

## Questions and Proposals about Thomas Merton's *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.

(NOTE: For future users of these study materials, the edition referred to in the questions below is the Image edition from 1989.)

### Question 1: Your Idiosyncratic Fascinations/ Obsessions with Merton

If you could name one or two of the book's passages that especially interested you, which would they be? The other and maybe more sensible way to ask this question is to invite you to name one or two questions asked by Merton in *Conjectures...* that have now become your questions as well.

To invite book group members essentially to dictate the contents of a discussion on *Conjectures...* seems the most formally reasonable way to proceed, first because of the many subjects treated here, also because of the eclecticism of Merton's thought, deriving as it does from a diverse array of subjects: theology, poetry, political philosophy, observations about the landscape around Gesthemani Abbey, zen poetry, basket weaving—to name only a few! I know that I am most compelled by the book's theological writing; but perhaps that isn't true for you: perhaps your fascination lies with Merton's observations about war, or with his thoughts about the monastic life; with race relations; with the Civil Rights movement; with international relations; psychology; the nature of subjectivity, what have you. Or maybe for you the book is most interesting for its *form*—for its unsystematic, incremental, seemingly mood- or even weather- driven pursuit of its subject matter, its “subject” determined only as the writer was ready to greet and then name it. To dwell within a single passage in a book like this, maybe even for several days at a time, might ultimately end up mattering more, to *you* (yes, you!) than to plough through the whole thing and then to try and fit together its disparate parts and paradoxes. **So let's have an essentially personal discussion—which is to say, please do come to meeting with a particular passage/ question/ obsession you'd like to share.**

### Question 2: The Form of The Book

Another way to bring the book into focus is to remember that it is a journal (or a diary): a series of short compositions which do not follow an established literary form, and which treat whatever subject happened to be on Merton's mind on the day—or hour—in which he was writing. In *Conjectures* Merton is, to quote one of our book group members, “all over the place”: by turns placid, contemplative, polemical, “ranting” (again to quote a book group member), and very often in contradiction with himself. Though it is true that certain subjects recur across the entries, and some of them fairly frequently; and also true that about many of those subjects Merton's opinion remains fairly consistent, even emphatically so; the book is nevertheless a journal--and anyone who has kept a journal will know that the self appearing on January 1st may read and even “be” a very different self than the one appearing on January 31<sup>st</sup> (or even on January 2<sup>nd</sup>.)

So this question is not so much a question, rather a reminder to keep in view this particular “journal” or “diary” form as you read *Conjectures*.... Merton wasn’t a “book” thinker—he wasn’t interested in, or, in any case, inclined toward, the systematic, cumulatively evidentiary treatment of a circumscribed set of concerns. He was rather a single mind recording the habits of that mind across mood, contingency and time, submitting himself to the only form available that would honor all three as shaping influences upon “the truth.”

Does thinking about the book this way open it up for you? If so, how? What does it tell you about Merton’s enterprise generally that he should elect to house himself and the subjects he cared about in the diary form rather than in forms mightier, more elegant, more “final” feeling, more concise, etc?

(My thanks to Allan Campo, who in our book group meeting about *Conjectures*...underscored Merton’s choice to cast his thoughts in the diary form.)

### **Question 2: How Can Merton Still Matter?**

My second question has to do with the title of Bill Leonard’s talk this coming Wednesday, “Why Thomas Merton Still Matters.” I’m curious about that title, as I assume you are too. Underneath it there seems to lie the possibility that Merton *doesn’t* matter anymore, that there is something in his writing that made sense and could even move readers to action in the 1960s and ‘70s, but which today reads as merely....(fill in the blank.) What do you think about the possibility of Merton mattering, especially in larger, communal or even international ways, now? (*Right* now seems actually a great time to read Merton, and by right now I mean the “now” of Obama’s election AND the current economic downturn, in which we are forced to reevaluate our national and global economic practice of the last twenty plus years.) Does Merton seem dated to you? If so, does this feeling of dated-ness affect the way you read and relate to him? Lastly, and this is a slightly different question (and perhaps one only for personal reflection): What can you imagine doing in your life so that the discoveries made while reading Merton can be lasting ones?

### **Question 3: Contemptus Mundi**

As Thomas Moore writes in his introduction to the book, by *contemptus mundi* Merton did not mean “fulminating against lax sexual morals, divorce, and pornography—the usual easy targets of religious moralists. He means something more subtle: a giving up of the understanding of oneself that comes from identifying with society’s aims. The monk has contempt for the world in the sense that he refuses to participate in its values and assumptions. It makes no difference whether or not you live out in your own life the unconscious and unconsidered principles of the society at large.” (p. VII, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 1989 Image edition.)

This is one of the elements of Merton's project I found myself thinking about the most, and with the greatest confusion, a confusion maybe you experienced as well. The confusion, for me, goes like this:

How can I attain a Merton-like lucidity, a Merton-like peace, the kind of peace out of which I might be able to determine which elements of the world will abide and support my sapiential humanity and which will not—while having to live in that world, and in a very enmeshed and enmeshing way? (By the way, any time you have the chance to use the word “sapiential,” I say go for it.)

This is sort of a sub-question, or a corollary, to the one above, and it derives from an observation of my own: I think that for me this question of how to attain a kind of monastic peace turns less on living physically apart from this universe called “the world” (say, in a sanctuary, such as a convent or a monastery) than it does on living apart from *people* and from relationship with them. Occasionally in *Conjectures...* we hear about Merton's interactions with the other brothers at the abbey or about a letter he's written or received. But for the most part Merton lived alone, outside the very affecting business of dependency on and by other mortals. It's a funny paradox: Merton's theology is so human, so embracing, of the self primarily, but certainly of others as well, so consistently focused on Christ as incarnated in the human being (as opposed to an abstraction of Perfection and Goodness the human being, being human, could never attain)--yet Merton doesn't have to live with other human beings. Not as a spouse, not as a parent, not as a sibling (sadly), not as a son (sadly), not even very regularly as a friend. He can't really be disappointed, and he can't really disappoint. (And if I'm wrong about this, if there's some portion of the biography I'm neglecting here, let me know.) I wonder how others of you respond to this paradox. Does it, as it sometimes does for me, stand as a barrier to imagining oneself as actually following Merton's example, actually trying to emulate his way of life in one's own?

**By the way, for me Merton is most specific about what he means by the world on pages 256 – 257 of the book.** On the chance that some of are working with editions other than my own, I'll transcribe that passage here:

“I think the question of ‘turning to the world’ is in fact a question of being patient with the unprepossessing surface of it, in order to break through to the deep goodness that is underneath. But to my way of thinking, ‘the world’ is precisely the dehumanized surface. What is under the surface, and often stifled and destroyed, is more than ‘the world’: it is the spirit and likeness of God in men. Much of the ambiguity in talk about the world—especially mine—is that everyone tends to be quite selective about the elements he admits into his concept of ‘the world.’ My particular concept focuses on the sham, the unreality, the alienation, the forced systematization of life, and not on the human reality that is alienated and suppressed. This had to be made clear.” (*Conjectures...*, Image Edition (1989), pp. 256-257).

He also speaks very forcefully and with exceptional precision about the Church's relationship to "the world," or, rather, how it ought to envision its relationship to the world, on pp. 323 to 325.

#### **Question 4: Go East**

The following is not so much a question as it is an invitation to those of you who are interested in Eastern religions and in Buddhism in particular to talk when we meet about the consistencies Merton saw between Buddhism and the Christian faith and life. So if we have time, let's talk about Merton's inter-religious understanding and how it may or may not be influencing our own practices.

#### **Question 5: Merton's restlessness**

This question, like the one above, is not so much a question, rather an observation, and it's a pretty subjective observation, meaning that much of it derives from my own experience reading the book. So I hope it will be useful to you. If not, my apologies.

As I was finishing *Conjectures...*, I found myself increasingly receptive to a kind of tension in Merton, or maybe a better word would be a restlessness in Merton, which may have sat (or may not, who knows) at the source of his desire to write. That tension I would describe as ultimately a discomfort with just about any arrangement Merton found himself in--whether that "arrangement" was a cerebral one--an intellectual or a theological arrangement, I mean--or a physical one: and by "physical" I mean, simply, the monastery (outside the world) or, conversely, the world (inside it and therefore vulnerable to its hypocrisy and destructiveness.) If Merton had been content with monastic life, he wouldn't, one assumes, have followed the events of the world so closely and read nearly anything he could get his hands on by way of understanding that world. Nor would he essentially have nominated himself, through his writing, as an interpreter of that world and as an advisor, to his readers, on events of enormous consequence. And if he'd been content *that* role--with greater involvement with the world, I mean--presumably he'd have not sequestered himself in a monastery, and in one of the strictest he could find. So, too, he is often at odds even with Catholicism, endeavoring again and again to articulate those elements of the tradition and of doctrine that seemed to him consistent with Christ, and those that were not. Also persistent is not just his receptivity to Protestant thinking (and also to the offerings of "religion-less religion"), but his passionate interest and respect for those offerings--even if he rarely agreed with them. This is all to say that it seems to this reader that there is no "place" where Merton rests. One gets the sense he could have written three hundred and sixty more pages and have been asking the same questions, and with the same openness, fierceness, loneliness.

I wonder if others of you felt this tension in Merton; and I wonder what that tension *itself* has to teach us. To me, that tension IS why Merton still matters, though at this eleventh hour on Thursday afternoon, wanting to send these questions in time for you to make use of them, I haven't yet articulated why I think so. Anyway, as always, the objective here

is to inspire your own thinking...and so I'll look forward to hearing from you on Monday.