show by extreme protest that it is not normal at all."393 The neglect of prayer has brought this crisis. The remedy, it seems to Merton, is prayer.

The letter of September 1968, before he sets out on his last journey, states that "our real journey in life is interior: it is a matter of growth, deepening, and of an ever greater

392 Ibid., p.116.
393 Ibid.
surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts."  

The last circular letter is the Asian Letter of 9 November, 1968, from New Delhi, India. He writes of meditation, of his meeting with the Dalai Lama and of the rich experience of meeting true men of prayer. In all of these letters he both asked for prayers and promises to pray for all his friends. In summary, maybe this is the only counsel that is needed.

Merton's letters are direct, pulsating with life and genuine concern. There is nothing abstract about them. They are all intensely personal and speak to the person addressed. Merton had such a reverence for time that each and every letter had to be important. In one sense, he crafted his letters. Idle chatter or gossip are totally alien to him. His belief in his mission as a writer kept him targeted to the work in hand. His letters were directive and his great gift was the ability to be present to the 'other' on paper.

Buber writes: "Just by my accepting love, I discover in you what you are meant to become." This is also Merton's creed. Merton starts from the premise 'I am' and 'I am with others.' "I must look for my identity somehow, not only in God but in other men." Counselling facilitates this mature relationship and harmony between the 'I am' and 'I am with others' which develops in maturity into an 'I-Thou' dialogue. The need for counselling disappears when "one no longer seeks to be told by another who one is. One no longer demands re-assurance. But there is the whole infinite depth of what is remaining to be revealed."

\[394\] Ibid., p.118.

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Advice? I would say that there is one basic idea that should be kept in mind in all the changes we make in life, whether of career or anything else. We should decide not in view of better pay, higher rank, "getting ahead," but in view of becoming more real, entering more authentically into direct contact with life, living more as a free and mature human person, able to give myself more to others, able to understand myself and the world better.  

This is Merton, the spiritual director / counsellor. Again he is realistic. (the italics in the above quotation are his.) He is, as always, calm, compassionate and value-orientated. He knows money does not satisfy one's higher aspirations for love, for peace and for self-transcendence. Man needs a 'why' to continue living. Frankl, quoting Nietzsche says, "he who has a why can endure any how." Merton does not aim to give ready "whys." Every one must find his or her own way. Merton points man in the direction of self-transcendence. It is up to everyone to follow the star or at least to raise his gaze.

Chapter 5 Merton and Counselling

5.1. The Emergence of Counselling

Counselling is as old as time. In The Book of Genesis Joseph acted as the Pharaoh's advisor. Gilgamesh sought advice about the defeat of Enkidu. The ancients consulted the oracles at Delphi. Aeneas, on his arrival in Italy, sought out Sibyl, Apollo's priestess to find out his future. Merton in his writings refers to the I Ching, saying that it had fortune-telling patterns, which would be dangerous for the unwise. It should be used with caution. The Magi searched for the new star and followed it. Every king had his druids to advise him. These druids were part of the Aes Dana in Ireland and as such had a very high social status. Paulinus, the Roman general was engaged in defeating the druids on Mona, when Bodicea, Queen of the Iceni, attacked and pillaged London.

In the Greek world Socrates called himself a healer of souls. (The word 'psychiatrist' is derived from the Greek iatros tes psyche.) Plato also saw himself as a healer of souls, healing by verbal means. Freud's so called "talking cure" dates back at least to the Fourth century B.C.

The Greeks and Romans were unique in viewing the philosopher as the physician of the soul. Other cultures tended to see the soul as pertaining to the religious domain.
"However, in each case it has involved the use of conversation for the nurture and healing of persons, the care and cure of souls being understood as addressing those needs at the deepest level of our being." 396

When science gained prominence over religion in the seventeenth century, there was a tendency to dismiss religion as a complex of magical rituals and observances. The birth of modern psychology dates from the emergence of Freud and psychoanalysis at the end of the Nineteenth Century. Psychoanalysis saw itself as a therapeutic method which was reputed to be modern, technical and value free. "While twentieth century psychotherapists have sought to replace care of sinful souls with cure of sick minds, all they have really done is take from clerics their historic role as physicians of the soul." 397 Psychological man replaced spiritual man. This was a simplistic solution. Man's need for self transcendence demands recognition. The presenting problems are spiritual in character at their root.

In Psychology, "spirit" is used (with the adjective "spiritual") to denote all that belongs to our higher life of reason, art, morality and religion as contrasted with the life of mere sense-perception and passion. The latter is intrinsically dependent on matter and conditioned by its laws. The former is characterized by freedom or the power of self-determination. "Spirit" in this sense is essentially personal. 398


397 Ibid.

5.2. Theories of Counselling

There are many theories of counselling. These theories reflect the world view of the counsellor. The Behaviourists, the Freudians, the Humanistic existential counsellors and non-directive Rogerian counsellors to name but a few, all structure their counselling sessions in very different ways. Yet despite their differences of emphases, all the theories have much in common. All have as their goal the emergence of the client as a mature well integrated person, in touch with the reality of self and the world.

What are the emphases of the various theories of counselling? The psychoanalysts aim to reconstruct the basic personality through reliving earlier experiences, by getting in touch with the unconscious, and thereby to resolve repressed conflicts. In this way they aim to achieve intellectual awareness and freedom.

The Behaviourists focus on specific problems. Their approach is present and future orientated. It is highly directive, with the counsellor playing a very active role in the modification of behaviours. When the client is socially re-orientated, then he is on the road to personal development and maturity. His previous anti-social behaviour blocked any possibility of integration or maturation.

The Existential counsellor sees his role as releasing the client to freedom, a freedom which enables man to act freely within the limits of the law. This is freedom to act responsibly. How one responds to externals depends on one's self concept and self image. The existential counsellor's role is to lead the client to accept his freedom and to take responsibility for his own life. In striving to effect change, the counsellor and the client
endeavour to find ways to help the client to grow in maturity, even in the face of struggle, pain and failure. The attainment of one's true self is seen in the inner power of the individual to control his future and to live in a human way, even in the midst of misfortune, even in captivity. For Frankl, freedom alone helps to make sense of suffering, of the mystery of life and death.

Person-centred counselling provides an atmosphere conducive to helping the client reach a solution to his problems. In a friendly congruent atmosphere, the client is enabled to discover himself and to recognise the things which block his growth. The result is a surge of self-trust leading to healthy personality growth, in a climate of self-critical, self-acceptance, created by the counsellor's unconditional positive regard, his empathy and genuineness.

5.3. The Art of Counselling

"Counselling is the art of helping human beings to become well integrated and fully realized persons."399 The healed client is no longer subject to life's many manipulators, but is rather responsible for his own life, thus enhancing his self concept and self image. St. Thomas calls this "the art of living rightly."

This is the ideal. "The woman you gave me tempted me" was Adam's defence in the Fall account in the Book of Genesis. Adam was free and responsible. His non-acceptance of responsibility is repeated down the centuries. Eichmann did not accept any responsibility for the thousands whom he allowed to die. Similarly, personal wrong doing is presented daily in the media as the outcome of collective forces and not due to any personal decisions. The media fry the big fish. The minnows (i.e. the ordinary people) are for the most part the self-evading, self-blaming clientele of the counsellor. For the existential counsellor freedom, responsibility and interpersonal responsibilities, and self-acceptance form a triad in his attitude and approach to the client. For effective counselling, the therapeutic alliance of the counsellor and the client is the most important element.

5.4. The Quest for Identity

The basic identity question is "who am I" or "what am I." The identity crisis lies at the heart of psychological searching. If life has no meaning beyond man's biblical span of three score and ten years, why suffer? Merton makes the point that before his conversion to Christianity, as life was the only certainty and good he knew, he prayed for his grandmother to live.

Freud invoked sex and the pleasure principle. Maslow developed his hierarchy of values, culminating in self-actualisation. Frankl, in his turn, substituted "the will to meaning" for Freud's will to pleasure. His experience of the concentration camps convinced him of the
truth of Nietzsche's saying, "He who has a why will endure any how." Merton in his turn formulated a theory of counselling based on the necessity of man to find his inner identity and to discover his groundedness in God.

The increase of suicides particularly in young males would point to a dissatisfaction, amounting to a dis-ease, a reluctance to endure the pain and suffering that accompanies life. Some psychologists and counsellors see attempted suicides as cries for help. Holistic therapists and counsellors today re-assert the role of the spiritual in the psychological process. The Twelve Step programmes of organisations like Alcoholics Anonymous call on the inner spiritual resources of the person, to enable him to live one hour at a time.

The proliferation of popular psychological literature, such as the writings of Norman Vincent Peale, Dr. Scott Peck and Susan Jeffers, demonstrate the hunger in the heart of man to understand himself. Is he simply a bundle of reflexes or a being with a spiritual core? If man has a spiritual core, in what does it exist? This is the age old dilemma. Socrates' maxim, "Know thyself" discovers an inner vitality which cannot be reduced to the physical components of the body. Man's self sacrifice in heroic circumstances such as Frankl's refusing to use his own exit visa as his father did not get one; firemen risking their lives to save others; Sheila Cassidy's work in South America and Dr. Rieux' efforts to alleviate the suffering of the plague victims in Camus' *The Plague* are examples of the power of love, of the spiritual, in the concrete situation. The spiritual permeates the whole person, his intellect, his heart and his will. His spirit could be described as an enfolding atmosphere. David Benner says:
My thesis is that, while psychotherapy is usually viewed as a psychological procedure for treating psychological or psychophysiological disorders, it cannot be properly understood without reference to spiritual aspects of person and its process. Furthermore, until the essential spiritual foundation of both human nature and psychotherapy is acknowledged, the confusion over what psychotherapy is and how it is best conducted will only become worse.

5.5. The Power of Love.

Fromm claims that man in essence needs to love. He is spiritual in his essential composition. "All men are "idealists" and are striving for something beyond the attainment of physical satisfaction. They differ in the kinds of ideals they believe in." Fromm also states that, "there is no one without a religious need, a need to have a frame of orientation and an object of devotion." To state this negatively he says:

If a person has not succeeded in integrating his energies in the direction of his higher self, he canalizes them in the direction of lower goals; if he has no picture of the world and his position in it which approximates the truth, he will create a picture which is illusory and cling to it with the same tenacity with which the religionist believes in his dogmas. Indeed 'man does not live by bread alone'. He has only the choice of better or worse, higher or lower, satisfactory or destructive forms of religions and philosophies.

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400 David Benner, *Counselling as a Spiritual Process*, p.6.


402 Ibid., p.25.

Man is caught in the web of unreality. He is out of touch with himself. Man's troubled mind is dominant in physosomatic illnesses. Cure of the mind is often accompanied by the cure of physical ills. Why do people with incurable illnesses with concomitant suffering not self destruct? Frankl faced this question in the concentration camp.

Frankl's concentration camp experiences illustrate man's basic freedom. Despite captivity he was still free to hope, to love and to seek purpose and meaning in life. Frankl recounts a talk he gave to his fellow prisoners. The prisoners were on a twenty-four hour punishment fast. The electricity failed and they were plunged into darkness. The senior block warden was worried about the low morale of the prisoners. A good number had died either of sickness or suicide. He asked Frankl to give some words of hope. In his talk, Frankl was both optimistic and honest. Why surrender to death? Life may be bad but luck might turn in their being allocated to a gang with good working conditions. Was the past not good in some respects? The past could be rebuilt in the future. Was there no light in the present? Who knows what the next hour or day would bring. Hope was vital. He quoted a line of poetry "Was Du erlebst, Kann Keine Macht der Welt Dir Rauben." (What you have experienced, no power on earth can take from you). He presented the ideal of sacrifice, of offering up their sufferings for another. His strong belief in God and the afterlife was evident in his statement that someone looks down on each of them, a friend and/or a God - do we want to disappoint them? Suffering proudly for the hopelessness of the struggle to stay alive does not detract from life's dignity and meaning.
Life under any circumstances never ceases to have meaning. Frankl concluded "the purpose of my words was to find a full meaning in our life." Merton echoes this.

No matter how ruined a man and his world may seem to be, and no matter how terrible man's despair may become, as long as he continues to be a man his very humanity continues to tell him that life has a meaning. "Our purpose in life is to discover this meaning and live according to it."

Merton's philosophy of the person would seem to sit easiest with the existential humanistic theories, as exemplified by Maslow, Frankl and the person-centred therapy introduced by Rogers and developed by his followers. Merton respects each one's freedom. He acts out of his belief of the dignity of the 'other.'

5.6. Merton, the Spiritual Direction and the Counselling Process

One of Merton's scholastics, James Conner, OCSO, writes about the direction sessions he had with Merton in the period leading up to his solemn profession in 1954. Merton's compassion impressed him deeply.

When people ask me what was most memorable about Father Louis (Merton), I have always said that it was his humanity. He was warm, jovial, light-hearted and youthful. He was about thirty six years old at the time....He had a good sense of humor which he readily shared with others in a way that kept their feet on the ground....Merton was an excellent spiritual director. He had the ability to comprehend what was conveyed almost without its having to be expressed....His ability to listen and hear

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what they expressed made him to be the spiritual father he was for so many.... All of this was a concrete expression of a theme that played a large part in his writings, namely, the true self. For Merton the true self was not some sort of idealization of the person nor some esoteric part which is encountered only in rare and profound encounters. He was conscious of that true self present in each person and he was attentive to help the person become more familiar with that and to strive to live more fully from that level. He saw falsity not just as a defense mechanism but as a lack of living from that level and that reality which the Lord sees and loves.406

Merton's openness was evident in each session and he used his knowledge of psychology to help the young monks to grow in self knowledge. His pre-monastic bohemian life style, his knowledge of literature coupled with authentic monastic living, afforded him a richness of inner experience to better understand presenting problems. It is quite common that people struggle with this final decision, whether to remain in the monastery or not, for some time before it is made. Conner continues:

In this way I would regularly bring to him each week all the doubts I had about making solemn vows: the benefits of married life, the beauty of human love, the value of a life of ministry, the seeming purposelessness of the monastic life. Each time he listened patiently and honestly discussed the pros and cons of each point as it arose, but without judgement or pressure. Finally a couple of months before a decision was due, I remarked to him that all of these arguments still go on in my head, but that somehow there remained a silent conviction of the fact that when the time came, I would decide to make profession. At this he simply responded "Now you are really talking."407

This quotation illustrates many of the skills of a good counsellor. His attentiveness helped


407 Ibid., p.477.
the young monk to be at ease, enabling him to talk openly, spontaneously and honestly. Conner weighed the attractions of marriage and of human love as against the seeming purposelessness of the monastic life. In this quiet reflective time together, Conner was able to discuss his doubts and fears. Time was given to him to explore all options. Merton's empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard set the young man at ease to discuss sensitive issues. In this way, his search for identity was affirmed.

The freedom of the client to proceed at his own pace is essential in person-centred counselling.

While the counsellor needs to respond when a client is weighing two options, the response should be "You don't know what to do, which way to go" or "you don't know which side has the most value "In this way, he keeps the conflict state in the exact proportion that the person feels it. The conflict will slowly be resolved in one direction as the person sees more clearly which is the more reasonable path for him.  

Merton obviously followed this procedure with Conner. Conner commented on Merton's good humour during the sessions. This is important. When the client is trying to resolve a dilemma, the strain of an incongruent counsellor would increase his feelings of inferiority and incompetence. Lurking in his mind is the feeling that a certain stigma is attached to attending a counsellor. When a person is full of self doubt, the necessity to consult a counsellor makes it appear that he is unable to think for himself. Merton always respected the freedom of the 'other'.

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Man finds himself and is happy when he is able to be aware that his freedom is spontaneously and vigorously functioning to orientate his whole being toward the purpose which it craves to achieve in its deepest spiritual centre. This purpose is life in the fullest sense of the word - not mere individual self-centered egotistical life which is doomed to end in death, but a life that transcends individual limitations and needs, and subsists outside the individual self in the absolute - in Christ, in God. Man is truly alive when he is aware of himself as master of his own destiny to life or to death, aware of the fact that his ultimate fulfilment or destruction depends on his own free choice, and aware of his ability to decide for himself. This is the beginning of true life.\footnote{Thomas Merton, \textit{The New Man} (London: Burns & Oates Ltd., 1962), pp. 7-8.}

In his turn, Frankl traces some forms of neurosis to the failure to find meaning and a sense of purpose in life. One needs a purpose to go on living. Freedom is as much a spiritual as a physical thing. As the poet Lovelace says, "stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage." \footnote{Richard Lovelace, "To Althea From Prison" in \textit{The Golden Treasury} Selected by F.T. Palgrave (London: Macmillan &Co., Ltd., 1929), p.99.} Man is free to choose within the limits of his nature and the legal restraints. Merton sees freedom as man's birthright, a gift, part of the essence of man, be he king or servant. He is a realist, as the facts indicate that many men are slaves, either in reality, or slaves to another's whims and even more to their own false self.

Merton's direction was always realistic and balanced. Religious life, as he admitted in a letter to Sr. Anita, is initially a strain. The young monk's striving for perfection can result in his becoming introspective and self-centred. Merton's weekly sessions with each novice can be compared to a journey. On this journey are both Merton and the client. Merton was influenced by his own current reading, the choice of which was dictated both by his
work and personal preference, by his environs and by stimuli provided by his many correspondents. The novice is becoming immersed in an unfamiliar monastic culture, a regime of prayer and work which is a total contrast to the "Rock and Roll" world vocalised in 1956 by Bill Hailey and The Comets with *Rock around the Clock*. Thus, there are two life-stories here, both with a past and future. Their 'now' is the encounter of these two stories. The resulting insights are their agenda for the future.

5.7. The Shared Journey

This journey dimension is important. Everyone is in a state of becoming. Unless people are challenged and broadened, they will not search the depths to find the 'pearl of great price'. They will not attain the self-awareness and self-transcendence which is waiting within and without. Thus, Merton in his own reading programme and in his views on monastic and university education stresses the need for the spiritual in peoples' lives. Often this spiritual dimension lies dormant, needing the help of an insightful counsellor to effect its re-awakening from hibernation to new life.

Counselling and direction is not just for crises in life. The ideal is to have regular 'stopovers' on the journey both to evaluate and gain refreshment to travel the next mile, be it through desert, in either sense, or through green pastures. The person becomes increasingly whole as his knowledge of life grows, a knowledge, experienced in reality or vicariously.
That "thou canst not utter what thou dost not know" is true for everyone. For some, knowledge is power. Socrates sees knowledge as virtue. Frankl believes that knowledge is a means of achieving a life of meaning. For Merton, knowledge is the key to existence, in so far as it allows man to find his identity. He finds his identity in his relationship with others and with God. Man is essentially relational. Thus man's knowledge of self is essential to a proper understanding of the meaning of life and death. Merton, like Frankl, ask questions of life. The tentative answers reflect the person's understanding of life and of himself.

Knowledge of self is deep and difficult to discern. The complex being that is man, is a life time study. Man's social milieu, his environment and his genetic composition, all combine to make this multi-faceted being. The answer to the questions "who am I", and "whither am I going" is the key to man's actions. As man is so complex, he makes many detours on life's journey. Sometimes, the way is a trackless waste where in one sense no one has gone before. Sometimes, he stands at the fork in the road. There he has yet another choice to make. As regards choice, Frankl says through choice, irrespective of circumstance, man can be a swine or a saint.

In substituting the noetic dimension for the instinctual, Frankl insists that we are not egos driven by the id, seeking to manipulate to deceive, and to demean ourselves and others. Instead we are spiritually empowered beings seeking wholeness, true values and meaning, who can see guilt constructively as well as negatively....Although guilt reminds us of our imperfections and limitations, it is a sign of our humanness and helps us to avoid hubris and to determine what is ethical. Existentialism and humanism stress the role of reason, experience and the exercise of the will.
Existentialism's personalism aims at establishing a holistic philosophy of the self beginning with commitment. Knowledge of things may amount only to a mastery of technology. This is not to underrate technology. The sight of the robotic 'mini' land-rover, walking on the surface of Mars and beaming back photographs, fills one with awe. This is man's work at the end of the Twentieth Century. Man has made great advances. The global village, of which everyone is a citizen, is present by satellite, in the living room. The question is, is man more loving, more mature, more altruistic as a result of this knowledge?

5.8. Altruism

One definition of altruism which could be applied to the "apparently rich" is advanced by a Rogerian psychologist, David Brazier, in the collection of essays entitled *Beyond Carl Rogers*. He states:

Providing accurate empathy is a thoroughly altruistic activity. Being a therapist or indeed a helper of any description, involves a relationship in which at least one of the parties has the intent of promoting the growth, development, maturity, improved functioning, improved coping with life of the other.

For the therapist it must be growth promoting to give primary attention to someone other than self, to put one's own concerns aside and to adopt a completely altruistic stance whether or not, in the process, one receives empathy, positive regard and congruence oneself. The major beneficiary of

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therapy is the therapist.412

This says that it is more blessed to give than to receive. The act of giving which goes beyond what is 'reasonable' is an act of virtue. This is the sense in which Merton views altruism. Merton, in this regard is balanced in his outlook. To bestow riches indiscriminately is unwise. While the donor may feel good, it is necessary to exercise prudence. To give everything, to try to anticipate every need of the 'other' is to demean the 'other' by not respecting his need to be altruistic also.

The counsellor, who is truly conscious of the dignity and freedom of the 'other', does not kill and bury the client in an avalanche of words, ideas and suggestions. If the intention is to bind the 'other' to oneself, then that is not love, but bondage. Where the giving of oneself is in question, an equal caution holds good. The greatest wealth a person can bestow is oneself. Altruism, according to Merton, is a reflection and imitation of the Supreme Being. Bede Griffiths, O.S.B., says:

The Godhead is the Supreme Reality in which the whole creation and every human being in the creation and every experience in the whole universe is gathered into total unity. This is what Nicholas of Cusa calls the "coincidence of opposites" in ultimate truth. And that is the ultimate goal of life, to reach that total unity where we experience the whole creation and the whole of humanity reintegrated in the supreme consciousness, in the One, which is pure being, pure knowledge and pure bliss, saecidananda.413

Blazier says that when one is frustrated in being altruistic, that is, in giving love, then the


person is diminished. "Frustration in life is now seen not so much as a failure to gather narcissistic supplies, as the misfortune of living among those who are unreceptive to goodwill. 414 Altruism is the ideal. Despite Blazier's positing it's source as self-interest, Merton's viewpoint is that altruism involves self sacrifice.

5.9. Merton, The Spiritual Director of the Scholastics and Novices

It can be asserted with a degree of certainty that every aspiring Cistercian or Trappist entrant would have read The Seven Storey Mountain, Merton's autobiography, by 1950. Merton graphically describes the stages in his life. He wrote it 'under obedience' at the behest of his abbot. Despite the censorship of the work, the picture of a man brimful of energy, of vitality and above all, of a man full of humanity emerges. It pulsates with life, as it is a chronicle based on truth. The fact that it was censored, is not surprising. Merton's difficulties with the censors of the Order throughout his monastic life are recorded in his correspondence and his journals. He experienced great frustration over their attempts to stop the publication of his journal, recording the events of the years 1939-1941. Finally, it was published as The Secular Journal. It was so called to emphasise the fact that it was written before he joined the Trappists.

Both Rogers and Frankl would recommend a sharing of experience with their clients.

Frankl gave an account of his imprisonment in the concentration camps. The apparent ease of Merton's acceptance into Gethsemani, when he had been rejected by the Franciscans, would lead one to think that men, with equally colourful backgrounds, were already in the monastery. Any new entrant to Gethsemani after 1950, would not hesitate to try to locate Merton among the other robed men. As master of scholastics from 1951 to 1955, he had regular sessions with those men who were preparing for the priesthood. As novice master from 1955 to 1965, the new entrants were in his care, subject to the Abbot. There would have been no fear of shocking him by the honest revelation of their innermost thoughts. He encouraged frank and open discussions.

This easy relationship between novice master and novice helped the novice to reach inner harmony. Inner harmony has as it's opposite - dissonance. People in mental distress who seek the counsellor's help, experience a sense of dissonance, of being out of tune both with themselves and their neighbour. Serenity and peace are lacking, so too is the ability to tame the wild horses within themselves.

Existential anxiety is healthy. A degree of tension is creative, encouraging people to find a solution to problems, or to risk a new venture. This is, however, very different from the client whose reaction to events are out of proportion to their seriousness. In this instance,

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415 Many of his ex-novices corresponded with him for many years after they had left his care. This includes men like James Conner, OCSO who remained in the monastery and men like Ernesto Cardenal who left Gethsemani to minister to his own people in Nicaragua.

416 Plato describes the lower appetites as wild horses.
neurotic anxiety takes control. This paralyses the client. Reflection in a directed way gives the perspective to go forward, to get the "courage to be." It requires training and self-control on the part of the counsellor to wait for the client to regain his self-control and to make his own decision.

Merton's use of examples from literature in his talks to the young monks gave them further insights into life by means of vicarious lived experience. Is that not one of the roles of catharsis in theatrical representations? Authentic life consists in man's learning to live with himself, being able to cope with normal anxiety. Ideally, man acts rather than reacts in daily life. Merton's great gift lay in his ability to be present to each one. His was a profound insight into the cause of the person's dissonance.

The counsellor, following the person-centred approach, is able to make interjections and ask reflective questions which will spotlight the root of the problem. In one sense, the counsellor is like a mirror, reflecting the client's thoughts back in a slightly modified manner. It often happens with new clients that the presenting problem is not the issue, but only peripheral to disclosure of the real problem in a favourable climate. Merton, therefore, in helping the young man, Conner, to reach a balanced viewpoint, allows the him the dignity of being the instrument of bringing about his own inner harmony. One will risk all, even death itself, for what one owns and loves. An imposed solution can cause inner rebellion and perhaps disintegration. In extreme cases, the result may be suicide. A decision forced upon a client is not a decision but the tyranny of bondage.

Merton believed in a common-sense approach to problems. He felt familiar remedies
should be tried first. A walk in the woods, immersing oneself in the beauty of the trees, the bird song and the multi-hued sunset were in his judgement extremely therapeutic and health giving. He himself, in a letter to Abbot Fox after a day in the woods, thanked him for this permission, as he felt restored in mind and body. He advocated the cultivation of hobbies to the laity who consulted him and he no doubt approved of St. Thomas Aquinas' cures for sadness - a hot bath, a long walk, a talk with a compassionate friend and a good sleep. St. Catherine of Siena says "God does not require a great work but infinite desire". This was Merton's view also. His formula lacks drama and is devoid of ostentation.

5.10. The Wisdom of Referral to a Psychiatrist

While common sense was his yardstick, Merton was sufficiently skilled in the art of counselling to know when homespun remedies were insufficient. This insight is vital. It was his practice to refer his novices, when necessary, to Dr. J. Wygal, a psychiatrist in Louisville. Sometimes the use of chemical curatives are essential in addition to the "talking cure." A counsellor shows wisdom when he prudently makes a referral. There is humility here also, as some counsellors see themselves as "god" and resent any suggestion that superior or different skills are needed. Accurate diagnosis is the mark of a good

doctor. Similarly timely referral is the mark of a good counsellor.

5.11. The Quest for Maturity

Man has potentialities which he must realise if he is to become fully mature. Human maturation has been defined as "that underlying dimension of consciousness that openly waits and searches for a transcendental fulfilment of our human nature." Maslow describes the self-actualised person. He says:

The psychological health of the adult is called variously, self-fulfilment, emotional maturity, individuation, productiveness, self-actualization, authenticity, full humanness etc. ... Self actualization is defined in various ways but a solid core of agreement is perceptible. All definitions accept or imply (a) acceptance and expression of the inner core of self, i.e. actualization of these latent capacities, and potentialities, "full functioning," availability of the human and personal essence. (b) They all imply minimal presence of ill health, neurosis, psychosis, of loss or diminution of the basic human and personal capacities.

Merton says that self discovery is the path to man's true identity in God. Maturity is seen in integration and inner harmony. It includes mental, emotional and social maturity. When one is mature, the intellect and will are in control. Self-knowledge, sincere self-acceptance and self-love are present. In arriving at maturity, the person has explored his personality. He acknowledges his gifts and is ready to use them for the benefit of others.

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As knowledge naturally flows into love, so self-knowledge which plays the main role in mental maturity, should give birth to sincere self-acceptance and self-love, which are the most essential elements of emotional security. So, within the unity of the human person, mental maturity merges with emotional maturity, and both contribute together to the same person's self-control.  

This leads in turn to social maturity. When a mature person looks at life, he is convinced that to look is insufficient. Looking must change to love. The reaching out to the 'other' in love is as natural as breathing when the person has a balanced perspective of himself and his world. Reaching out to the 'other' involves risk. Man however, is incomplete, without this social dimension. That is why Merton is so insistent that solitude is a prerequisite for action, as solitude helps gain perspective. Awareness of one's roots in society and the ability to transcend the self is a mark of the mature person. His inner self and his persona to the world are in harmony.

Emotional maturity sees things in correct proportion. There is balance based on the concept of doing to others as one would do to oneself. Aggressiveness, other-manipulation, lust and anger darken the understanding. They diminish a person's freedom as these passions darken the inner eye and render the person unresponsive to reason. Love is not always met by love. This is part of the pain of humankind but the mature person needs to give love.

There is no greater human need than to love and to be loved. This need touches the deepest level of the human heart. And the need to love may be deeper and more central than the need to be loved. Often we receive our

meaning from our loving actions towards others.  

Man is social by nature. Through seeing, hearing, touching and speaking, man interrelates with the world and with others. The more real he becomes in the sense of being rooted in reality, both material and metaphysical, the more authentic his responses become, reflecting the mature inner person who is constantly evolving. Growth, in Merton's view is not growth in a linear sense but more a deeper realization of who we are; that is our capacity to be. Our formation as whole persons cannot be measured simply in terms of what we can do or what we know; we are not what is outside ourselves...Ultimately our "doing" will emerge freely from our "being" essentially, from love.

Merton's starting point is "I am" and "I am with others." As a result, his ideas are grounded in a basic reality and are not contingent on peripherals, which are in a constant state of change. These changes are faced and acknowledged. The person who is grounded in an inner certainty, is able to assimilate and process new stimuli and experiences. Merton says:

Now anxiety is the mark of spiritual insecurity. It is the fruit of unanswered questions. But questions cannot go unanswered unless they first be asked....One of the moral diseases we communicate to one another in society comes from huddling together in the pale light of an insufficient answer to a question we are afraid to ask.

He is certain that many read his books because he does not give ready-made answers, but rather poses questions, volunteering tentative answers, leaving the reader the dignity of

422 Thomas Merton, The New Man, p. 178.
423 Thomas Merton, No Man is an Island, pp. 12-13.
reaching his own decisions. In the last analysis

without a more profound human understanding derived from exploration of the inner ground of human existence, love will tend to be superficial and deceptive....He who attempts to act and do things for others or for the world without deepening his own self - understanding, freedom, integrity and capacity to love, will not have anything to give to others. He will communicate to them nothing but the contagion of his own obsessions, his aggressiveness, his ego - centered ambitions, his delusions about ends and means, his doctrinaire prejudices and ideas.424

In reality, life will never be conflict free. This conflict is both positive and negative. The positive aspects of conflict are the creative energy that it releases. It can lead to a richer, more whole and a more compassionate person. "The management of conflict is the raw material for wholeness."425

5.12. The Counsellor's Need for Solitude

The counsellor needs solitude. He will not be able to make significant interventions unless he has spent time alone pondering his client's problems. Only with mature reflection, will he be able to throw light on the presenting problem by reframing the client's responses with a new focus. The counsellor needs contemplative moments. Merton writes:

Whether from the point of view of psychology, ethics, art, religion or simply in the development of man's deepest capacities, the contemplative


425 Mark Sutherland, "Pastoral Care, Theology and Mental Health" in Contact No. 123, edited by Stephen Pattison & Andrew Jones ( Surrey: Contact Pastoral Ltd., 1997 ). p 17.
experience is in touch with what is most basic in human existence. 426

Solitude is not escapism; rather it is the ground of ordinary life. "He who is truly alone finds in himself the heart of compassion with which to love not only this man or that but all men." 427

5.13. The "Must" of Confidentiality

It must be stressed that confidentiality is the client's prerogative. Merton himself respected peoples' right to confidentiality, as he placed a twenty five year embargo on the release of his papers in the event of his death. John Howard Griffin, when he was writing "The Hermitage Years", asked Margaret Smith's 428 permission to use her name in his account of the years, 1966 - 68. Monica Furlong, whose biography Merton was published in 1980, did not use her name nor include many details about her. Mott in the official biography, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, does not name her either but refers to her as 'S'.

Confidentiality is dictated both by prudence and justice. Confidentiality is essential. The guarantee of confidentiality, in so far as is possible, is central to disclosure. A client needs to be assured that his innermost thoughts will not become 'table-talk.' The Samaritans, in

426 Ibid., p.180.
428 A full account of the Margie-Merton love affair is to be found in John Howard Griffin, *The Hermitage Years*, pp57-87. cf. chapter one of this work.
their training of counsellors, insist that confidentiality is the cornerstone. In fact, it is the very basis of their service.

There are circumstances when the counsellor cannot give a complete guarantee of confidentiality. There are legal constraints on the counsellor to report suspected child abuse. The client should be informed of this at the beginning of the counselling sessions.

Everyone assumes that the material of a counseling interview will be kept private and personal. This not only requires that certain safeguards be present in the choice of the place for the counseling interview, but it also places special demands on the counselor himself. This must be particularly emphasized in interviews with children. The confidences of children are equally important. A child who feels he has been betrayed in a confidential relationship with an adult may be deeply hurt and may even become bitter as he broods over it. Consequently, if for any reason, the counsellor intends to use the information children give him, he should state this openly to the child before the interview begins.429

It might seem that Merton, by allowing the publication of his letters, disregards the principle of confidentiality. Br. Patrick Hart states that in addition to the twenty-five year 'hold' on the publication of his personal papers, Merton classified some material as "not for publication." Permission was sought from every correspondent before any letter was included in a collection. The evidence of 'gaps' in a series of letters, perhaps, indicates the withholding of some letters, as too personal for publication.

John Howard Griffin has been criticised for writing so frankly about the Margie-Merton relationship. Merton regarded this experience as deeply enriching, despite the pain it
caused them both. In May 1968, Merton gave a retreat to some contemplative religious superiors. One of his talks was entitled "the Feminine Mystique."

Men stand to gain by the rehabilitation of women; men will be more whole when women are. What everybody has to be is a person. Wholeness is in the reciprocity between men and women as persons who have the same nature.

...Then, of course, there's the male reaction of misogyny. Many men and a lot of clerics are really women-haters. They're afraid of women and they deal with women as if they were enemies, in a tricky or dishonest way....It all adds up to the fact that women have a secondary place. This is what's wrong, plain wrong: men on top and women in second place.

...We all have to fight against this. We need a whole new theological anthropology, a whole new understanding of what a human being is, what a woman is, what a man is.430

Perhaps, Margie and Merton are the twentieth century equivalent of Abelard and Heloise, thankfully, without the drastic consequences that they suffered. Merton is indeed more empathetic and compassionate, more a whole person, by his own admission, as the result of experiencing true love.

5.14. The Supervision of the Counsellor

Most counsellors seek supervision from another counsellor. They examine the material to ensure that the counsellor is not self-seeking nor prolonging the counselling sessions,

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thereby taking advantage of the client. The counsellor must guard against projecting his own life-view onto his clients.

For example to acknowledge in advance that I will make mistakes is to be aware of my fallibility and my constant need to learn and grow....It would be destructive to focus totally on my mistake, playing and replaying in the 'if only' aspect. Such blockage could damage my confidence as a helper.

On the other hand, analysing the error of speech or judgement, preferably with a colleague or supervisor, can help me consider alternative strategies for the future, eliminate aspects of my helping role that were not useful, and generally make the occasion into an opportunity for growth in my counselling ability.431

Merton used his correspondence with people like Milosz and Dom Jean Leclercq to test his responses and his interpretation of life's problems. His perpetual self-deepening, through prayer, reflection and his reading of modern and ancient sources, corresponds to the counsellor attending refresher courses and consulting others in a professional capacity.

It is recorded that Merton consulted Dom John Eudes Bamberger, a psychiatrist member of the Gethsemani community, in his professional capacity.

5.15. Grace and Nature

Philosophically, Merton was influenced by Gilson and Maritain who followed the Thomistic tradition. Due to his attendance at Dan Walsh's lectures and to his study of Blake for his Master's degree, he came under the influence of Duns Scotus and St.

Bonaventure, and finally the mystical tradition of St. John of the Cross. A basic scholastic and Thomistic adage is that grace builds on nature. St. Thomas says "grace not only builds on nature but enhances it." This can be traced back to St. Augustine and the Greek Fathers of the Early Church. Merton's adoption of this essentially optimistic view that man is basically good but flawed, is consistent with his understanding of the nature of man.

Is grace (maturity) opposed to nature? Not at all. Is it opposed only to the limitations, to the deficiencies, to the weaknesses of nature and to the infections and illnesses nature has incurred through the misuse of its own judgement and the abuse of its own freedom. Grace is given us for the precise purpose of enabling us to discover this deep self, which is hidden with Christ in God.

Is grace opposed to our own self-realization, to our perfection as persons? Far from it. Grace is given us for the precise purpose of enabling us to discover and actualize our deepest and truest self. The "self" to which grace is opposed is not merely the passionate, disordered, confused self - the rambling and dishevelled "ego" - but much more the tyrannical "super-ego," the rigid and deformed conscience, which is our secret God and which with an infinitely jealous resourcefulness defends its throne against the coming of Christ.

5.16. The False and Real Self

D. W. Winnicott, a paediatrician and psychiatrist in the Freudian tradition, deals with the concept of the true and false self. He sees the false self as the protector of the hidden true self. The person hides behind the false self lest the true self be wiped out by an enemy.

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who is often a significant other. Maturity comes only with the integration of the true self. The real self must risk the hazards of becoming real and vulnerable. The false self disappears only when the real self, like a timid deer, ventures into the open. For this to happen, the challenging of the false self is a prerequisite to becoming 'real' must occur. If man has not got the 'courage to be', he becomes alienated.

Alienation is the psychological condition of somebody who is never allowed to be fully himself .... There is no real personal meaning to his life, because everything he does belongs to someone else.434 Alienation is the cause of many of man's vain imaginings.

Merton is very conscious of the true and the false self concept. He sees the need to replace the false self with the true self. The false self is the mask presented to the world. Until man accepts himself, both in his negative and positive aspects, he fails to reach personal maturity. One of the goals of counselling is to align the self concept and the self ideal. Self-acceptance and self-esteem go hand in hand. Indeed, self-acceptance also facilitates better interpersonal relationships as the 'other' is not seen as an enemy. The false self must be replaced by the true self whose centre is found in God and in his fellow man. Growth has a spiral movement. Selfish self-salvation is impossible if the mature man is properly understood.

Merton maintains that it is through interpersonal relationships that man becomes truly


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human. After the "Margie affair" he remarked that "man is most human and proves his humanity (I did not say his virility) by the quality of his relationship with women." For Merton, the discovery and acceptance of the feminine is linked to the discovery of the true self. Here he recognises the complement of the sexes. The mature man "accepts others as unique individuals different from himself, prizes himself and prizes others." For man, salvation is the free search for authentic identity, the ousting of the false self by the real self. "We inherit a tendency towards maturity, which develops through each stage of life. Winnicott describes this as the psychomorphology of every day life."

5.17. The Mis-use of Counselling.

Merton reflects that ideally every person should enjoy the space and leisure to transcend himself. Society, however, "tends to lift a man above himself only far enough to make him a useful submissive instrument in whom the aspirations, lust and needs of the group can function unhindered by too delicate a personal conscience." Merton comments that "no


more remarkable device than psychoanalysis has ever been devised by a society for preventing its superior citizens from giving it pain (as the individual is wrong therefore classed neurotic, not revolutionary). Psychoanalysis renders them totally unsure and fills them with self doubt, unwilling and unable to trust their own judgement. There is nothing more debilitating than an illness which leaves the sick person overwhelmed by vulnerability, as the malady is hidden.

5.18. Self-Transcendence

Frankl's priority is defining the role of self-transcendence as the dimension of the self that enables persons to become aware of what it means to be human. Merton, in turn, says that society gives "each individual a chance to transcend himself in the service of others and thus become a person." 440

Merton's psychological, intellectual and spiritual development were all intertwined. His "inner journey was neither isolationist nor introspective. Rather it led to a widening of his horizons to the incorporation into his "theme of the self" of a rich mix of insights drawn from Catholic tradition, Protestant theologians such as Barth and Bonhoeffer, from the mystical traditions of Buddhism and Islam and from his own personal experience. 441

440 Ibid. p.140.
An Indian proverb says: Change yourself and you will enter a changed world. In an age devoted to scientific and other extroverted values, Merton stressed the centrality of the development of the inner man. This new man will come to maturity when he reaches the ground of his being, his innermost self. Merton sees the "cogito ergo sum" of Descartes as the declaration of an alienated being forced back on his thought to prove his existence. In so doing he reduces himself and God to a thing.

For Merton, the purpose of education is to show a person how to define himself authentically and spontaneously in relation to his world. The more man is in touch with his inner self in relationship with God and the world, the greater is his freedom to choose his own life and to know himself at the deepest possible level. Merton sees the function of a university as threefold. Firstly, a university should help the student to discover himself. Secondly, it should help him to recognise himself. Thirdly, it should help him to identify who it is that chooses. This is consistent with Merton's belief that it is essential for a human being to know who one is. Then he knows what he has to offer the world and how to make that offering valid.

Education means learning to be oneself, discovering the ground of one's being, a being "which not only survives the destruction of all other more superficial selves but finds its identity affirmed and clarified by their destruction." 442

442 Love and Living, p.5.
Merton sees a similarity between the monastery and the university.

Both monastery and university came into being in a civilization which paid a great deal of attention to what it considered to be its own primordial roots in a mythical and archetypal holy ground, a spiritual creation. Thus the Logos or Ratio of both monastery and university is pretty much the same. Both are “schools” and they teach not so much by imparting information as by bringing the clerk (in the university) or the monk (in the monastery) to direct contact with “the beginning,” the archetypal paradigm world. This was often stated symbolically by treating the various disciplines of university and monastic life, respectively, as the “four rivers of paradise.”

Merton speaks of a seeming conflict between the university and the monastery in relation to “participation” in and “experience” of the hidden and sacred values implanted in the ground of one’s being. He feels that they reach their destination by different means: the university by scientia, intellectual knowledge, and the monastery by sapientia, or mystical contemplation. These lines of distinction become blurred when you find mystics like Aquinas and Eckhart in the university.

Thus, the fruit of education, whether in the university (as for Eckhart) or in the monastery (as for Ruysbroeck) was the activation of that inmost center, that scintilla animae, that “apex” or “spark” which is a freedom beyond freedom, an identity beyond essence, a self beyond all ego, a being beyond the created realm, and a consciousness that transcends all division, all separation. To activate this spark is not to be, like Plotinus, “alone with the Alone,” but to recognize the Alone which is by itself in everything because there is nothing can be apart from It and yet nothing that can be with It, and nothing that can realize It. It can only realize itself. The “spark” which is my true self is the flash of the Absolute recognizing itself in me.

143 Ibid., p.7.
144 Ibid., p.10.
Merton believed that there should be monks in the monastery who are able to engage in dialogue with intellectuals in all fields. The monastery is not anti-intellectual. Many novices come to the monastery without “training in humanities.” This, in Merton’s view, is not limited to a knowledge of Latin. A knowledge of literature, art, and other humane studies is necessary.

...We must not fear to confront such possibilities as a limited and well ordered use of modern media, even educational TV, while at the same time excluding the addiction to frothy entertainment.

We must resolutely face the fact that the monastery is not a ghetto and will not profit by being kept as one.\textsuperscript{445}

This is indeed a charter for a liberal education in line with the thinking of Newman. If teachers and counsellors in training are exposed to this broad educational menu, then inevitably their students and clients will be educated in the real sense, and will be genuinely helped. It is not envisaged that teachers and counsellors be experts in every field. In so far as they are enriched by the wisdom of the ages, in like proportion they will open up treasure houses of invaluable riches for their students. Education in this broad sense is the salvation of modern man as it gives him the liberty and confidence to stand erect on his own two feet, as befits man, fashioned in the image of God.

Merton insists on the inner deepening of the person. He who neglects this essential work is superficial and short-changes both himself and his neighbour.

He who attempts to act and do things for others or for the world without

deepening his own self-understanding, freedom, integrity and capacity to love, will not have anything to give to others.  

Merton continues:

He will communicate to them nothing but the contagion of his own obsessions, his aggressiveness, his ego-centered ambition, his delusions about ends and means, his doctrinaire prejudices and ideas. There is really nothing more tragic in the modern world than the misuse of power and action into which men are driven by their Faustian mis-understanding and mis-apprehensions.

This broad education is reflected in his counselling. The books he recommends to his clients indicate the breadth of his efforts at self-broadening and self formation. This study of the early Fathers of the Church enabled him to get perspective on twentieth century religion. Through this study his discernment gained clarity. He was better able to find the essentials. Thus he could speak cogently on the great issues of his time. The counsellor, in natural justice, must become as expert as possible in his professional field. This may include a study of alternative therapies, including meditation and relaxation therapies. He needs to be open to new insights.

If we assume that human nature is capable of change and can grow in self-understanding and responsibility, then the counselor's role as such is not one of advising and giving directions. Rather, he must acquire skills which will further the powers of growth for self-responsibility in the individual himself. In counseling, in contrast to guidance, the person's lack of knowledge is not the focus, but his inability to carry out what he knows. Actually, a person...is apt to know more than anyone else about his own

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446 Ibid., p.173.
447 Ibid., p.179.
personal problems, reactions, and attitudes if he can be given an opportunity to think them through calmly and unemotionally.\[4.48\]

Merton makes a very important distinction in this passage. He clarifies the distinction between counselling and guidance. Counselling concentrates on enabling the client to reach decisions, which he then puts into action. Guidance is much less dynamic, as it is in a way an "information providing" process. The will, informed by the intellect, is the main focus of the counsellor. Therefore, it is fundamental to the client's dignity, that the counsellor allows the client to reach his own decisions, thereby respecting the client's dignity.

5.20. The Mis-use of Language-Jargon.

A person who is new to a profession is tempted to use the jargon or language associated with that school of thought. With experience this same person trusts his inner psyche. He no longer depends on "the jargon of the trade", but is confident to relate to the client in simple straightforward language. The support system of terms is abandoned. This is true of Merton. Due to his continual self - deepening through prayer, study and interaction with others, he was well equipped to be an advisor to "everyman".

The implications of this for the counsellor are that life-long education is essential. At no point can one say "I know it all". Life itself is a teacher. Sometimes, however, one is too

\[4.48\] Charles A. Curran, Counseling in Catholic Life and Education, p.49
bewildered by the sheer weight of the matter to be assimilated. At this point, the reflective stance, advocated by Merton provides a key to survival. Thus the counsellor needs to incorporate into his timetable some spaces for reflection and for the deepening of self-awareness. Without this, the counsellor will not be able to focus fully on each client. The clients will be jumbled up, as if in rag-bag, without order. The counsellor will function in a robotic fashion, forced to rely on theory, lacking the ability to cut through incidentals to reach the nub of the individual's problems. This counselling is too superficial to be effective.

5.21. The Aesthetic and the Counsellor

Merton sees human artistic experience as a form of active contemplation where extraordinary moments are possible. He believes "that aesthetic experiences, like Maslow's peak moments, can take us outside the everyday and provide illumination." This illumination comes only in reflection. Camus says "The artist, if he must share the misfortune of his time, must also tear himself away in order to consider that misfortune and give it form."

The aim of life can be only to increase the sum of freedom and responsibility to be found in every man in the world.... There is not a single true work of art that has not in the end added to the inner freedom of each person who has known and loved it.... An artist may make a success or a failure of his work. He may make a success or a failure of his life. But if


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he can tell himself that, finally, as a result of his long effort, he has eased or decreased the various forms of bondage weighing upon men, then in a sense he is justified and, to some extent, he can forgive himself.\footnote{Ibid., p. 184.}

Counselling, in its turn, aims to help people find meaning and purpose in life. Frankl saw as his priority the definition of the role of self transcendence as the dimension of the self that enables persons to become aware of what it means to be human. Fullness of life is found through affirmation of life's meaning, not through denial and tears. Man is both free and responsible. This is only tenable where an indeterminate view of man is adopted. Frankl uses ontoanalysis with its stress on freedom of the self, as a corrective to psychoanalysis' description of the person as a fully conditioned and a wholly predictable object among objects.

5.22. Spiritual Direction and Counselling

What then is the difference between this view of counselling and Merton's view of spiritual direction? Spiritual direction goes one step further than counselling. "Spiritual direction is not merely the cumulative effect of encouragements and admonitions which we all need in order to live up to our state in life. It is not mere ethical, social or psychological
guidance. It is spiritual." This is Merton's view. He dismisses any notion of duality in man.

Benner, in his turn, sees a clear distinction between spiritual direction and psychotherapy. The ideal, in Benner's opinion, would be a fusing of spiritual direction and counselling.

The crucial distinction in spiritually sensitive psychotherapy is that both the spiritual and psychological aspects are addressed. In both assessment and treatment the focus is on the whole person. To attend only to the spiritual is to function as a spiritual guide but fail to function as a psychotherapist. However, to attend only to the psychological is to function as a psychic technician but fail one's responsibility as a psychotherapist.

...The psychotherapist who is sensitive to the fact that the interior world is not neatly divided into psychological and spiritual compartments is therefore a person who may have the unique opportunity to provide help, not merely for the psychological or structural aspects of personality, but also for its spiritual or directional aspects.

A note of caution is necessary. The spiritual must be interpreted in its broadest sense. Merton's definition of "spiritual" is holistic, encompassing the whole person.

The full stature of man is to be found in "spirit" or pneuma. Man is not fully man until he is "one spirit" with God. Man is "spirit" when he is at once anima, animus, and spiritus. But these three are not numerically distinct. They are one.

Spiritual life is not just the life of the intellect or of the emotions. Man is one. Merton adds:

The true spiritual life is a life neither of dionysian orgy nor of appollonian

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clarity: it transcends both. It is a life of wisdom, a life of sophianic love. In Sophia, the highest wisdom-principle, all the greatness and majesty of the unknown that is in God and all that is rich and maternal in His creation are united inseparably, as paternal and maternal in His creation are united inseparably, as paternal and maternal principles, the uncreated Father and created Mother-Wisdom. 454

Counsellors have different views of man, depending both on the counselling theory they adopt and on their world view. It can be asserted, that all aim at making their clients self-aware, integrated and mature. Even if man is held to be determined, the counsellor tries to lead him back to the designated path of his destiny. The thread of inevitability can become entangled in man's attempt to discover himself fully in relation to others. Balance is the key.

Most of the contemporary models of counselling and therapy assume that clients are able to accept personal responsibility and that their failure to do so has largely resulted in their present emotional and behavioural difficulties. This focus on acceptance of personal responsibility does not imply that we can be anything that we want. We need to recognise that there are social, environmental, cultural and biological realities that limit our freedom of choice. What seems crucial is learning how to cope with the external and internal forces that limit our decisions and behaviour. Thus a comprehensive approach to counselling goes beyond focusing on our internal dynamics by addressing those environmental realities that influence us. Corey says:

My philosophy of counseling does not include the assumption that therapy is exclusively for the "sick" and is aimed at "curing" psychological.

"ailments." Such a focus on psychopathology severely restricts therapeutic practice, mainly because it stresses one's deficits rather than one's strengths... For example, counselors with an Adlerian orientation contend that people become discouraged and need encouragement. This is a positive and growth-oriented model that is focused on the future, on the goals that provide direction in life, and on the ability of clients to create their own destiny. Counseling, then, is viewed as a vehicle for helping "normal" people get more from life.455

Merton would agree with this view of counselling. He bemoans the dearth of spiritual directors. He feels the laity would benefit greatly from direction. In his own experience, after he became a Catholic, he felt the need of a balanced director with whom he could discuss his day to day problems. Man is a composite, a unity. His life does not fall neatly into religious and secular compartments. In fact, some would suggest that all life's problems are in some way spiritual, when 'spiritual' is interpreted in the broadest sense.

Whenever a layman ... is in a situation with peculiar problems, he certainly ought to have a director. For instance, workers in Catholic action, college students, professional men, or couples preparing for matrimony need some spiritual direction.456

5.23. Merton's Legacy to the Counsellor

Merton's holistic vision of life includes both the spiritual and the aesthetic. He believes that man is destined to self-transcendence. Within himself man has the potential to be a


456 Thomas Merton, Spiritual Direction and Meditation, p. 22.
saint or a beast. For Merton, man should be in process of 'becoming' while he is 'doing.' Self-awareness demands a certain kind of 'doing.' The busy, busy attitude of the frenzied world prevents the person from becoming the person that he is meant to be. If there is no provision for solitary periods, then man is chained to the treadmill of life's empty affirmation of perpetual motion. It is in silence and reflection that man finds his real self. In solitude, he is able to lay aside the mask and seek the hidden ground of his being.

5.24. The Task of the Counsellor

The counsellor has a three fold task. Firstly, he must take to heart the maxim "know thyself." Secondly, he must wait in tranquillity until the re-assured clients trust enough to reveal their deepest thoughts. Thirdly, the counsellor must root the 'now' in a celebration of the past and in an expectation of wholeness in the future.

The first task of the counsellor is to know one's self. Realistic self evaluation is important and is based on truth. The counsellor is also in a state of flux, of becoming, a condition that endures as long as life itself. One often hears a person described as "being set in his ways." This homespun saying touches the truth. This is what the counsellor must and must not be. True, each one in adulthood reacts to circumstances in his own way. Often people consult another precisely because of the fact that his outlook on life is predictable. They consider his counsel wise and balanced. This is praiseworthy. "Being set in one's ways" in the pejorative sense is different from following a consistent course of action and
giving balanced advice, according to his beliefs. It is rather to be blinkered, totally disregarding any new influence and ideas. This is death not life-bearing. There is no room for the Spirit to quicken the dead bones.

The counsellor along with every thinking person, in Merton's view, must be open to new stimuli and advances of knowledge, be they, in the physical, psychological, scientific or ecological sphere. With Einstein's theory of the splitting of the atom at the beginning of the century, science was forced to relinquish the position of certainty that it held in the Age of Reason. Atheism changed to agnosticism through the decades. At the approach of the second millennium, a spiritual hunger is evident in the efforts of people to become real, to know themselves and to know the future. To achieve aesthetic experience drugs are sometimes used. Merton states clearly that drug-taking to experience ecstasy, results in chemical dependency and destroys man. Drugs deprive man of exercising his highest gift, his free-will.

In this atmosphere of searching the counsellor, while still a seeker in his professional life, must know himself and his reactions and have developed a pool of stillness to find his centre. This must be achieved prior to meeting the client. Otherwise the client may find himself misread and being guided in ways that violate his freedom. A confused dissatisfied client is the result.

Counselling is, therefore, a definite relationship where, through the counsellor's sensitive understanding and skilful responses, a person objectively surveys the past and present factors which enter into his personal confusions and conflicts and, at the same time, reorganises his emotional reactions so that he not only chooses better ways to reach his reasonable goals, but has sufficient confidence, courage, and moderation to
act on these choices.457

The aesthetic, including all the arts, provide the counsellor with a richness of experience to determine his stance on certain aspects of life. Tragedy and comedy are the two sides of the coin of life experience. Drama portrayed this very powerfully on stage and on television. The dramatic presentation allows the counsellor to enter the world of the tragic clown, of the rapist and the murderer. The film Dead Men Walking enables the viewer to enter into the 'death row' trauma. A heart of stone would be stirred by Schindler's List. This film provides much material to promote a non-judgmental attitude in the counsellor.

The counsellor is human and by virtue of this fact he is able to reach out to others provided he has plumbed the depths of his own heart and in silence cries "why, why"? Suffering is the lot of everyman. Final integration is not achieved without suffering. The scale of suffering is relative. No one goes through life without suffering, to a lesser or greater degree. Beneath a serene exterior, there may beat a heart, rent by suffering. Lear is not unique. If he were, he would not provoke such emphatic responses. Frankl says that "the reality of joy and the reality of suffering are both basic components of a human life lived to the full."458 The role of suffering is positive, irrespective how severe it is, provided it is accepted as a challenge. "When suffering is unavoidable, we can change


ourselves even if the situation cannot be changed." The most integrated people are those who have managed to re-assemble the fragmented pieces of life's jigsaw. The master craftsman does not end up with a leftover fragment when the work is seemingly whole. Man, in his fumbling ways, often does have this surplus fragment. This is a symbol of the chaos within and without. The wounded healer is an excellent description of the Humpty Dumpty counsellor. The fragment may prove to be the cornerstone of healing.

This is why life never ceases to have and to retain a meaning to the last moment. Even facing an ineluctable fate, e.g., an incurable disease, there is still granted to man a chance to fulfil even the deepest possible meaning. What matters, then, is the stand he takes in his predicament...the attitude we choose in suffering.

A second requirement for the skilled wounded healer is to learn to wait in tranquillity and peace. This inner stillness may be learned by the practice of yoga and meditation or by simply being still and observing and experiencing the wonders of nature. Out of this stillness comes a growth in self-awareness and a realization of the existence of absolutes. Plato and Aristotle both postulate the existence of absolute beauty, light and truth. In their view the goodness, beauty and truth in the individual are minute slivers of the Absolute.

Silence can be both threatening and welcomed by the client. The skilled counsellor holds

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the person in focus. An over-talkative counsellor will be ineffective. Silence is very powerful. Often the client will break the silence and hesitantly volunteer a hidden addendum which may serve as the key to the whole problem. Tears bring release from tension while a hearty laugh renews and sparks off new life in the counsellor/client relationship. Real encounter results and the subsequent dialogue is often earthy and most times a true reflection of the clients' inner emotions and thoughts. The person is reborn in the silence.

A third requirement comes into play only when the first two requirements are present. If communication leading to communion is established, then both counsellor and client have achieved "lift-off." The quantum leap has occurred. The sessions will have a new dimension of simplicity, openness and trust, both on the part of counsellor and client. It is good to bear in mind Merton's belief that the question is often more valuable than the answer. Just as man is more than the sum of his parts, the question born in this quiet time grows. The Spirit plays Puck and awakens the commonplace utterance with unfamiliar light.

5.25. Conclusion

For Merton, if we find our true selves, we find God and to find God is to find our true identity. The 'nunc stans' changes in the course of the search to the 'nunc fluens'. The river of life emerges composed of Lethe and Eros, bearing death and life which will finally resolve the ultimate questions: who am I, what am I, and whither am I bound?
The thought of Merton is indeed relevant to the counsellor. His was an example of self-deepening and self-education. His reflection in silence and solitude enabled him to reach a measure of self-awareness leading to transcendence. For the counsellor, this is indeed meaningful and worthy of imitation. He had great respect for others and he believed in the essential goodness of the person. Merton considered challenge and struggle to be health-giving, resulting in the ousting of the false self by the true self. When this happens, he believed, the person is in harmony and grounded in the source of life, the source of all Being.

Some counsellors may take exception to Merton's firm belief that man's true identity is found in God. He offers no apology. His notion of man as capable of achieving self-transcendence is acceptable to the non-determined humanistic schools of psychology. His vision of man is holistic. It is in keeping with the contemporary notion of holistic medicine.

Merton's love of nature, his respect for the environment and his appreciation of all aesthetic experience are a light for the steps of the counsellor, on this the eve of the second millennium. His openness to the Spirit, irrespective of its source, is an example to the counsellor to explore all avenues to experience the world of their clients. All Truth, in the last analysis, is one. Merton's simplicity and transparency in an age of confusion, resulted in his being both available and understood by his clients, no matter what their educational background was. In truth, his is the way of freedom and love, and above all, of life-giving freedom. "There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light,
a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness.\textsuperscript{461}

Antoine de Saint Exupéry states: "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly, what is essential is invisible to the eye."\textsuperscript{462} Merton would be in agreement with this thought. All the elements in Merton's writings combine to provide the counsellor with an abundance of riches, an over-flowing cornucopia. From this, the counsellor can choose whatever is needed for every situation. More important, however, is the use of this abundance to enrich the counsellor himself, to help him to become a true" I," ready to help the "other", to melt his frozen heart and bloom in a re-awakened life of freedom. This freedom is both for the counsellor and ultimately for the client.

For the world and time are the dance of the Lord in emptiness. The silence of the spheres is the music of a wedding feast. The more we persist in misunderstanding the phenomena of life, the more we analyse them out into strange finalities and complex purposes of our own, the more we involve ourselves in sadness, absurdity and despair.

...Yet the fact remains that we are invited to forget ourselves on purpose, cast our awful solemnity to the winds, and join in the general dance.\textsuperscript{463}

_Est finis operis, sed non finis vivendi et quaerendi._


\textsuperscript{463} Thomas Merton, _Seeds of Contemplation_, p.230.
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