

Questions and Proposals about *Thomas Merton's New Seeds of Contemplation* (1961)

The following questions have been prepared by myself, Emilie White, and by the Reverend Canon Brian Cole.

EMILIE'S QUESTIONS:

Emilie's Question #1

My first question is not so much a question as a request, which is that *each of you of bring to the meeting on Monday night A) a passage from the book that especially interests you, and B) a question, or problem, the book has raised for you. (And if the question stems from the passage, all the fleeter.)*

Why proceed this way? Several reasons.

A) First, if we each bring a passage we'll be sure of having a truly communal discussion, in which everyone has a chance to speak.

B) Anyone can open it up and engage with it out of his or her experience, even if s/he is not a Catholic, or even a Christian. Also, as Merton makes clear, theological expertise does not necessarily aid in our effort to attain what he calls "contemplation." (Merton advocates for an education in theology, but he also cautions against investing too much in it.) To the pursuit of contemplation each of us brings our unique wisdom, also the unique character of our bewilderment and frustration.

Emilie's Question #2:

This question departs from the following excerpt.

"To say that I am made in the image of God is to say that love is the reason for my existence, for God is love.

Love is my true identity. Selflessness is my true self. Love is my true character. Love is my name.

If, therefore, I do anything or think anything or say anything or know anything that is not purely for the love of God, it cannot give me peace, or rest, or fulfillment, or joy."

--*New Seeds of Contemplation* (1961) New Directions Edition, 1972, pp. 60-61

As the excerpt above will show—and there are many like it in this book—the kind of love we feel and ultimately *are* when we live in Christ is radical, thorough, constitutive—requiring from us a kind of “self-emptying” so that Christ may occupy all of us. Merton is explicit on this point:

“Here is a man who is dead and buried and gone and his memory has vanished from the world of men and he no longer exists among the living who wander about in time: and will you call him proud because the sunlight fills the huge arc of sky over the country where he lived and died and was buried, back in the days when he existed?

So it is with one who has vanished into God by pure contemplation. God alone is left. He is the “I” who acts there. He is the one Who loves and knows and rejoices.” (p. 287)

I don't know about you, but I find this description of the Christian contemplative self both desirable and intimidating. In what follows I'm going to describe why I find it intimidating, for no other reason than to generate your *own* response to this challenge. Here's that description. (And this challenge, one might argue, is as much the observant Buddhist's as it is the observant Christian's.)

I do not trust that I am capable of such self-emptying without making huge changes to the way I live. What sort of changes? Changes to the way I spend money; changes to the ways I spend my attention; and changes to the sorts of people to whom I give my time and energy. It seems that to really empty myself, I would need to die to the world as I know it: I would need to give away a large portion of what I own, I would need to stop squandering my time (in front of the TV, on the internet, in the shopping mall, etc.); I would need to devote the lion's share of my attention and energies to the poor and truly needful. I would need to die to certain habits of mind and body that currently have much to do with who I am—that indeed have structured and decided who I am. Who will I be, once I am dead? Will I still be at home?

Sure, it's easy to say that my home is in Christ. But the home I *know* is here and now. Even though the here and now is comprised to large degree of enfeebling and love-limiting preoccupations, still it is home (or, it sure feels like home.) How "in the world" can I possibly leave home?

As I say, I frame this question in terms of my own experience on the assumption that my experience resembles yours. If it doesn't, use my description then to articulate your difference from me. What I want to talk about is the problem of practicing radical love--really being radical love--in a modern, "worldly," non-monastic and materialistic life. Do others of you share my feeling of confusion as to how to do this? If so, how are you confused? And if you're not confused, how are you clear?

Emilie's Question #3

I have a question about contemplation--about where one begins in practicing it. Merton never lays out a method, *per se*. He sort of glances at what the contemplative process might look like in Chapter 38 of the book, "Pure Love," though he never gets specific. (And there may be a good reason for this.) In any event, did you find yourself closer to contemplation upon closing the book? If you believe you may be on a threshold of a kind, what does that threshold feel like?

Emilie's Question #4

This is sort of an odd question, but I wonder if folks will be interested in describing the sort of relationship Merton establishes with you as a reader. With Merton I find a persistent challenge--to my assumptions, to what I "think" I "know," even to my desires for what I'd like to understand better. I also find that he will repeatedly lay out a premise, such as, "There is a step," which he then will then take away from me: "Actually, there is no step." (*"When the next step comes, you do not take the step, you do not know the transition, you do not fall into anything. You do not go anywhere, and so you do not know the way by which you got there or the way by which you come back afterward."* p. 283)). In this way he does what many good writers do, which is to indicate, adumbrate, augur--what have you--a mystery which cannot, by nature, be described in words, or even perhaps conceived of via known contours of thought.

Which is an inspiring way to write--though one of the unfortunate effects for me is that I close the book feeling inadequate to the contemplative life. I wonder if others of you felt this way; or if, again, my response only helps you to see your readiness for the contemplative life.

Question #5

What was it like to read this book during the last weeks of this election season? Did you find your concerns as a voter, or as a citizen of the United States (or of this global economy) activated, represented by, sharpened, made more intense, etc., by Merton's picture of what it would really and experientially be like to "join in the general dance"?

And now to Brian Cole's questions:

Questions for New Seeds

"Whatever I may have written, I think it all can be reduced in the end to this one root truth: that God calls human persons to union with Himself and with one another in Christ, in the Church which is His Mystical Body. It is also a witness to the fact that there is and must be, in the church, a contemplative life which has no other function than to realize these mysterious things, and return to God all the thanks and praise that human hearts can give Him. It is certainly true that I have written about more than just the contemplative life. I have articulately resisted attempts to have myself classified as an "inspirational writer." But if I have written about interracial justice, or thermonuclear weapons, it is because these issues are terribly relevant to one great truth: that man is called to live as a child of God. Man must respond to this call to live in peace with all his brothers and sisters in the One Christ."

Excerpt from "Concerning the Collection in the Bellarmine Library," November 10, 1963 by Thomas Merton

"The time will shortly be upon us, if it is not already here, when the pursuit of contemplation becomes a strictly subversive activity."

America is Hard to Find by Daniel Berrigan, 1972.

Before I offer any questions for Merton's New Seeds, I want to thank you all for being willing to spend some time with Thomas Merton. I am a Merton devotee and too often treat Merton as the answer to any question I am offered concerning the spiritual life. It is my hope that next year, Susan and I will be able to travel to Thailand to visit the site where Merton died and see a part of the East that drew Merton towards the end of his life.

While I believe there are other writers who write as well, if not better, on the life of prayer and contemplation, Merton remains essential in my own life because he was my first introduction to the contemplative life. As an eager Baptist child and young adult, I only understood the Christian life as one lived outside of my self, with visible acts of Bible reading and witness, outreach and compassion. Even when I prayed, I prayed *for* others. Merton was the first writer who suggested that the Christian life included an interior world inside of me that I had not wandered through.

While Merton is essential for me, that does not mean I have found New Seeds ever to be an easy book or a spiritual page turner. My first attempts to read it while in seminary failed miserably. Yet, so many folks I admired and looked up to spoke of the book with such strong feeling that I kept at it.

It was while at early attempts with New Seeds, that I first came to hear of spiritual reading. In some ways spiritual reading is similar to the close reading that Emilie has spoken to us about. Spiritual reading is a kind of meditative process, reading very slowly and with interludes between the reading of the page and the reflection on the text. Spiritual reading takes into account the reader, the text and the Spirit that plays between the two.

The first time I remember being hooked by New Seeds on my own was when I read the chapter, *Learn to Be Alone*. Unlike other parts of the book, I found this chapter clear and deeply practical and also, exposing of my own weaknesses and desires. Since then, *Learn to Be Alone* has been the way into my reading of New Seeds.

- 1. Has there been a chapter for you in New Seeds that has spoken to you? Did it affirm your way or expose something or offer up a vision of some kind of life you strive for?**

- 2. The process of contemplation involves the willingness of an individual to explore the interior life. How does a community of faith support such a journey? How does a community impede such a journey?**

