

WHO IS THOMAS MERTON?

By Ken Silva, Southern Baptist pastor-teacher

As we prepare to discuss the Contemplative Mystic Thomas Merton we will be entering the very Temple of the Contemplative Spirituality Movement (CSM) itself to touch one of its most “anointed” Buddhas. Those who teach Contemplative Spirituality Mysticism such as Richard Foster, the Quaker mystic who is listed among the “living spiritual teachers” at the Spirituality & Practice website, hold the late Merton in extremely high regard. Regardless, in this article I will show you that Merton taught a “social conversion,” which was a clear rejection of the historic orthodox Christian theology and the absolute necessity for mankind to be born again/regenerated. Merton’s teachings about Contemplative/Centering Prayer (i.e. transcendental meditation) for the inward conversion of man was right in line with the same foolish social gospel preached in liberal theology. And now through so-called “Christian” mysticism this falsehood has been reimagined by Guru Brian McLaren and others in the Emergent Church as their own warped and toxic myth of the Kingdom of God.

Spiritual Director Thomas Merton

A wise man attacks the city of the mighty and pulls down the stronghold in which they trust
(Proverbs 21:20).

In the CSM you will much talk about Spiritual Formation (SF) from men like Richard Foster, the Guru of Contemplation, and his faithful sidekick Dallas Willard. One of the main ideas they promote is the need for a Spiritual Director in one’s life. First we turn to a book called *Spiritual Direction & Meditation* by Thomas Merton, the man Foster says shared “priceless wisdom for all Christians who long to go deeper in the spiritual life.” In it Merton explains the origin for this supposed requirement of “spiritual direction.” As he does you will see where this whole messed up mysticism immediately went off-track. Merton tells us the:

original, primitive meaning of spiritual direction suggests a particular need connected with a special ascetic task, a peculiar vocation for which a professional formation is required. In other words, spiritual direction is a monastic concept. It is a practice which was unnecessary until men withdrew from the Christian community in order to live as solitaries in the desert. For the ordinary member in the primitive Christian community there was no particular need of personal direction in the professional sense. The bishop, the living and visible representative of the apostle who had founded the local Church, spoke for Christ and the apostles, and, helped by the presbyters, took care of all the spiritual needs of his flock (11, emphasis mine).

In reading the above one must take into account that as a Roman Catholic monk Merton's view of Church history is badly skewed. However, even with that we can see the whole of this so-called "Christian" mysticism, with its "spiritual formation" and "spiritual directors" teaching their contemplative spirituality began as a rebellion against Biblical authority and the outline for Church leadership in the pastoral epistles. We'll return to this "monastic concept" later but for now we can see Merton admits that "men withdrew from the Christian community in order to live as solitaries in the desert." This is where mysticism would enter into their religious life as the eastern "Desert Fathers" began seeking "common ground" with Buddhists, Muslims and Hindus in their worship. There they turned their back on their brothers and sisters in local churches in favor of seeking individual religious experience apart from the prescribed method of worshipping God in this Age of Grace laid out in the New Testament.

As we return to begin looking more specifically at Thomas Merton I want to mention that in his excellent series *Mysticism* Gary Gilley points out just how deeply Guru Richard Foster is influenced by the mystic monk Thomas Merton. Just a quick aside for those who wonder why I use the title Guru so often with these "spiritual directors" in the Emergent Church like Foster and McLaren; if you are going to assign each other titles from apostate Rome and involve yourselves in trying to teach practices of Eastern mysticism, then a Guru is what you are. Gilley is right when he says of Foster:

Foster cites and/or quotes Merton on at least nine separate occasions in *Celebration of Discipline*, yet Merton was not a Christian as far as we can tell. He was a twentieth-century Roman Catholic who had so immersed himself in Buddhism that he claimed he saw no contradiction between Buddhism and Christianity and intended to become as good a Buddhist as he could.

But despite his doctrinal views and New Age leanings Foster considers Merton's *Contemplative Prayer*, "A must book," and says of Merton, "[He] has perhaps done more than any other twentieth-century figure to make the life of prayer widely known and understood." Merton wrote, "If only [people] could see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed.... I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other."

Merton's Message

The above quote from Merton comes from his *Conjectures Of A Guilty Bystander* (CGB) which was first published in 1966 and is a good representation of where his contemplative spirituality ultimately led him. On the back cover we're told that as he neared "the end of his life" the Mystic Monk "played a significant role in introducing Eastern religions to the West." Now let's look at the above quote once again, but this time in its broader context. Beginning on page 156 of CGB Merton is describing an experience he has one day while watching people "in the center of the shopping district." Merton tells the reader he "was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people,...even though we were total strangers." As he continues on describing this epiphany Merton says he comes to understand that the solitary life of a monk creates "the illusion that by making vows we become a different species of being" as it were.

In the following we will catch a glimpse of the universalism which underlies the more liberal vein of theology within apostate Roman Catholicism as Merton says of the monastic life that:

though "out of the world" we are in the same world as everybody else, the world of the bomb, the world of race hatred, the world of

technology, the world of mass media, big business, revolution, and all the rest. We take a different attitude to all these things, for we belong to God. Yet so does everybody else belong to God. We just happen to make a profession out of this consciousness (157, emphasis mine).

As one continues to read there is no question Merton is writing in praise of his fellow mankind and downplaying our sinful nature. In fact he even says it "is a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race," even though it "makes many terrible mistakes." This love of man is a common theme in the writings I've studied by those who are longtime practitioners of Contemplative/Centering Prayer. And with this misapplied love comes an anthropocentric understanding of God. Rather than focusing on how we've caused God such grief by these "terrible mistakes," which are the results of a fallen nature that can only be cured by the Cross of Christ, instead Merton turns things backward when he says:

yet, with all that, God Himself gloried in becoming a member of the human race. A member of the human race! To think that such a commonplace realization should suddenly seem like news that one holds the winning ticket in a cosmic sweepstake. I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, and now I realize we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people they are all walking around shining like the sun (157).

Now we have the context for the earlier quote and it is beyond question that Merton is literally gushing about what he sees as mankind's innate goodness. This becomes even clearer as the late mystic comes to believe that his "solitude" really "is not just my own." This says Merton "is because I am one with them...and when I am alone they are not 'they' but my own self." And what follows is an unmistakable denial of the doctrine of original sin:

Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could see themselves as they really are. If only we

could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed....I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other. But this cannot be seen, only believed and “understood” by a peculiar gift.

Again, that expression, *le point vierge*, (I cannot translate it) comes in here. At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak His name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship. 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 billion points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would 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 (158).

Clear Contextual Evidence Of The Human Potential Movement

I’ve purposely chosen to include this much of the text of Merton’s book to annihilate the argument that my conclusions have been formed by taking the Mystic Monk out of context. It is beyond question that he is talking about an inner quality of goodness at “the center of our being.” Further he tells us this “point of nothingness” is itself “untouched by sin,” and in line with ancient Gnosticism this divine spark “belongs to God,” and this “point” of deity within mankind “is the pure glory of God in us.” And finally doctrine in agreement with the “Inner Light” of the Quakers comes emerging as Merton tells us this “little point of nothingness” is “in everybody” and is “blazing with the invisible light of heaven.” Men and women, this is a uniform testimony from those I have read who practice contemplative spirituality. So it’s little wonder that in the back of his own booklet *Meditative Prayer* under “Further Study In Meditation” Guru Foster would call Merton the Mystic Monk’s book *Contemplative Prayer*, “A powerful analysis of the central nature of contemplative prayer. A must book.”

On Slice Of Laodicea I once posted the abbreviated quote from Merton's CGB as an example of an anthropocentric denial of original sin and an improper view of mankind's true nature. And then underneath I placed the following from Christ Jesus the Lord:

What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person (Mark 7:20-23).

While this would certainly appear to be a flat contradiction by mankind's Creator Himself of Merton's mystic teachings above there were quite a few who were unable see that these statements are mutually exclusive and therefore diametrically opposed. Whatever equivocation we'd like to use about Merton his statement stands in its context. He is unquestionably talking about an innate goodness in mankind. Whereas Jesus says in no uncertain terms there is not. This is as old as Genesis 8:21 where He had already said: "I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth." And we also consider this from the inspired Apostle Paul - "I know that nothing good lives in me (Romans 7:18). So the sad story is that sin proceeds out of the heart of man, and every intention of man's heart is evil, and nothing good is inherent in mankind that would make him worthy of God's saving him despite what Norman Vincent Peale and his clone Robert Schueller and one of his disciples smilin' Joel Osteen say to the contrary.

For Men Shall Be Lovers Of Their Own Selves

If you actually read what myself and others have written on Thomas Merton you would know that by the time his life was over he was for all intents and purposes a Buddhist and his theology ended up as panentheistic as the other mystics before him. I documented Merton's disgusting recounting of his spiritual experience at Polonnaruwa in Thomas Merton And The Buddhas. The information that follows now is from my article Contemplative Prayer And Meditation and was itself literally taken from Merton's Message at The Thomas Merton Foundation. They are in a much better position to know what this

heretic taught than any of us. For the Lord's sake isn't it time we finally see what is so blatantly obvious? This simply has no place in Christian theology:

He takes people into deep places within themselves... At the core of Thomas Merton's spiritual writings is the search for the "true self" and our need for relationship with God, other people and all of creation... He concludes that we must discover God as the center of our being to which all things tend...

Merton's interests were prophetic,...he foresaw...the source of the problem [we face] is that man "has become alienated from his inner self which is the image of God." [The solution] requires a social conversion,... The first step in this turning is a transformation of consciousness and Thomas Merton is a preeminent guide to us in this first step...[and] a spiritual master whose influence crosses generations and religious affiliations.

And as I have previously pointed out, of course it would cross "religious affiliations" because there is no mention of the inherent sin nature of man, or the need for being regenerated, or of the Cross of Christ as the only real solution for sin. What we have just read from a Site sympathetic to Merton could be agreed to by virtually anyone from any spiritual background, and this is precisely my point. It is exactly this same message of New Age spirituality that comes through the "transformation of consciousness" to all those who practice this transcendental meditation long enough to anger God until He finally abandons them to their reprobate mind. (see-Romans 1:18-32)

Men and women, God is not the center of mankind's being and His image in man was shattered at the Fall. The absolute Truth is that apart from Christ one cannot even begin to restore this imago Dei. This is an appeal for you to see these things taught by demons for what they actually are...the worship of mankind and a major step toward the fulfillment of Satan's blasphemous boast frozen in time for us by God the Holy Spirit in Isaiah 14:14 - "I will make myself like the Most High."