From *Anomie to Metanoia*: The Spiritual-Political Thought of Henry Thoreau & Thomas Merton

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ABSTRACT

Both Henry David Thoreau and Thomas Merton revolted against the state of society as they saw it and lived in it. They retired to their respective wildernesses to seek solitude and dive deep for truth. Merton and Thoreau were not content with a solitude that did not also involve a meaningful relationship to society. They were concerned with social justice and communicated that through their writing, which, it seems, came about because of their solitude. In that way, each author encourages his readers to build their own inner retreats, and in the end, they do this as a means of furthering social reform in their times. For both men, a relationship to God—or to nature, to cosmic divinity—is cultivated within. Furthermore, once the individual's relationship to this higher power has been established, this leads to a recognition of the divinity in others. Both Merton and Thoreau, from their respective hermitages, reached inward—only to find themselves also reaching outward. Both Thoreau and Merton offer a vision of solitude and silence that goes hand in hand with social justice and political action.

In 1845, the oddball naturalist Henry David Thoreau moved into a cabin that he built on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts. Almost a century later, the Christian mystic Thomas Merton was accepted as a novice monk at the Abbey of Gethsemane, near Bardstown, Kentucky. In the next century, I took it upon myself to visit Walden Pond, and travel to the secluded monastery in the hills of Kentucky, to see how these places reflected their most famous guests. On the surface, Thoreau and Merton might appear to be two very different thinkers and writers. On the one hand, Thoreau was a Transcendentalist who eschewed the strict religious confines of his time. Merton, on the other hand, was a devout Catholic and ordained Trappist monk. Yet I had to ask myself: what, if anything, ties these two radical iconoclasts together? Where does their thinking diverge? I wondered, above all, what it means to me—and whether any of this still matters in the 21st century.

"Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth," wrote Thoreau in *Walden,* the famous account of his two-year retreat to a cabin at Walden Pond (1153). Through silence, solitude, writing, close observation of self and of nature, Thoreau would arrive at his version of truth. Nature held the answers; there was no other way in. The noise and clutter—both spiritual and material—that clouded Thoreau's vision finally cleared when he was alone at the pond. Ironically, within his experiment of self-exploration, Thoreau actually spends most of *Walden* critiquing his Concord neighbors and society at large: they were myopic; they did not see reality for what it is.

In Thomas Merton's view, similarly, our "short-sightedness as the pace of modern culture accelerated" seemed to be quickly making us "less than human;" "often with good intentions man ends up distorting fundamental truth" (Kramer 93). Succinctly put, Merton's view of the modern world was one where many people were simply losing the ability to distinguish what was true. Appreciation of truth was apparently being lost because of "increasingly greedy, cruel, and lustful pressures common to a society which encourages man to ignore the truth and to be primarily concerned with fitting in, or with his own satisfaction" (Kramer 93). Both Merton and Thoreau felt repulsed by the burgeoning modernity they observed.

Solitude became the space in which they could plumb the depths of their inner selves, and climb the high peaks of reality and truth. Both Merton and Thoreau, from their respective hermitages, reached inward—only to find themselves also reaching outward. As Thoreau wrote in *Walden*, "Not till we are lost, in other words not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations" (1070). Merton, seemingly echoing Thoreau, wrote in *No Man is an Island*, "Only when we see ourselves in our true human context, as

members of a race which is intended to be one organism and 'one body,' will we begin to understand" (xxi). A cultivated interior life, for both men, would lead to an intimate relationship with a higher power, and one that would ultimately call them to action.

For Thoreau, "Nature" was the supreme being; for Merton, "God." My suggestion is that although Thoreau and Merton may have had different conceptions of God, their ideas ultimately do not oppose each other; in fact, there is significant overlap. For both men, a relationship to God—to nature, to cosmic divinity—can only first be cultivated within. Once the individual's relationship to a higher power has been established, this leads to a recognition of the divinity in others, for both God and Nature are all-encompassing. Both erase the barriers between perceived "individual" entities, highlighting the universality of all Being. Moreover, that universality, when properly understood, develops a concern within the individual for other people and the world at large. Both Thoreau and Merton offer a vision of solitude and silence that goes hand in hand with social justice and political action.

At first glance, solitude and society may seem diametrically opposed. However, both Thomas Merton and Henry David Thoreau were not content with a solitude that did not also connect meaningfully to society. Both were concerned with social reform—and communicated that through their writing—which came about *through* their solitude. In that way, both authors also encourage their readers toward their own inner retreats. And in the end, they do this as a means of furthering social justice in their times.

Once a deeper awareness of one's self develops, that awareness reaches out to others. Although he fled to the monastery to escape the decadence of both his former self and the wider world, Merton expressed his renewed sense of mission as it naturally matured: "Solitude has its own special work," he wrote, "a deepening of awareness that the world needs. A struggle against alienation. True solitude is deeply aware of the world's needs. It does not hold the world at arm's length" (Hinson 65).

Thoreau took a similar journey from self to society. As one critic wrote, throughout Thoreau's rumination is implied "the notion that the individual must first discover himself as an individual, which can only be done in solitude. When this self-discovery has taken place, and the individual is a true individual, then he is able properly to function in and contribute to community" (McInerny 176). Indeed, it was only through his experiment of living at Walden Pond that Thoreau was ready to return to life in Concord and report his findings to the community. He did this by publishing *Walden* and followed up by delivering lectures on the popular lyceum circuit, even though he met only mixed success with popular audiences.

For both thinkers, their personal solitude was also the solitude of Nature, or God. As Merton wrote, "Man's loneliness is, in fact, the loneliness of God. That is why it is such a great thing for a man to discover his solitude and learn to live in it. For there he finds that he and God are one" (MacCormick 118). In that sense, there is no such thing as true solitude, because all things share a sense of "Being" in a vastly interlinked web. In the cities, Merton wrote, people have constructed "a world outside the world, against the world, a world of mechanical fictions which condemn nature and seek only to use it up, thus preventing it from renewing itself and man." The antidote was "the solitary, [who] far from enclosing himself, becomes every man" (O'Connell 145).

This revelation of interconnectedness hit Merton like a ton of bricks: "In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation" (O'Connell 105). The Western legacy of Cartesian dualism was an inherited illusion that Merton knew must be shattered if we were to heal as a species and live in harmony with the planet. Up at Walden, far from being entirely alone at the pond, Thoreau discovered in a similar way that "every little pine needle expanded and swelled with sympathy and befriended me" (Van Doren 31). These solitaries found themselves in the company of others, even when they initially thought otherwise.

Thoreau and Merton both found themselves enmeshed in a society they recognized as corrupt and decadent. Both found themselves repulsed by aspects of human civilization. But they were also greatly concerned for its welfare and reform. The scurry and strife of human society was, for both, exacerbated by industrial machine technology. Thoreau's blistering critique in *Walden* that "We do not ride upon the railroad; it rides upon us," (1029) should be read as encompassing his larger stance on the illusions of technology. For Thoreau, these flashy gadgets and devices are "improved means to unimproved ends" (1007-1008). Human life was Thoreau's concern, ensconced as he was in the natural world of Walden Pond.

Writing of the Transcendentalists broadly, George Hochfield notes that "They belong to an age of burgeoning industrialism, and they were among the first Americans to see that this new social fact [of capitalist economic organization] cast a problematic and threatening light on the hope for democratic fulfillment" (xxiv). Private ownership of property, and capitalist production, were incompatible with the democratic ideal of individual freedom. "Private property tended to destroy the social equality on

which freedom was based; it seemed to be creating a new class system and new forms of dependency in which masses of men were the helpless victims of economic power controlled by a few" (xxiv). Thoreau was one of many in the Transcendental movement who "recognized the factory system as the most ominous fact of American life" (xxv). The machine had entered the garden. In a time of increasing competition, the Transcendentalists saw yawning class divides and widespread economic anxiety. Money and power had come to define individual and social life. It is astounding to read Thoreau's words in *Walden*, as if he's commenting on 21st century America: "The principal object [of the factory system] is, not that mankind may be well and honestly clad, but, unquestionably, that the corporations may be enriched" (994). It is no wonder that Thoreau was met with indifference: "Preoccupied with industrial growth and westward expansion, Americans had become less pietistic and idealistic, putting their faith not in the power of ideas but in the idea of power" (Judd 33). Times were changing, and a loafing idler like Thoreau represented vices like sloth, even greed. His message would be obscured by the zeitgeist.

The erosion of social values, and the concomitant imposition of a spiritual malaise, can be best summed up by the term anomie, or alienation. Bewildered by the pace of change and discomfited by societal ruptures, both Thoreau and Merton identified technological "progress" as a defining factor of society's ills. "Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life?" Thoreau wonders in *Walden*. "We are determined to be starved before we are hungry. Men say that a stitch in time saves nine to-morrow" (1029). What were all of these mechanical advances for? They did not aid our inner spiritual development. He observes "a hundred 'modern improvements'; there is an illusion about them; there is not always a positive advance" (1007). Thoreau looked out on his native Concord and saw mindlessness, ennui, townspeople going through prescribed motions, not bothering to look up from their work to ask the fundamental questions about life. "We need to be provoked," he wrote (1038). Indeed, in the very epigraph of *Walden* Thoreau makes explicit that his aim is "to wake my neighbors up" (980).

Merton, too, found himself shocked awake from the slumber of his appetites when he underwent a spiritual conversion—a change of heart, or *metanoia*. Merton looked out on the modern world and observed "the ceaseless motion of hot traffic, tired and angry people, in a complex swirl of frustration" (MacCormick 122). Just as Thoreau in his time diagnosed the "quiet desperation" in the "masses of men" (984), Merton saw a society full of "men worn out by a dirty system" (Kramer 39). Dennis McInerny likens what I call the anomie of the individual in modern society to a "disease [of] mindless materialism and an infatuation with power which is caused by severe spiritual anemia"

(187). Importantly, for Merton and for Thoreau, a degraded society is only the outward manifestation of the inward ills of the individuals making up that society. Ironically, society, as it is, in turn keeps its individuals sick. The inner and outer states of conflict and malaise, the chicken and the egg, are not clearly distinguishable, but they are related.

In our increasingly digitally-lived lives today, with the unfathomable power of artificial intelligence looming before us, Merton's thought from half a century ago seems startlingly prophetic: as E. Glenn Hinson puts it, "Merton could be highly critical of modern technological culture, precisely because it dehumanized and depersonalized…. by becoming autonomous technology threatens to undo man entirely" (66). Both men looked out on a civilization that was teetering, imbalanced. The result of unregulated capitalist competition was that, as Thoreau had pointed out in *Walden*, "A few are riding, but the rest are run over" (1008). Merton was so taken with this phrase that he copied it into a piece of calligraphy in his journal, over an abstract Eastern-influenced drawing (O'Connell 126). American capitalism, both men saw, was set on a course to ravage nature, then the whole continent, and eventually the whole world. Without serious efforts to preserve nature—and hence, the self—we would end up destroying ourselves.

So, the role technology plays in distracting us from ourselves is not only self-destructive, but world-destructive. In *No Man is an Island*, Merton writes, "Those who love their own noise are impatient of everything else. They constantly defile the silence of the forests and the mountains and the sea. They bore through silent nature in every direction with their machines, for fear that the calm world might accuse them of their own emptiness" (257). Merton identified this sickness in his time, Thoreau in his. People zoomed from place to place, abuzz from information overload, hasty and harried. That Thoreau could be so aware of this trend in the 1840s is astonishing. Merton's 1940s were even more saturated with machine technology. And to reflect on the fact that neither man was remotely acquainted with the Digital Age, of the Internet, social media, or artificial intelligence, is to see both as issuing essentially prophetic warnings about our physical and mental health, and the wellbeing of Planet Earth.

Through the haze of media and technology, we can barely distinguish truth from falsehood, true self from mere illusion. Dennis McInerny writes of this problem in his essay, "Thomas Merton and the Tradition of American Critical Romanticism": "In a world in which there is much activity one might conclude that one is in the thick of life. Merton would argue otherwise. Look closely at the activity and you will note its frenetic quality. It is the activity of a people who are in despair, who use activity as a means of maintaining a distance between their consciousness and a reality which they do not want to face" (177-178). Solitude is the antidote to alienation, for in our solitude we hear

the true voice of reality, and then we can act in accordance. As several commentators have pointed out, "Thoreau heeded an inner voice he believed to be divine in origin and universal in scope" (Judd 121).

Thoreau famously claimed he went to the woods because he wanted "to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life" (1028). He means to arrive at the deeper meanings of existence itself: to approach the endeavor of living a human life with the seriousness it deserves and with full consciousness. What *is* life? Why are we here? To mindlessly consume? Those who too commonly "lived lives of quiet desperation" were not waking up to these "essential facts."

Merton, at the monastery, came into contact with Thoreau relatively late in his life. As Patrick O'Connell notes, "It was apparently not until December 1950, almost exactly nine years after entering the monastery, when he had already published four volumes of verse and five of prose, including the autobiography that made him a household name, that [Merton] read *Walden*. His response to it was immediate and profound," (117). Merton found particular resonance with Thoreau's "beautiful pages on morning and on being awake" (117). He compares Thoreau's basic aestheticism to St. John of the Cross's, and reflecting in his journal, Merton admired how Thoreau "did not intend to be resigned to anything like a compromise with life" (117). Merton, like Thoreau, believed that the world and the culture in which he lived were characterized most essentially by evasion, by delusion. And technology was the chief means that we use to avoid the truth of reality. Distilling Merton's thinking on the subject, Dennis McInerny concludes:

> Contemporary Western man was in flight, a massive madcap flight from the deepest realities…Everything in contemporary society seems to work toward the perpetuation of this delusion, for we live in a world which is aroar with noise, a world which seems to be conspiring constantly to distract man from himself… ubiquitous media cover all, and they trivialize everything they touch; by a process of relentless reductionism they depress everything to the level of bland inanity. The "news" which we think it so important to "keep up with" is often little more than glorified gossip. (177)

On this score Merton and Thoreau were in perfect accord. In *Walden*, Thoreau drolly satirizes his contemporaries' lust for information: "To a philosopher, all *news*, as it is called, is gossip… Hardly a man takes a half hour's nap after dinner, but when he wakes he holds up his head and asks, 'What's the news?' as if the rest of mankind had stood his sentinels" (1030). It was technology that delivered this news, and the speed of communication in Thoreau's time, as in ours, was undergoing massive, rapid growth.

Technology, ostensibly intended to bring people closer together, was backfiring—in Thoreau's time, in Merton's time, and in ours. "Merton was against technology because he believed that, ultimately, technology was against man. The machine had become so prevalent and powerful that it ruled the life of its creator. The master had become the slave to his own creation. He had been dehumanized by it, himself transformed into a machine," Dennis McInerny writes (183-184). In this sentiment Merton echoes, however unconsciously, Thoreau's revelation in *Walden* that "We do not ride the railroad; it rides upon us" (1029). The idea that technology serves to benefit humankind is, for both men, sheer nonsense, a deceptive trap. Technology, rather than bringing us closer to reality and to each other, instead removes us from *fully conscious contact* with God or Nature. For Merton, as for Thoreau, "a great deal of what was wrong with American culture could be explained by the social structure of the country, built almost entirely around the machine. The machine lies at the heart of the troubles that beset contemporary life" (McInerny 182-183). It is chilling to consider what either would have made about the increasingly documented relationship between social media and teenage depression, anxiety, body issues, and self-harm.

"Everything in modern city life is calculated to keep man from entering into himself and thinking about spiritual things," Merton writes in *No Man is an Island*. "Even with the best of intentions a spiritual man finds himself exhausted and deadened and debased by the constant noise of machines and loudspeakers, the dead air and the glaring lights of offices and shops, the everlasting suggestions of advertising and propaganda" (108-109). And Merton didn't have a smart phone to have to deal with. Yet, he was already grasping that "The whole mechanism of modern life is geared for a flight from God and from the spirit into the wilderness of neuroses. Even our monasteries are not free from the smell and clatter of our world" (108-109). Looking out on the world today, it is easy to see these "neuroses" manifested on an even grander scale. The smart phone is a distraction machine and a behavior modification system. In our personal and our public lives, we are increasingly defined by digital algorithms.

One of Thoreau's biographers uses Thoreau's own cosmic vision to zoom out on our world for an alternative, more encompassing perspective. "From 'an observatory in the stars,' would America's 'beehive' of commercial activity really look like freedom?" Laura Dassow Walls asks. "Hardly. 'There would be hammering and chipping, baking and brewing, in one quarter; buying and selling, money-changing and speech making, in another.' By tying us to material goods, commerce does not free us but enslaves us, turns us into brutes" (Walls 81). This commerce—capitalism, consumerism—joins machines

and technology to offer the *appearance* of growth and evolution. But instead, it leads us away from ourselves, and in the end, away from each other as well.

Rejecting the myth of Thoreau as an eccentric, self-obsessed hermit, Walls concludes, "Thoreau was a haunted man. He and everyone he knew were all implicated: the evil of slavery, the damnation of the Indian, the global traffic in animal parts, the debasement of nature, the enclosure of the ancient commons—the threads of the modern global economy were spinning him and everyone around him into a dehumanizing web of destruction" (438). Even in his hermitage, Thoreau was concerned with the outside world. In fact, it is my contention that through his solitude and silence, however relative it was, Thoreau arrived at a deeper concern for society and the natural world. Haunted he may have been, but despairing he was not. Thoreau found hope in his revelations, urging others to take whatever path they needed in order to arrive at a similarly widened consciousness. In *Walden*, Thoreau issued an invitation—a provocation, really—for others to establish in their own lives their personal equivalent to his sojourn in the woods, so that when they "came to die," they would not discover that they "had not lived" (1028). As Dennis McInerny makes clear, many of Merton's books, also, were in effect "invitations to his readers to adopt a monastic mentality toward the world and their experiences. He was constantly challenging them to force the issue, to face their situation nakedly, to dispose themselves for the totally transforming *metanoia*," or change of heart (178).

Paradoxically, Thoreau located the macro of the universe in the micro of the self. By looking deeply inward, outward truths could be revealed. We are, after all, each of us threads of some larger abstract fabric of Being. Thoreau would identify that Being as Nature. He could walk through the woods near Concord and find the whole universe composed in a single fallen leaf. As critic Mark Van Doren concluded about Thoreau, his "whole life was a search for embodied Reality, and his whole contention on paper is that Reality is accessible…if he finds his self, he finds reality. If he finds reality, he has found the universe" (121). This bedrock reality—nature, the universe—is the same essential capital-B Being that Thomas Merton would identify as "God."

In his runaway bestseller autobiography, The *Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton recounts his experiences with medieval mystic literature, and his first encounter with the notion of Aseitas:

> The English equivalent is a transliteration: aseity—simply means the power of a being to exist absolutely in virtue of itself, not as caused by itself, but as requiring no cause, no other justification for its existence except that its very nature is to

> exist. There can be only one such being: God. And to say that God exists *a se*, of and by reason of Himself, is merely to say that God is Being Itself…God is being *per se*. (189)

If God is another word for Being Itself, it seems that we can also substitute Nature with little to no loss of meaning. In that nexus, Thoreau and Merton meet.

The critic Victor Kramer also makes a connection between Thoreau and Merton. "When one agrees to stay put…one can really begin to travel," Kramer writes. "Merton's writing finally allowed him to move beyond a concern with self, yet the only way to do this was to begin with an examination of self. Just like Thoreau's apology within the opening pages of *Walden* for the subject matter he knows best, himself, Merton's strategy builds on paradox" (Kramer 28). The paradox Kramer sees here is similar to the micro-to-macro mirror of self-universe; understanding oneself leads to a better understanding of others. To examine the self is to also observe the world. Solitude, actually, unites. "The closer the contemplative is to God, the closer he is to other men," Merton wrote. "The more he loves God, the more he can love the men he lives with. He does not withdraw from them to shake them off, to get away from them, but in the truest sense, to *find* them" (Hinson 69).

In her biography of Thoreau, Laura Dassow Walls notes a similar paradox. Modern audiences have been handed down two different versions of the man, "both of them hermits, yet radically at odds with each other. One speaks for nature; the other for social justice" (xx). One is alone, cloistered in his cabin, while the other is among the masses, acting as town gadfly. "Yet the historical Thoreau was no hermit, and as Thoreau's own record shows, his social activism and his defense of nature spring from the same roots: he found society in nature, and nature he found everywhere, including the town center and the human heart" (xx).

One can never find the self if one insists on looking elsewhere than in the self. Therefore, in Merton's words, "in order to find our souls we have to enter into our own solitude and learn to live with ourselves" (Kramer, 1984, p. 95). Merton's extensive writings suggest, and his actions illustrate, that we must be more attentive to our interior, individual lives. With such focus, we can hear God. The possibility for this transcendence of mundane reality lives within us. There is a divinity in our hearts, if we can only learn to hear it. "To be human is to search for one's unique inner powers and then consciously unfold, guide, and nourish them," Laura Dassow Walls writes of the Transcendentalists. "In most people those powers lie dormant; to awaken, to become fully human, is to see

that of all creation, humans alone carry God's nature within. As William Ellery Channing wrote, 'We see God around us, because he dwells within us'" (88).

The call of this divinity within also becomes a call to action. Victor Kramer writes, "More concern about solitude and silence led Merton to an awareness of his fundamental responsibility to suggest links between his insight as a monk and his understanding of questions that people in the world faced" (Kramer, 1984, p. 94). For Thomas Merton, Kramer writes, "the great delusion of our time is the delusion of a 'humanism' within a society in which man has been alienated from himself by economic individualism and lost in a mass society where each person is hardly distinguishable from others" (Kramer, 1984, p. 94). The voice of transcendent reality—God—is being snuffed out by the hustle and bustle of modern life. What Merton wants us to realize is that "the vocation of any person is to construct his own solitude…for a valid encounter with other persons," (Kramer, 1984, p. 94). It is only *through* solitude that one can begin to build toward cooperation and communion.

Even for Merton, the monk, solitude does not mean a necessarily *religious* withdrawal. This may be why, if only in passing, Merton singles out Thoreau and Emily Dickinson as inspirations, in his essay "Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude": the hermit withdraws from others not out of his rejection of them, but rather so he can be "closer to the heart of the church" (Kramer, 1984, p. 96). Withdrawal, Merton demonstrates, is a form of love for other men. "It should never be a rejection of man or of his society," Merton states clearly; a true solitary is one who has gone *beyond* the shallow "I"; true solitude is not a form of selfishness. Merton rightly concludes that "without solitude of some sort there is and can be no maturity" (Kramer, 1984, p. 97).

In his incisive essay on Merton, Dennis McInerny takes note of this paradox as well. "The hermit sever[s] himself physically from other human beings, not out of an antipathy for men, but rather out of a love for them" (176). True solitude, then, has an inherently social element. The hermit's ecumenical contemplation has the potential to benefit society at large. Likewise, the world at large nurtures the thoughts of the solitary. The psychologist Anthony Storr confirms this: "A man in isolation is a collective man. One cannot even begin to be conscious of oneself as a separate individual without another person with whom to compare oneself" (147). Although we are accustomed to thinking about solitude and society as diametrically opposed, their true relation is paradoxical. That means they are not opposed, but rather, are two sides of the same coin, a yin-yang.

Thoreau and Merton were also both influenced by Eastern Philosophy. Thoreau brought a copy of the *Bhagavad Gita* with him to Walden Pond. Transcendentalism

was the first philosophical movement in America to seriously attempt to bridge the gap between East and West.

In his *Journal of 1850*, Thoreau levels the barriers between all religions, identifying their essential equivalence: "I do not prefer one religion or philosophy to another—...To the philosopher all sects of all nations are alike. I like Brahma—Hare Buddha—the Great Spirit as well" (O'Connell 134). In the same vein, Merton recorded in his own journal, "One of the things I like best about Thoreau is not usually remarked on. It is the fact that he is something of a bridge builder between East and West. Gandhi liked his essay 'Civil Disobedience,' and Thoreau had a liking for Oriental philosophy. So do I," (O'Connell 133). Not only does Merton take inspiration from Thoreau, but he recognizes that others whom he esteems—Gandhi being one—had also noticed Thoreau's sage recognition of the East. Merton's unabashed admiration for Mahatma Gandhi is of a spiritual-political nature. He saw that Gandhi "applied Gospel principles to the problems of a political and social existence in such a way that his approach to these problems was *inseparably* religious and political at the same time" (Hinson 64). Eastern spiritual wisdom was useful for all of these men when they turned their attention to social reform.

Observing the bitter clash of the Civil Rights Movement in the early 1960s, Merton summarized the history of non-violence in America:

> The purpose of non-violent protest, in its deepest and most spiritual dimensions is then to awaken the conscience of the white man to the awful reality of his injustice and of his sin, so that he will be able to see that the Negro problem is really a *white* problem: that the cancer of injustice and hate which is eating white society and is only partly manifested in racial segregation with all its consequences is *rooted in the heart of the white man himself.* (Woodcock 131)

It was in the same way, of course, that Gandhi set out to show that the problem of a subject India "were those of the conquerors and not of the conquered" (Woodcock 131). Gandhi, in fact, had been so affected by Thoreau's essay "Civil Disobedience" that he mentioned wanting to make a pilgrimage to Walden Pond himself (Judd 143).

In a series of essays on the racial strife of the 1960s, Thomas Merton returns again and again to the necessity for a radical transformation of inner self—in perceptions and patterns of behavior—not just in outward laws. Merton's "Letters to a White Liberal" (1963) like Thoreau's "Slavery in Massachusetts" (1854) condemns those who pay lip service to reform so long as it does not interfere in any significant way with their own comfortable existence, those "who blithely suppose that somehow the Negroes (both north and south) will gradually and quietly 'fit in' to white society exactly as it is, with

its affluent economy, the mass media, its political machines, and the professional inanity of its middle class suburban folkways" (O'Connell 129). Merton's reiterated message is that "American society has to change before the race problem can be solved" (O'Connell 129). Before society can be changed, both men argue, the individual must first undergo its own revolution.

For Merton in particular, his encounter with the *Tao Te Ching* was especially profound: Taoism is, in a very literal sense, "a way, a mode of living that recognizes the existence of universal forces—something close to what we call natural laws—and which holds that man can live according to these forces, and can benefit from them, by ceasing to be conscious of any distinction between himself and the world around him" (Woodcock 161). Recognizing the "way" of nature was, for both Merton and Thoreau, the surest path to truth, to reality. It is also an apt description of both men's journeys: examining the individual self to arrive at a better understanding of the larger world.

Merton, despite being a devout Catholic, became later in life enamored with not only Taoism, but Confucianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam. As a monk of the West, Merton nonetheless sought bonds with the East, especially when the Vietnam War became a political and cultural flashpoint. Merton passed away suddenly in Bangkok in 1968 during a grand tour of the Buddhist holy land, where he had gone to forge international spiritual-political alliances. He was deeply moved by his experience. At a Buddhist shrine in Ceylon, having "pierced through the surface…beyond the shadow and the disguise" (O'Connell 137), Merton's preexisting ideas had been reinforced. "Everything is emptiness and everything is compassion," he wrote, finding existential confirmation of his statement that "The geographical pilgrimage is the symbolic acting out of an inner journey," (137). In the last speech he made, a few hours before his death in Bangkok, Merton said: "The monk is essentially someone who takes up a critical attitude toward the world and its structures" (O'Connell 120).

Deep in his solitude Merton had become concerned with the plight of others, even on the other side of the world. And in his own country, of course. As E. Glenn Hinson points out, in a letter to James Baldwin, Merton wrote that he found Baldwin "right on target with reference to…the racial crisis in America" (Hinson 67). He disagreed with him only in Baldwin's insistence that he did what he did as a "non-Christian" or "anti-Christian." To the contrary, Merton insisted, what Baldwin said was "fundamentally religious, genuinely religious, and therefore has to be against conventional religiosity" (67). For those who might consider Merton a dogmatic or purely orthodox thinker, think again. Merton even found existentialists such as Camus "essentially Christian," despite Camus'

avowed agnosticism (67). True concern for social welfare dismantles these artificial boundaries.

God was the ultimate force erasing those demarcations. Merton found evidence for this in his study of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Writing about that text, Merton returns to the idea of a "cosmic dance": "Arjuna surrenders totally to the will and wisdom of Krishna," the Almighty. "Arjuna thus attains the pure consciousness of Being, in which the subject as such 'disappears.'" It is at this moment, Merton goes on to say, that one "encounters [God] not as Being but as Freedom and Love" (Patnaik 86). Arjuna's "true self comes to full maturity in emptiness and solitude" (86). Once again, through solitude, the fundamental self can finally emerge—this true self being one of Thoreau's "essential facts" of life. As Thoreau had asserted in the "Higher Laws" chapter of *Walden*: "Man flows at once to God when the channel of purity is open" (Schneider 100). When authentic selfhood is established, as both Merton and Thoreau attest, a deep concern for the welfare of society and other people can truly begin.

To lose the self, then, is the first step to finding the self. Only later can we discover the true nature of the world, and act on what we find. First, we must be subsumed by God—Nature—Being. As Dennis McInerny summarizes, "In the contemplative experience…we find ourselves (or, what amounts to the same thing, we lose ourselves) in the All, the All that is no thing…for if the All were a single separate thing, it would not be the All. The goal of contemplation is to live in All, through All, for All, by him who is All" (200). Merton had written, "I too must be no thing—and therefore no separate individual identity. And when I am no thing, I am in the All" (200). Once you are "in the all," once the veneer of dualistic thinking is shed, others, too, appear in their true form.

In *The Seven Story Mountain*, Merton details his first encounter with Eastern mysticism. It came from a Westerner, but one who took seriously the lessons of "Oriental" texts: Merton's contemporary, Aldous Huxley. In particular, Huxley's *Ends and Means*. "[Huxley] had read widely and deeply and intelligently in all kinds of Christian and Oriental mystical literature, and had come out with the astonishing truth that all this, far from being a mixture of dreams and magic and charlatanism, was very real and very serious," Merton writes (202-203).

> Not only was there such a thing as a supernatural order, but as a matter of concrete experience, it was accessible, very close at hand, and extremely near, an immediate and most necessary source of moral vitality, and one which could be reached most simply, most readily, by prayer, faith, detachment, love. (202-203)

The spiritual realm was readily accessible—one just needed solitude and silence to locate it. Merton found himself increasingly committed to intermingling these ancient ideas. He writes, "The point of [Huxley's] title was this: we cannot use evil *means* to attain a good *end*" (202-203). Huxley argued that we were using the means that precisely made good ends impossible to attain: war, violence, rapacity. Huxley, Merton writes, "traced our impossibility to use the proper means to the fact that men were immersed in the material and animal urges of an element in their nature which was blind and cruel and unspiritual" (202-203). Thoreau would have found much to agree with in the idea that vacuous materialism held no answers. Rather, truth, as lived in the spiritual realm, is accessible through nature, and the self.

Patrick O'Connell, comparing the two men, sees one crucial distinction in their approaches to social justice in their respective times. Merton, a committed nonviolent actor, "does not agree with or justify the turn to violence, as Thoreau apparently does in 'A Plea for Captain John Brown'" (130). "I do not wish to kill or be killed," Thoreau had said, "but I can foresee circumstances in which both of these things would be by me unavoidable" (Gougeon 208). Yet, Patrick O'Connell finds, "Merton sympathizes with the frustration of those who imagine that violent revolt is their only recourse against oppression" (130). Perhaps this is a defining break between them. Nonetheless, of this we can be certain: in Merton's dedication to both solitude *and* social reform, his silent retreat and his written expression, his Americanness *and* his interest in ancient Eastern thought, he and Thoreau do have much in common. Henry Thoreau and Thomas Merton were two radical thinkers who shook the world with their pens. Each moved from the self to the world, from a sense of alienation to a change of heart.

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