

MERTON UNCENSORED: ON ECUMENISM

BY

REV. PATRICK W. COLLINS, PH. D.

Thomas Merton engaged in ecumenical dialogue with Jewish, Orthodox and Protestants during the late 1950's and early 1960's. He wrote of this to his poet-friend Sister Therese Lentfoehr in May, 1961: "Mostly I am busy with class and with Protestants..." (Lentfoehr, Sr. Therese 5.10.61 RJ 238) And again several months later one senses the broad base of the monk's ecumenical contacts and his sense of the societal difficulties involved in such work: "...I am now seeing quite a lot of the various retreatants, particularly Protestants still. Also a wonderful Rabbi from Winnipeg a Hasid [Zalmon Schachter]: an orthodox priest, a Negro working on fair labor practices for Negroes, and lots of others like that. They are wonderful people, and have so much. It is very encouraging, except that there does not seem to be much they can do with all the good that is in them, in the face of the evil that threatens everyone. I can still get mad at society, all right. It is such a tragic thing that society as a whole should be so violent, corrupt, wasteful, and absurd.." (Lentfoehr, St. Therese 9.19.61 RJ 238-239) He wrote at the same time of these endeavors to Nicaraguan writer Pablo Antonio Cuadra: "I have been busy with many interesting meetings and conferences with Protestant theologians, writers and others." (Cuadra, Pablo Antonio 9.16.61 CT 189-190)

While Thomas Merton appreciated these exchanges with Protestants, he was aware of the limitations of such dialogue for institutional reform and reunion. "One thing here is that I am having occasional meetings with good and earnest Protestant seminary professors, and we sit and talk and discover how much we really agree on many things and that if we cannot change the situation about respective groups, we perhaps are not expected to change it. But that there are many other things we can change in ourselves. This I think can be fruitful." (Harris, John 6.17.60 HGL 396)

Merton's approach to Christian unity and to the unity among all religions was not grounded primarily in discussing differences in creed, code and cult. Merton's was a much more personal, spiritual and experiential approach. He wrote about this to English school teacher John Harris in 1959. In the monk's view salvation is a gift from God which is not primarily reliant upon one's relationship with any religious institution or structure or doctrine in Merton's view. "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. Though of course there are official declarations and official answers: but they never come anywhere near the kind of thing you bring up, which is personal. No one is officially saved, salvation cannot be that kind of thing. The other reason for not claiming to answer all your questions and solve all your problems is that I really don't think your problems are as real as they seem to be: they are indeed, or they tend to be, created by the whole false position arising out of the fact that there are so many who insist on having, giving, official solutions. As I say, declarations can and must be made but they never get into the depths where a person finds himself in God. You may think me flippant if I say you probably believe in God already, and your problem consists not in whether or not you doubt God, but in trying to account to yourself for a belief in God which does not sound like anything official you have ever heard about this matter. And in wondering whether, that being the case, it is 'the same God' you believe in. "Whatever may be the intellectual aspects of the thing - I leave them to you, only suggesting that you do not have to apply yourself madly to 'working' anything 'out.'" If at the same time you can read and enjoy books by me and by Pasternak it is clear that you are a basically religious person. And in that case, explanations and manipulations of symbols are not the most important thing but the reality of your life in God. The symbols can later take care of themselves..." (Harris, John 1.31.59 HGL 385-386)

During 1961 Thomas Merton was engaged extensively in Protestant-Catholic dialogue. A cinder block cottage had been erected in the woods near the abbey to house these conversations. This was

the place which would become Merton's hermitage in 1965. He wrote about these ecumenical encounters to Nicaraguan priest-poet Ernesto Cardenal: "There is no telling what is to become of the work I have attempted with the Protestant ministers and scholars. Evidently someone has complained to Rome about my doing work that is "not fitting for a contemplative" and there have been notes of disapproval. The contacts will have to be cut down to a minimum. I do not mind very much, personally. I have the hermitage and would rather use it as a hermitage than as a place for retreat conferences. In all this I remain pretty indifferent, as a matter of fact. There are much wider perspectives to be considered. My concept of the Church, my faith in the Church, has been and is being tested and purified: I hope it is being purified. Even my idea of 'working for the Church' is being radically changed. I have less and less incentive to take any kind of initiative in promising anything for the immediate visible apostolic purposes of the Church. It is not easy for me to explain what I feel about the movements that proliferate everywhere, and the generosity and zeal that goes into them all. But in the depths of my heart I feel very empty about all that, and there is in me a growing sense that it is all provisional and perhaps has very little of the meaning that these zealous promoters attribute to it. So about any contacts I may have had with Protestants. I have had just enough to know how ambiguous it all becomes. The only result has been to leave me with a profound respect and love for these men, and an increased understanding of their spirit. But at the same time I am not sanguine about the chances of a definite 'movement' for reunion, and, as I say, I am left with the feeling that the "movement" is not the important thing. As if there were something more hidden and more important, which is also much easier to attain, and is yet beyond the reach of institutional pressures." (Cardenal, Ernesto 12.24.61 CT 129)

By May of 1962, although Merton was enjoying time in his "hermitage" more and more, he was wearying of these ecumenical dialogues as he wrote to Cardenal: "...The frequent retreats of Protestants and others keep me unusually busy. The hermitage is fine. I take advantage of it as much as possible. This life takes on a new dimension when one actually has time to begin to meditate! Otherwise it is not really serious, just a series of exercises which one offers up with a pure intention and with the hope that they mean something. That is not what the monastic life is for." (Cardenal, Ernesto 5.16.62 CT 132)

Abraham Heschel, the Jewish rabbi and theologian from New York, was one of Merton's principal correspondents regarding Christian and Jewish relations. In 1960 the Trappist wrote to Heschel: "I believe humbly that Christians and Jews ought to realize together something of the same urgency of expectation and desire, even though there is a radically different theological dimension to their hopes. They remain the same hopes with altered perspectives. It does not seem to me that this is every emphasized" (Heschel, Abraham 12.17.60 HGL 431)

In 1963 Merton discussed with Heschel some of the issues between Jews and Christians regarding the Prophets of the Hebrew scriptures: "We have the bad habit of thinking that because we believe the prophecies are fulfilled we can consider them to be fulfilled in any way we please, that is to say that we are too confident of understanding this 'fulfillment.' Consequently, the medieval facility with which the Kingdom of God was assumed to be the society inherited from Charlemagne. And consequently the even more portentous facility with which Christians did exactly what they accused the Jews of having done: finding an earthly fulfillment of prophecy in political institutions dressed up as theocracy. "The twentieth century makes it impossible seriously to do this any more, so perhaps we will be humble enough to dig down to a deeper and more burning truth. In so doing, we may perhaps get closer to you, whom the Lord has not allowed to find so many specious arguments in favor of complacent readings." (Heschel, Abraham 1.26.63 HGL 432)

Abraham Heschel visited Thomas Merton at the Abbey of Gethsemani on July 13, 1964. For the monk it proved to be a "warm and memorable occasion, which was a real and providential gift." The two discussed the Vatican II debates on Catholic-Jewish relations which were at something of an embarrassing impasse after the third session. Merton expressed both his sense of the limitations and at the same time of such official statements: "Every time I approach any such statement, I am more deeply convinced of the futility of statements. But statements are easy. And the fact of not having

made one when it was required can be a terrible and irreparable omission.” (Abraham Heschel 7.27.63 HGL 432)

Heschel’s visit prompted the Trappist to pen a letter to Augustine Cardinal Bea, the head of with the Secretariat of Christian Unity in the Vatican. The letter was dated the day after Heschel’s visit. On July 27 the monk shared that letter with Heschel. It spoke of the conciliar chapter on the Jews and indicated his deep personal concerns for Jewish-Catholic relations. While admittedly far removed from the scene, he promised his prayers for the issue. “...I and my brothers here will certainly be praying that God may see fit to grant his Church the very great favor and grace of understanding the true meaning of this opportunity for repentance and truth which is being offered her and which so many are ready to reject and refuse. It is true that the Chapter can do much for the Jews, but there is no question that the Church herself stands to benefit by it spiritually in incalculable ways. I am personally convinced that the grace to truly see the Church as she is in her humility and in her splendor may perhaps not be granted to the Council Fathers if they fail to take account of her relation to the anguished Synagogue. This is not just a question of a gesture of magnanimity. The deepest truths are in question. They very words themselves should suggest that the ekklesia is not altogether alien from the synagogue and that she should be able to see herself to some extent, though darkly, in this antitypal mirror. But if she look at the picture, what she sees is not consoling. Yet she has the power to bring mercy and consolation into this mirror image, and thus to experience in herself the beatitude promised to the merciful. If she forgoes this opportunity out of temporal and political motives (in exactly the same way that a recent Pontiff [Pius XII] is accused of having done) will she not by that very fact manifest that she has in some way forgotten her own true identity? Is not then the whole meaning and purpose of the Council at stake? These are some of the thoughts that run through my mind as I reflect on the present situation in the Church of God. I dare to confide them to Your Eminence as a son to a Father.” (Augustine Cardinal Bea, 7.14.64 HGL 433)

Another of the Trappist’s favorite correspondents on ecumenical issues was the Shaker thinker and writer, Edward Deming Andrews, to whom he wrote several times in the early 1960’s. Merton, as a Cistercian, felt a certain kinship with the simple lifestyle and values of this spiritual movement. “To me the Shakers are of a very great significance, besides being something of a mystery, by their wonderful integration of the spiritual and the physical in their work.... “I feel all the more akin to them because our own Order, the Cistercians, originally had the same kind of ideal of honesty, simplicity, good work, for a spiritual motive.” (Edward Deming Andrews Dec. 12, 60 HGL 32) Merton judged that he and the Shakers have much in common spiritually despite their theological divergences: “I have allowed myself to be involved in more tasks and interests than I should, and the one that has most suffered has been the study of the Shakers. It is in a way so completely out of the theological realm with which I am familiar, although their spirit has so much in common with ours.... “It is very certain that the Shakers preserved many many deeply important religious symbols and lived out some of the most basic religious myths in their Christian and gnostic setting. I cannot help feeling also that the very existence of the Shakers at that particular moment of history has a very special significance, a sort of ‘prophetic’ function in relation to what has come since.” (Edward Deming Andrews 8 22, 61 HGL 35)

One of Monk Merton’s lifelong quests was the search for truth. And in this he found another commonality with the Shakers: “The Shakers remain as witnesses to the fact that only humility keeps man in communion with truth, and first of all with his own inner truth. This one must know without knowing it, as they did. For as soon as a man becomes aware of ‘his truth’” he lets go of it and embraces an illusion.” (Edward Deming Andrews 12 21, 61 HGL 36)

In the fall of 1962 Merton wrote of some Shaker problems which had arisen at Shirley Meeting House. They reflected some of his own concerns with the vocation to monastic life since, in both situations, “...the law of all spiritual life is the law of risk and struggle, and possible failure.” He continued: “Perhaps somewhere in the mystery of Shaker ‘absolutism’ which in many ways appears to be ‘intolerant’ and even arbitrary, there is an underlying gentleness and tolerance and understanding that appears not in words but in life and in work. It is certainly in the songs. Some

of us only learn tolerance and understanding after having been intolerant and 'absolute. In a word, it is hard to live with a strict and sometimes almost absurd ideal, and the ambivalence involved can be tragic, or salutary. More than anything else, the Shakers faced that risk and the fruitfulness of their life was a sign of approval upon their daring." (Edward Deming Andrews 9 20, 62 HGL 37)

A few months later Merton noted that for Shakers, as well as for monks, the foundation on which their lives are based is an obedience in faith: "And of course it is for us in our own way by our faith and obedience to all of God's 'words' to attune ourselves to His will and to join in His work, according to our own humble capacities. The Shakers saw this so well, and saw that their work was a cooperation in the same will that framed and governs the cosmos: and more governs history." (Edward Deming Andrews 12 28, 62 HGL 37-38)

Following Andrews' death in 1964, Merton wrote to his widow of his profound appreciation for the Shaker tradition. "I realize more and more the vital importance of the Shaker 'gift of simplicity' which is a true American charism . . ." (Mrs. Edward Deming Andrews July 20, 64 HGL 40) As he had written to her husband in 1962: "The 'Gift to be Simple' is in fact the 'Gift to be True,' and what we need most in our life today, personal, national and international, is this truth... There is more in this than just a pious song." (Edward Deming Andrews 0.20.62 HGL 37)

Merton's own personal and spiritual approach to ecumenical activities led him toward the Holy Spirit which, he believed, would lead all religions in a common search for Truth. He wrote of this in 1963 to the Russian Orthodox scholar Sergius Bolshakoff during the time of the Spirit-inspired Second Vatican Council. "I am very drawn to the Russian idea of sobornost [the doctrine of the Spirit acting and leading the whole Church into the truth] which seems to me to be essential to the notion of the Church, in some form or other. I do not know how this can be gainsaid. Collegiality is a step in that direction." (Sergius Bolshakoff 11.11.63 HGL 104)

Perhaps some of Thomas Merton's most profound writings about ecumenism can be found in a series of letters with his English Anglican friend, Etta Gullick, between 1963 and 1966. His thoughts reflected very much the discussions at Vatican II about the Mystery of the Church. He also paraphrased, consciously or unconsciously, the words of John XXIII in his opening address at the council: "For the substance of the ancient deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another." (Peter Hebblethwaite, Pope John XXIII: Pope of the Century, NY: Continuum, 1994, p. 223) "We cannot get too deep into the mystery of our oneness in Christ. It is so deep as to be unthinkable and yet a little thought about it doesn't hurt. But it doesn't help too much either. The thing is that we are not united in a thought of Christ or a desire of Christ, but in His Spirit... there is all the difference in the world between theology as experienced (which is basically identical in all who know and love Christ, at least in its root) and theology as formulated in which there can be great differences. In the former it is the One Spirit who teaches and enlightens us. In the second it is the Church, and in this of course I believe that the Roman Church is the only one that can claim to say the last word. But I do not think it makes sense to be narrowly Roman in a sort of curial-party sense, and I am also very attracted to the orthodox sobornost idea. And of course I think in reality Pope John has been quietly moving in that direction, and he has been perfectly right in so doing, without affecting his own primacy and so on... I do not of course intend a hard-and-fast distinction between the Spirit on one hand teaching the individual and the Church teaching him: this would be erroneous. But I mean the Spirit teaching us all interiorly, and also exteriorly through the magisterium. In either case it is the Spirit of the Church, and the Church, living and speaking. But in exterior doctrinal formulations, where there are different groups, there are various confusions and differences. And so on. I am not a very sharp technical theologian, as you can see." (Gullick, Etta 4.29.63 HGL 359-360)

In 1965 the Trappist, again reflecting the discussions at Vatican II, wrote to Gullick of the role of the Holy Spirit in leading the Church toward deeper unity: "It is the Holy Spirit who makes us one and our experience of Him may or may not make much difference. But faith in Him makes a very great deal of difference and this is the important thing. Deep faith and obedience. I see this more and

more. So let us be united in prayer in Christ and in His Spirit.” (Gullick Etta 6.9.65 HGL 371) Thomas Merton’s deep faith in the Spirit uniting all in prayer was expressed again to Gullick in 1966: “It is the Holy Spirit who makes us one and our experience of Him may or may not make much difference. But faith in Him makes a very great deal of difference and this is the important thing. Deep faith and obedience. I see this more and more. So let us be united in prayer in Christ and in His Spirit.” (Gullick Etta 6.9.65 HGL 371)

After the conclusion of Vatican II it was clear to Monk Merton that the institutional reunion of the Christian churches was not yet possible. Still he believed that, in the Spirit, a real unity already exists among Christian people and their churches. From his contemplative vantage point the monk wrote again to Gullick: “...there can be little hope of institutional or sacramental union as yet between Anglicans and Romans. Perhaps on the other hand I am too stoical about it all, but I frankly am not terribly anguished. I am not able to get too involved in the institutional side of any of the efforts now being made as I think, for very many reasons, they are bound to be illusory in large measure. And this kind of thing is for others who know more about it. To me it is enough to be united with people in love and in the Holy Spirit, as I am sure I am, and they are, in spite of the sometimes momentous institutional and doctrinal differences. 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...” (Gullick, Etta 11.24.66 HGL 378) One can note at this point the Trappist’s earlier expression of qualified admiration of Anglicanism in a letter to Oxford scholar A. M. Allchin in 1964: “It seems to me that the best of Anglicanism is unexcelled, but that there are few who have the refinement of spirit to see and embrace the best, and so many who fall off into the dreariest rationalism.” (Allchin, A. M. 4.25.64 HGL 26)

During the mid-1960’s Thomas Merton’s external ecumenical interests and activities were turned more in the direction of shared action among religionists for human and societal concerns. He wrote about this to Gordon Zahn in 1963: “...the climate of ecumenism is all very nice, but does it have all the wonderful meaning we read into it? Christ said: If you salute your brethren, what are you doing that the pagans have not done? I don’t think that the glad gatherings of people who are exactly alike in every respect except their commitment to slightly different religious forms are exactly a presage of world peace. If they gathered together for something significant, like peace and disarmament, or the race issue, it would make more sense and I might find encouragement in it.” (Zahn, Gordon 4.30.63 HGL 650)

By 1964, while Merton was still meeting with Protestants at the cottage in the woods as well as in the monastery, he wrote to Cardenal: “There have been meetings of Protestants here often, but I do not want to overdo this.” (Cardenal, Ernesto 5.8.64 CT 145) In the following spring, as Merton prepared to move into the cottage as his hermitage, he wrote to Sister Therese Lentfoehr of his shift of emphasis away from ecumenical involvements: “There is a blessing on every attempt at ecumenism that is simple and sincere, and your desire to do this not for your own sake but for God and the Church and for them, will guarantee that it will be blessed in one way or another. I am not in any ecumenical work this year. Fr. Abbot wanted me to withdraw from it as I am planning more and more to be in the hermitage and perhaps even live there eventually. I must meet his requirements therefore, and am not sorry to.” (Lentfoehr, Sr. Therese 3.27.65 RJ 250)

Three months later, in June, 1966, Merton the hermit wrote about the decline in his ecumenical engagements to his Aunt Agnes Merton living in New Zealand. He also expressed himself to be not totally “Roman” in his Catholicism. “I am not working with ecumenical groups at the moment. Since I came up to the hermitage Fr. Abbot feels I ought not to do any kind of active work with people, and I am not terribly anxious to unless it should turn out to be necessary... I have lots of Anglican contacts... All High Churchy as you might well imagine. But I am a pretty liberal bloke myself, if not radical. Actually I feel very much at home with the C. of E. except when people are awfully stuffy and insular about it. I have never been and will never be aggressively Roman, by any means. It would not be possible for a Merton to go too far with a really “popish” outlook. We are all too hard-headed and independent.” (Merton, Agnes 6.1.66 RJ 75)

By 1967 Thomas Merton's interests had clearly grown from ecumenism toward interreligious dialogue. After years of noncommunication with his uncle and aunt, Harold and Elsie Jenkins, his mother's brother and his wife, Merton wrote to them of his growing interest in Buddhism: "I see a lot of ministers and others on an 'ecumenical' basis. My main interest in that line however is keeping up with the Buddhists, especially Zen people. They are the ones for whom I seem to have the closest affinities. We get along quite well..." (Jenkins, Mr. and Mrs. Harold 12.31.67 RJ 83)

Thomas Merton's final comments about ecumenism in his published letters are expressed in an April, 1968 letter to a high school junior at St. Thomas Seminary in Bloomfield, Connecticut, named Philip J. Cascia. The young man had written to Merton about his term paper on ecumenism and Merton's general response was generally affirming of the ecumenical movement: "I'd say that the ecumenical movement is certainly an excellent thing, and it has meant new life for all Christians. Of course it is something of a fad in some places, and it gets the usual distorted kind of publicity. But basically it is a good thing." (Cascia, Philip J. 4.10.68 RJ 36)

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