

## Transcript of "Thomas Merton: A Prophet for Our Time"

presented by  
Dr. Colleen M. Griffith  
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Dr. Jane Regan:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Who then is a contemplative? “Not one who sits under a tree with legs crossed attempting to edify him or herself,” exclaims Merton. It is one who, quote, “seeks to know the meaning

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

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

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

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

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

In his own journey in contemplative living, Merton met with many shadows of false selves. His desire to remain true to the concept of God uttered in him got reflected in his description of "salvation" as having to do with being exactly the creatures we were meant to be. Quote, "A tree gives glory to God by being a tree. It 'consents,' so to speak, to God's creative love. It is expressing an idea which is in God and which is distinct from the

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

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

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

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

Solitude in reality exists as a profoundly relational interior space, an interior space where interdependence is truly grasped, and poverty of spirit (our incompleteness unto our self) is

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silence.” You see, silence is so related to love. In silence, Merton finds himself better able

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

The great Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel, with whom Thomas Merton corresm-11.2(ts)7mn5(i)-TJ 0 -5(d)0.5( )0(r