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FACE TO FACE:  
THE GROWTH OF THE SELF IN THOMAS MERTON

*The futile life is not futile if you simply live it.  
It remains futile however as long as you watch yourself living it*

INTRODUCTION

The concept of the ‘true’ self versus the ‘false’ self is not a construct unique to the spirituality of the late Trappist monk and prolific author, Thomas Merton. It has been present in the writings of a wide range of thinkers through the ages. In the last century, one of its most influential proponents, Carl Gustav Jung would speak of the search for the true self in terms of what he called the ‘individuation process’<sup>1</sup> whereby we recover our true selves and in so doing, become who we truly are. This process involves the gradual letting go of our ‘false’ or illusory, adapted selves - the selves we show to the world and which are largely driven by the ego. In common with Augustine before him, Jung’s approach affirmed the human person simultaneously as a being made in the image of God and as one in whose being that image resides, locating God as the very ground of the self. Merton’s contribution lies not only in his own particular approach – one which is biblically-rooted but also bears traces of his engagement with psychology, philosophy and inter-religious dialogue (most especially, Zen Buddhism<sup>2</sup>) – but most notably in the intriguing manner in which his own life served almost as a narrative for spiritual growth into the authentic self.

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<sup>1</sup> See A. Storr, *C.G. Jung*. NY: Viking Press 1973, p. 74–87.

<sup>2</sup> T. Merton, *DT Suzuki: the Man and his Work*, „The Eastern Buddhist” vol. 2, no. 1 (August 1967), p. 7.

## THE SELF &amp; THOMAS MERTON

When did Merton's interest in the true versus the illusory self begin? For Gunn<sup>3</sup>, whose interest in Merton is more psychoanalytical than spiritual, the starting point was early infancy and the catalyst was Merton's mother, Ruth. Gunn documents the way in which Ruth Merton painstakingly observed her first-born son, noting down his every behavioural change in almost obsessive detail. Ultimately, this sense of being so closely observed by a mother whose 'cerebral intellectualism' would later be identified by Merton as a source of unresolved anxiety and resentment<sup>4</sup> was to manifest itself in a lifelong battle with *self-consciousness*. Perceiving his mother as perfectionist and critical, Merton was left with the sensation that he somehow fell short of her expectations – a sensation which, in turn, caused him to be at variance with his own 'spontaneous true self'<sup>5</sup>. Gunn also examines those factors in Merton's life that may have been responsible for heightening his 'burden of self-consciousness'. Here, impermanence, separation and loss are all implicated. Indeed, there emerges a picture of more or less continual upheaval and trauma in the formative years of his life. Arguably, the most devastating trauma he was to suffer was finding himself orphaned at just 15 years of age. Writing later of his youth in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton spoke of the 'sadness and depression' that settled over him at the ages of 6 and 15 with the deaths of his parents. When given the news of his father's death from a brain tumour while a boarder at Oakham School, a minor public school for boys in the East Midlands, Merton would relate that his grief was further compounded by the stark realisation that suddenly he 'really had no home'.

Placed in the care of a guardian who had been a friend of his father's, Merton went on to win a place to read Modern Languages at Clare College, University of Cambridge. There, he subsequently went completely off course, underperforming in his studies and living a highly social (and largely dissolute) life with disastrous consequences. Though the exact details remain sketchy to this day, it would seem that a young woman whom Merton had become intimate with became pregnant. If the account given in Furlong's biography<sup>6</sup> is correct, Merton's guardian came to some form of financial agreement with the woman and her family and then

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<sup>3</sup> R.J. Gunn, *Journeys into Emptiness: Dogen, Merton, Jung and the Quest for Transformation*, New York: Paulist Press 2000.

<sup>4</sup> In the course of Merton's correspondence with the Catholic feminist theologian, Rosemary Radford Ruether, he rounds on Ruether at one point and accuses her of being 'very academic, cerebral, abstract'. In a subsequent letter, he apologises and explains that the tone of her letter was reminiscent of his mother's cold intellectualism. *At Home in the World*, letters dated 19 March, 1967 and 27 March 1967.

<sup>5</sup> R.J. Gunn, *Journeys into*, p. 91.

<sup>6</sup> M. Furlong, *Merton: A Biography*, London: SPCK 1995, p. 57.

suggested it might be best for Merton to go to live in the United States where he would become the responsibility of his grandparents.

Having never settled at Cambridge which he was to remember as a place of 'damp and fetid mists' with a 'dark and sinister atmosphere,'<sup>7</sup> Merton enrolled at Columbia University in New York where he gained both his BA and MA degrees and was part of a circle made up of several individuals who would become life-long friends. During this period, his life was comprised of study, a heady social life (parties, jazz evenings and girls are mentioned in his journals), an interest in Aldous Huxley and a passing acquaintance with Oriental mysticism. In a classic example of Merton's tendency to make sweeping denunciations of that which he would later go on to positively integrate in his quest for the real self, he reduced all Oriental mysticism<sup>8</sup> to 'technique' which, he reasoned, cancelled out any 'mystical' element since it remained 'purely in the natural order'. By Christian standards this didn't make it 'evil *per se* just more or less useless'<sup>9</sup>.

Merton's subsequent conversion to Roman Catholicism would remain the most critical and transformative *volte face* of his life. Hitherto steeped in the anti-Catholic prejudice of his grandparents, he would now reserve his contempt for anything that was not Catholic. Engaged in teaching and a modest career as a writer, Merton's conversion was followed by the conviction that he was being called to the religious life. Rejected by the Franciscans, he was persuaded by a friend to try the Cistercians at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. In the *Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton recorded his impressions of the abbey during what is known in monastic terminology as an 'aspirancy'. He wrote in evocative terms of the church as being filled with light and of monks who 'stood in their stalls and bowed like white seas at the ends of the psalms ... The whole earth came to life and bounded with new fruitfulness and significance in the joy of their simple and beautiful chanting.'<sup>10</sup> Furlong makes the observation that, in this time of graced encounter, Merton 'had a sense of homecoming, of having found something he had searched for.' Describing his return to New York, Merton drew a sharp distinction between the enclosure of Gethsemani and the huge expanse of the city which stretched out before him. 'Back in the world, I felt a little like a man that had come down from the rare atmosphere of a very high mountain.'<sup>11</sup>

When in 1941, at the age of 26, Thomas Merton entered the Abbey of Gethsemani, he was convinced that he had renounced both 'the world' and his former, worldly self. He was prepared to forego a career as a writer and any connotations

<sup>7</sup> T. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Orlando, FL: Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovich 1976, c. 1948. 118, 126.

<sup>8</sup> The term 'Oriental mysticism' suggests a reductionism of the entire canon of the Asian sub-continent and Far East into a mysticism based on a kind of emotional irrationalism.

<sup>9</sup> M. Furlong, *Merton*, p. 69.

<sup>10</sup> M. Furlong, *Merton*, p. 97.

<sup>11</sup> T. Merton, *The Seven Storey*, p. 332.

of worldly success such a career might imply, to exchange the name he had been given at birth for a new name in religion and to live out the rest of his life in community as a Trappist monk in expiation for his own sins and the sins of the world. In the journals extant from those first years, he wrote of a life more in tune with mediaeval times than 20<sup>th</sup> century America – a life circumscribed by a silence<sup>12</sup> which was punctuated only by the liturgical and sacramental (chanting the Divine Office, saying Mass, making one's confession individually or publicly at the weekly 'Chapter of Faults') educative (as during the 'formation' of novices), spiritual (when seeking guidance from one's spiritual director) or by means of Cistercian sign language<sup>13</sup>. It was a world bounded by 'thick unheated walls', the wearing of 'mediaeval underwear' beneath a habit that was so heavy that it amounted to an instrument of penance during the hot and humid Kentucky summers, undertaking manual labour (the monastery ran a working farm), eating a frugal vegetarian diet and living a community life which afforded no real privacy and one where the monks slept 'in common' in large dormitories (during Merton's years at Gethsemani, the community was uncomfortably overcrowded, numbering 200 at one point).

One of Merton's closest friends from his Columbia days, Robert Lax, commenting on those early years at Gethsemani thought that Merton 'was seeking a direction in life ... [and] was hoping to become a complete human being or completely Thomas Merton.' Even while Merton was attempting to be what constituted a good monk in the initial stages of his formation, there were cracks - both physical and psychological. The heavy work, inadequate diet, constant activity, interrupted sleep (the monks had to awaken to go into choir in the early hours of the morning for the first Office of the day) and lack of time and space to recharge culminated in all manner of disturbances. Merton records being plagued by insomnia, stomach, bowel and skin problems and anxiety. In time, he would experience difficulties not over his vocation, but over whether, in fact, it was possible to be a true contemplative in such a busy and ordered world. Not for the first time would he wonder if he would not have been more suited to the life of a Carthusian. His superiors responded to his plight by setting him the task of writing and ultimately he would find – most especially as a result of the account of his conversion in the best-selling *Seven Storey Mountain* – that the 'self' he imagined he had left behind him in 1941 had, after all, been there with him all the time.

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<sup>12</sup> Dom John Eudes Bamberger speaks of the silence as making the life 'very intense ... with few emotional outlets'.

<sup>13</sup> See S.G. Bruce, *The Origins of Cistercian Sign Language*, "Citeaux: Comenntarii Cistercienses" 52 (2001), p. 193–209.

## THE SEEDS OF CONTEMPLATION AND THE SELF

According to Carr<sup>14</sup> and other Merton scholars, Thomas Merton's first 'formal' discussion of his theology of the self can be traced back to 1947 with the publication of *The Seeds of Contemplation*.<sup>15</sup> Later revised and reconfigured as *New Seeds of Contemplation*, it bears traces of Pascal (who denounced the ego as 'hateful'), the Desert Fathers, St Augustine of Hippo, mystics such as the Rhineland Dominican, Meister Eckhart and St John of the Cross (both exponents of the negative or 'apophatic' way to God) – as well as Carl Gustav Jung and more 'secular' thinkers such as Heidegger and the atheist existentialist philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre. For Merton, the riddle of the real self is bound up in God. Recalling Augustine whose search for God in the external world (i.e., outside the self)<sup>16</sup> was an exercise in futility, Merton stated, 'Finding God and finding my true self are not two separate experiences, rather the experience is one.'<sup>17</sup>

For Merton, the starting-point for any discussion on the self must entail a return to sources. This means nothing less than revisiting the biblical account of the creation of humankind in the opening chapters of the book of Genesis. The creation of the first representative human beings, Adam and Eve and the placing of the divine imprint (the *imago Dei*) and blessing upon them witnesses to the unitive state of perfect being in relationship to God, self and other that we call 'paradise'. The subsequent narrative of the 'fall' with its tragic sequence of events has disastrous consequences, heralding division, alienation and the onset of what Augustine termed 'Original Sin'. Merton identifies the false self with the ego and sees this as bound up with the propensity to sin since the false, illusory self (often imaged as a 'mask' or inauthentic *persona*) is outside – and therefore, unknown to – God. Conversely, the 'secret' self that carries one's true identity is hidden in God and waiting to be born again. Put another way, 'to be born again under the touch of the Spirit is not to become somebody else but to become ourselves. The New Man is the real self.' Likewise, to 'be saved' is 'to return to one's inviolate and eternal reality and to live

<sup>14</sup> A.E. Carr, *A Search for Wisdom Thomas Merton's Theology of the Self*, Notre Dame, IND.: University of Notre Dame Press 1988, p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> A.E. Carr, *A Search for Wisdom*, p. 12. The 'seeds' are those of our own identity 'continuously planted by God in the core of human freedom'.

<sup>16</sup> In the *Confessions (Book X)*, Augustine eloquently gives voice to this: "You were inside me but I was outside myself. I was searching for you and rushing headlong into disintegration amidst the beautiful things you have made. You were with me but I was not with you. But where was I when I looked for you? You were there before my eyes but I had deserted my own self. I could not find myself, much less you."

<sup>17</sup> T. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Tunbridge Wells: Burnes & Oates 1999, c. 1961.

in God.’ Imagining the ego as a barrier between God and the real self<sup>18</sup>, Merton contends that the original attitudinal state of human/divine encounter was one of unmediated ‘seeing’ or perfect contemplation. [This brings to mind Eckhart who stated that ‘when the mind and heart are emptied of self and all other things, a room is left ready for God to enter and occupy it ... For God is at once the place where he works and the work itself.’] In the depths of pure contemplative prayer perfect unity may be found since ‘there seems to be no division between subject and object’. Consequently, this obviates the need ‘to make any statement about God or about oneself for He and His reality absorbs everything else.’<sup>19</sup>

### THE INFLUENCE OF THE EAST ON MERTON AND THE REAL SELF

The late 1950s and continuing on up to his death in 1968 marked a personal renaissance for Merton. Jean Jadot, a contemporary of Merton’s states, ‘Thomas Merton started out with this closed Trappist life ... He wanted nothing to do with anything but his own faith and then slowly he opened himself to the influence of man and nature and Zen ...’<sup>20</sup> Light years away from the self who had dismissed Oriental mysticism as ‘not evil *per se*’, Merton was now in regular communication with Buddhist scholars and mystics such as DT Suzuki, the Vietnamese monk, Thich Nhat Hahn and the Dalai Lama. His interest in the self gained new ground in his engagement with Buddhist thought. Though he would contend that he saw ‘no contradiction between Buddhism and Christianity’ and go so far as to state that ‘the future of Zen is in the West’<sup>21</sup>, his point of reference remained firmly established within the Christian tradition. In correspondence with Suzuki, for instance, there were points of contact to be found within both Zen and the tradition of the Desert, especially where the need to combat self-delusion was concerned. Elsewhere, he would state that ‘it seems to me that Zen is the very atmosphere of the gospels and the gospels are bursting with it.’<sup>22</sup> This wasn’t to imply that he advocated a blurring of distinctions, simply that one tradition could shed light on the other. For Merton, his study of Zen – whether in dialogue or through providing a translation and commentary on the work of the Taoist Chinese sage, Chuang

<sup>18</sup> Merton would speak of the appearance of the ego as a consequence of the Fall also in terms of alienation from the inner self which is the image of God and that has been turned primordially inside out so that the ego plays the part of the person.

<sup>19</sup> T. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 160.

<sup>20</sup> J. Jadot in: P. Wilkes (ed.), *Thomas Merton by Those Who Knew Him Best*, San Francisco: Harper & Row 1984, p. 156.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in W. Shannon, *The Dark Path of Thomas Merton*.

<sup>22</sup> Letter to DT Suzuki, 12/3/1959.

Tzu – helped him to further understand his own vocation to the monastic and eremetical/solitary life as not separate from the world but as a unity or ‘oneness with all that is’<sup>23</sup>

Merton also argued that there was a meeting place between Christianity and Zen in terms of ‘no self’ insofar as both ‘point out that we arrive at the true self somewhat as we arrive at God: by negation, by what it is not ... The false self is the conditioned, adapted self whereas the true self is no-self’<sup>24</sup>. Though one could argue that there is a fundamental difference between the two rationales (Christianity, after all, is grounded in the Incarnation and this has implications for the self both in terms of *particularity* (roughly translating out as ‘I am ‘me’ at a particular place and time’) and in transformation of consciousness which, for the Christian, means participation in the mind of Christ<sup>25</sup>), Merton thought there was a greater commonality than appeared at first glance. In a classic example of Zen language as a kind of ‘anti-language’, he believed that there was a commonality to be found in the absence of the false self in the pure contemplative/meditative state which could be articulated in a number of ways such as the contention that ‘the realiser does not stand outside the reality, but may be said to be at least part of that reality. So he is a self-manifestation of reality as such. This realisation – that one is the self-manifestation of ultimate reality as such – is his realisation.’<sup>26</sup> Writing in 1966, he would argue that ‘the whole aim of Zen is not to make fool-proof statements about experience but to come to direct grips with reality without the mediation of logical verbalisation.’<sup>27</sup> This echoed those such as Eckhart who wrote of the inadequacy of language to express religious experience.<sup>28</sup> For his part, Suzuki would contend that ‘Zen emptiness is not the emptiness of nothingness, but the emptiness of fullness in which there is no gain, no loss, no increase, no decrease and in which this equation takes place: zero = infinity.’<sup>29</sup>

During this period, Merton was granted permission to live outside the monastery in a ‘hermitage’ – a small low-roofed bungalow built of breeze-blocks and initially without electricity or running water – which was set in the abbey grounds. In his diary entry for 26<sup>th</sup> December 1960, he wrote of having ‘lit candles in the dusk’ and spoke of a ‘sense of a journey ended, of wandering at an end.’ It was, he said, the ‘*first time in my life* I have ever really felt I had come home and that my roaming and looking were ended.’<sup>30</sup> In a life marked by paradox, the hermitage years coin-

<sup>23</sup> T. Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*.

<sup>24</sup> A.E. Carr, *A Search for Wisdom*, p. 83.

<sup>25</sup> This recalls Gal 2.20: ‘It is no longer I that lives but Christ in me.’

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Carr.

<sup>27</sup> See Shannon, William, *Thomas Merton’s Dark Path*.

<sup>28</sup> Eckhart once stated that anyone who speaks about the Trinity lies.

<sup>29</sup> T. Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, p. 129.

<sup>30</sup> T. Merton, *Turning towards the World: The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume 4, 1960–1963*, ed. V.A. Kramer, San Francisco: Harper Collins 1966, p. 80.

cided with one of the most socially aware and interactive times in Merton's life as a monk. He began to 'turn outward, to correspond with writers and thinkers and men of action who were deeply engaged with current problems and paradoxically to see his own growing solitude as an act of solidarity with them. *It was as though he had abandoned all interest in the persona of the monk.*'<sup>31</sup> Where previously he had been, in Bamberger's words, 'a good obedient monk', now he gave vent to his resentment over what he perceived as unreasonable restrictions placed upon him by his abbot of 25 years, Dom James Fox; where once he had spoken up in defence of ecclesiastical censorship and the obedience demanded by the monastic Rule, now – haunted by the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem<sup>32</sup> – he wondered if it [obedience] could ever be wholly justified on moral grounds. Around this time, after a lifetime of having 'always resisted any kind of possessive love on the part of another human being', Merton suddenly and inexplicably fell in love with a young nurse who had been assigned to care for him in hospital following an operation. Though he would remain in vows for the remainder of his life, this opening up of himself to another human being marked another step towards the realisation of his true and authentic self. Prior to the relationship with the woman referred to as 'M' in his journals, he wrote that 'my worst and inmost sickness is the despair of ever being able to truly love because I despair of ever being worthy of love.'

Towards the end of his life, it seemed that many of the barriers that had previously prevented Merton's true self from being born anew had been eradicated. His 'epiphany' on a street corner in downtown Louisville when, in an instant of intense enlightenment, he experienced his connectedness with all the individuals around him, had the impact of 'waking' him 'as if from a dream – the dream of my separateness.'<sup>33</sup> In a culture that is more concerned with the individual than the fully evolved and adult human person, Merton's theology of the self is perhaps even more relevant now than it was in his lifetime. Recovery of the true self ultimately means that 'the individual is no longer conscious of himself as an isolated ego but sees his inmost ground of being dependent on Another or being formed through relationships, particularly his relationship with God. By forgetting himself both as subject and object of reflection man finds his real self hidden with Christ in God. And so as his self-consciousness changes the individual is transformed; his self is no longer its own centre; it is now centred on God.'

<sup>31</sup> M. Furlong, *Merton*, p. 241.

<sup>32</sup> Hannah Arendt's *Dispatches from Jerusalem* which covered the Eichmann trial and, in the course of which the term 'the banality of evil' was coined, appeared in the *New Yorker* in 1963.

<sup>33</sup> T. Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, "The Journals of Thomas Merton" Vol. 3 (1952–1960), ed. L.S. Cunningham, San Francisco: Harper Collins 1966. March 19, 1958, pp. 181–182.



## SEEING BEYOND THE SHADOW AND THE DISGUISE

In 1968, Merton received permission to leave the Abbey of Gethsemani in order to take part in an important inter-religious conference in Bangkok where, in the course of his journey, he would meet on more than one occasion with the Dalai Lama. Travelling to the East was the realisation of a dream, a ‘homecoming’. Before he set out, he wrote in his journal: ‘May I not come back without having found the great compassion, *mahakaruna*. I am going home, to the home I have not had in this body.’<sup>34</sup>

His journal dating from that period, posthumously published as *The Asian Journal*, is filled with details of his travels as well as his growing understanding and appreciation of Zen Buddhist thought. One of his final entries concerns a visit to Polonnaruwa which sounds like a returning echo to his diary entry before he left the Abbey:

*I visited Polonnaruwa on Monday ... The vicar general shying away from “paganism” ... I am able to approach the Buddhas barefoot and undisturbed, my feet in wet grass, wet sand. Then the silence of the extraordinary faces. The great smiles. Huge and yet subtle. Filled with every possibility, questioning nothing, knowing everything ... Looking at these figures I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious ... The thing about all this is that there is no puzzle, no problem, and really no “mystery” ... Everything is emptiness and everything is compassion. I don’t know when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination. I mean, I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for. I don’t know what else remains but I have now seen and pierced through the surface and have got beyond the shadow and the disguise.*<sup>35</sup>

## EPILOGUE

Soon after this was written, Thomas Merton died accidentally of electrocution in Bangkok. His body was returned to Gethsemani where he was buried during the first snowfall of the year in the Abbey cemetery.

<sup>34</sup> T. Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, “*The Journals of Thomas Merton*” Vol. 7 (1967–1968), ed. P. Hart OCSO, San Francisco: Harper Collins 1998.

<sup>35</sup> T. Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*.

## TWARZĄ W TWARZ: ROZWÓJ JAŃNI U TOMASZA MERTONA

## Streszczenie

Nieżyjący już mnich trapistów i płodny autor, Thomas Merton, intensywnie zajmował się jaźnią, a dokładniej mówiąc, pragnieniem uwolnienia się od tyranii jaźni, którą przyjął za swoją tożsamość. Jego wczesne lata spędzone we Francji i Anglii naznaczone były poczuciem straty i zwichnięcia. Po opuszczeniu Cambridge jego późniejsze życie w Ameryce (studiował w Columbia University) i decyzja o przyjęciu katolickiego chrztu w wieku 23 lat doprowadziły ostatecznie do złożenia przez niego ślubów zakonnych jako mnich cysterski. Przyjmując imię brat Louis, sądził, że pozostawił za sobą „świat” ze wszystkimi jego pokusami i nierozwiązanymi problemami. Tak mu się jednak tylko wydawało. Lata, które spędził jako trapiści, doprowadziły do powstania bestsellerowej autobiografii, napisanej w posłuszeństwie swojemu opatowi i nawiązującej do wielu innych książek o naśladowaniu Chrystusa. Porównanie tej publikacji z *Wyznaniami* św. Augustyna przyniosło Mertonowi międzynarodową sławę właśnie pod dawnym nazwiskiem. Wyrażał zaniepokojenie „tym cieniem, tym sobowtorem, tym pisarzem, który [...] poszedł za mną do klasztoru... Nie mogę go stracić”. Z czasem mnich zdał sobie sprawę – dzięki doświadczeniu, żarliwej lekturze Biblii, rozważań św. Augustyna i mistyków, a także pod wpływem procesu indywiduacji zapoczątkowanemu przez Junga, buddyzmu zen i innych – że „ja”, z którego próbował uciec, było w rzeczywistości w dużej mierze „fałszywym ja”, napędzonym przez ego. W niniejszym artykule autorka śledzi drogę Mertona, od jego dawnego „ja” do „ja autentycznego”, które znajduje się w Bogu, w transcendencji. Obsesja na tym punkcie, obecna w XXI w., sprawia, że badanie drogi Mertona do samodzielności staje się tym bardziej istotne. Pojawienie się „ja”, autopromocja, jaką dają media społecznościowe i przykłady narcystycznych jednostek na stanowiskach władzy, ujawniają nieprawdziwość życia, w którym samoświadomość mylona jest z samorealizacją. Jak odkrył to Merton, jest to całkowicie błędny trop.

Słowa kluczowe: tożsamość, realność, iluzja, monastycyzm, chrześcijaństwo, buddyzm zen, psychologia Junga.

## FACE TO FACE: THE GROWTH OF THE SELF IN THOMAS MERTON

## Summary

The late Trappist monk and prolific author, Thomas Merton, was intensely concerned with the self – or to be more precise, with the desire to break free from the tyranny of the self he took to be his identity. His early years in France and England were marked by a sense of loss and dislocation. After leaving Cambridge for Columbia, his subsequent life in America and decision to be baptised a Catholic at the age of 23 eventually led to his taking vows as a Cistercian monk. On taking the name Frater Louis, the ‘world’ with all its temptations and unresolved issues had been left safely behind along with his old identity. Or so he thought. In fact, Merton’s years as a Trappist led to a best-selling autobiography written under obedience to his abbot and many more books to follow. Compared at the time of its publication to St Augustine’s *Confessions*, the autobiography led to his international

renown as Thomas Merton. He voiced his disquiet over what he called ‘this shadow, this double, this writer who [...] followed me into the cloister ... I cannot lose him.’ In time, Merton came to the realisation – through the lived experience and voracious reading of the Bible, St Augustine, the mystics, the individuation process propounded by Jung, Zen Buddhism and others – that the ‘self’ he was trying to escape was, in fact, largely a ‘false’ self driven by the ego. This paper traces Merton’s journey from that self to the authentic self which is found in God, and in transcendence. Obsession with ‘the self’ as understood in the 21<sup>st</sup> century makes the study of Merton’s path to selfhood much more vital. The advent of the ‘Selfie’, the self-promotion that social media afford and the examples of narcissistic individuals in positions of power give the lie to the lives in which *self-consciousness* is confused with self-realisation. Nothing, as Merton discovered, could be further from the truth.

**Key words:** Self Identity, Reality, Illusion, Monasticism Christianity, Zen, Buddhism, Jungian Psychology.

#### VON ANGESICHT ZU ANGESICHT: SELBSTENTWICKLUNG BEI THOMAS MERTON

##### Zusammenfassung

Der verstorbene Trappistenmönch und produktive Autor Thomas Merton beschäftigte sich intensiv mit dem Selbst, oder genauer gesagt, mit dem Wunsch, sich von der Tyrannei des Selbst zu befreien, die er für seine Identität hielt. Seine frühen Jahre in Frankreich und England waren von einem Gefühl von Verlust und Verwerfung geprägt. Nachdem er von der Universität Cambridge zur Columbia University in New York wechselte, führte ihn sein späteres Leben in Amerika zu der Entscheidung, im Alter von 23 Jahren die katholische Taufe zu empfangen. Schließlich legte er die Gelübde als Trappistenmönch ab. Unter dem Namen Frater Louis dachte er, er habe die „Welt“ mit all seinen Versuchungen und ungelösten Problemen hinter sich gelassen. Dies erwies sich jedoch als eine Selbsttäuschung. Die Erfahrungen, die Merton als Trappist gesammelt hatte, führten zur Entstehung einer Bestseller-Autobiografie, die er im Gehorsam gegenüber seinem Abt geschrieben hat. Sie enthält auch die Erfahrungen aus vielen anderen Büchern über die Nachfolge Christi. Der Vergleich mit den Bekenntnissen des heiligen Augustinus brachte ihm (unter seinem früheren bürgerlichen Namen) internationalen Ruhm. Er drückte seine Besorgnis aus „über diesen Schatten, diesen Doppelgänger, diesen Schriftsteller, der ... mir zum Kloster folgte ... Ich kann ihn nicht verlieren“. Mit der Zeit erkannte Merton – durch Erfahrung, eine inbrünstige Lektüre der Bibel, des heiligen Augustinus und der Mystiker, durch den von Jung, Zen-Buddhismus und anderen initiierten Prozess der Individuation –, dass das „Ich“, dem er zu entkommen versuchte, in Wirklichkeit weitgehend ein „falsches“, vom Ego getriebenes Selbst war. Im vorliegenden Artikel folgt die Autorin dem Weg Mertons, von seinem früheren Selbst zu dem authentischen Selbst, das im transzendenten Gott beheimatet ist. Die Besessenheit von dem eigenen Selbst, die so charakteristisch für das 21. Jahrhundert ist, macht es umso dringender, den Weg Mertons zum Selbst zu erkunden. Das heutige Zurschaustellen des eigenen Ich, die Selbstdarstellung in den sozialen Medien und zahlreiche Beispiele narzisstischer Persönlichkeiten in Machtpositionen offenbaren die Falschheit

eines Lebensentwurfs, in dem Selbstbewusstsein mit Selbstverwirklichung verwechselt wird. Dies ist jedoch, wie Merton betonte, eine vollkommen falsche Spur.

Schlüsselwörter: Selbstidentität, Realität, Illusion, Mönchtum, Christentum, Zen-Buddhismus, Jungpsychologie.

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**Susanne Caroline Rose Jennings** – magister teologii oraz literatury angielskiej. Do jej zainteresowań badawczych należą różne aspekty dialogu międzywyznaniowego oraz życie i dzieło Tomasza Mertona. W ramach pracy dydaktycznej wykładała teologię w Cambridge, prowadziła też w Londynie wykłady z religioznawstwa i literatury, kursy wprowadzające do judaizmu i religii Abrahamowych, jak również oparte na Księgach Hioba i Rut oraz Księdze Rodzaju. Jako nauczyciel akademicki pracowała w Maryvale Pontifical Institute w charakterze wykładowcy i mentora. Udzielała się także w strukturach rzymskokatolickiej diecezji East Anglia jako odpowiedzialna za edukację religijną dorosłych, liturgię i relacje międzywyznaniowe oraz za nabożeństwa z okazji Dnia Pamięci o Holokauście i organizowanie forów promujących dialog chrześcijańsko-islamski. Jej ostatnie publikacje dotyczą Abrahama Joshuy Heschela i Thomasza Mertona. Brała też udział w szeregu konferencji międzynarodowych, m.in. wygłosiła referat na międzynarodowej konferencji a okazji 100-lecia Towarzystwa Thomasa Mertona w Louisville w Kentucky (2015). Obecnie pracuje w St Edmund's College, University of Cambridge, a także zajmuje się współredakcją podręcznika żydowsko-chrześcijańskiego. Adres do korespondencji: scj22@cam.ac.uk.

