

Thomas Merton, The Bible, Jewish Mysticism and Martin Buber.

By
Marie Goldstein, RSHM

It is probably true that in the history of human thinking the most fruitful developments frequently take place at those points where two different lines of thought meet. These lines may have their roots in quite different parts of human culture, in different times or different cultural environments or different religious traditions: hence if they actually meet, that is, if they are at least so much related to each other that a real interaction can take place, then one may hope that new and interesting developments may follow. Such is the case with the writings and thought of Thomas Merton and Martin Buber; the Bible and Contemplation (Mysticism).¹

As we know mysticism arises out of every religion. What is common to it becomes evident from all its diverse forms.

Common to them all is the conviction of being able to penetrate to the ultimate. This conviction receives its innate character and expression from the religion, the philosophy, the manner and way of thought out of which it develops. It is an expression of feeling and of volition. The peculiarity of Jewish mysticism derives from the peculiarity of Jewish religion. All awe of God, all love of God is founded on faith in God where faith is defined as doing God's Will as it is addressed to the human person through the Bible. "All that the Lord has spoken, let us do and hear." (Exodus 24,7)

The Jew, mystic or not, is placed facing God so that he may listen to God and serve God alone. The desire for holiness was to be found by and through the study of the Bible which was a 'book' looked upon as a Book of hidden meanings. If one could plunge into the depth of these hidden meanings through the penetration of every sentence, every word, every rhythm, one could begin to 'see', to 'know' that the Bible means more than just what the words appear to say. The 'pious' Jew therefore directed his attention away from himself and turned it towards God. (*teshuvah*) This initial and basic step leads one towards unity and union with God. Having made this 'turning' one directed one's attention (*kavinah*) wholly on God, cleaving (*devekut*) to God. For the one who cleaved to God the way to holiness was opened. The mysterious reality of the Bible encased in its poetry, became known through study, meditation, prayer, through directing one's good and evil tendencies (*yeshar tov* and *yeshar rav*) to God.

Nothing in the Bible was meant to be prosaic. The search for hidden meanings was found by the creative, pious Jew who looked upon and accepted God as a personal commanding God. Jewish mystics cling to the God of the Bible as a

God of Creation and Revelation, of the Commandment and the Promise. Revelation began with the creation story of Genesis; the Commandment with the 'Shma Israel', "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, strength". (Deuteronomy 6,19)

Having spent some years in a Center of Prayer and Peace in Jerusalem and having attempted during those years to fathom Jewish and Christian mysticism through the study of the Bible and Contemplative Prayer I discovered much of what Thomas Merton shared with his readers. I also discovered that the search for the roots of Christian mysticism (as well as Jewish mysticism) is to be found, first of all, in the Word of God in the Bible. I dare say that if one wishes to fathom the depths of Thomas Merton's mystical life one needs, first of all, to become, as Thomas Merton once said, "a true Jew in order to be a true Christian." What my studied reflection has led me to think is that Merton meant, "become a student, a meditator, a pray-er of the Bible." In *Bread in the Wilderness* and in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* he says:

I believe that when the Lord sees the small point of poverty, extenuation, helplessness which is the heart of a monk after very long and very dry celebrations 'in choir', when He sees the point of indigence to which one is reduced, He himself cannot refuse to enter into this anguish, to take flesh in it so to speak, making it instantly a small seed of infinite joy and peace and solitude in the world. There is for me no sense, no truth in anything that elaborately contrives to hide this precious poverty, this seed of tears which is also the seed of true joy. Demonstrations and distractions that try to take away from this are futile. They can become infidelities if they are eagerly sought. I may speak to others only in so far as I address myself to this same small spark of truth and sorrow in them, to help resolve their doubts, to assuage their anguish, to lighten their grief by helping them to be strong in this same small spark of exhaustion in which the Lord becomes their Wisdom and their life forever. What else do the Psalms talk about but this?²

It is the Presence of God, the *Kavod*, the theophany of God which is the focus of the Psalms.

All the Christian mystics, Thomas Merton foremost among them as a Cistercian monk, read the scriptures, meditated and prayed them with faith and love allowing the word to come to life within him. If one reads Thomas Merton carefully and with a growing conscious awareness of the Word of God one will see how the Psalms and the Prophets touched his life as well as the Creation and Revelation stories of Genesis, Exodus, and Deuteronomy. Reading the Scriptures with faith, understanding and love he permitted them to carry him beyond the words of orientation to the mysterious reality to which the words point. He allowed them to carry him into the cloud of unknowing and the silence of the void as did Martin Buber, Jewish interpreter of the Hasidic way of life and like Thomas Merton one who was conscious of the Tao of Actualization as understood and realized by Eastern mystics.³ For those with biblical understanding the reality of the Presence of God as

envisioned by Ezekiel became the goal of mystical actualization. This was true for the rabbis and for the Christian contemplatives.

The aim of the mystic, whatever the religion, is to bring the timeless, the eternal One into time. The mystic desires to make the unity without multiplicity into the unity of all multiplicity. Martin Buber sees an experience of God not as one of the unity of the "I" with the world, the becoming one with God in a way of absorption but rather as an "I and Thou" relationship in which man receives a Presence, a Presence as Power, as the eternal revelation that is present here and now. It is the experience of the Perfect Man, Jesus, of whom we read in John 14, that "I and the Father are One ... but the Father is greater than I". This is, for Martin Buber, the perfect relationship that the Perfect Man, Jesus, has with God. For Buber, Jesus is One with God but Jesus is not God;⁴ He has the perfect "I/Thou" relationship with God. Jesus is the Perfect Man.

Before Buber comes to be able to say this statement he has developed his "I/Thou" dialogical philosophy painstakingly; he has studied, written prolifically on the Bible; he has pondered the New Testament. He has pointed the way to the Bible through his emergence into Eastern Mysticism and the Hasidic way of life. Buber insists that that what the 'mystic' of the East terms union is not union at all. Rather it is akin to an unfathomable act of relation. It is the enrapturing dynamic of relation like that which characterizes sexual love, when unity is so strongly felt that the "I" and the "you" between whom the relation exists are forgotten.⁵

Merton speaks of the mystical experience or infused contemplation as "that intuition of the Divine who is known not as an object but who is beyond concepts". Merton writes, "the 'I/Thou' relationship is a positive though perhaps tenuous awareness of God". Both Merton and Buber understand it as a unity and/or integration of one's own soul. It is paradoxical knowledge beyond concepts and without admittance of question although a subjective experience or encounter. Thomas Merton quotes Eckhart saying that a mystical love of God is a love that asks no questions. He goes on to say that contemplation is the light of God playing directly upon the soul. This Merton calls a metaphysical distinction.⁶ Buber calls it 'relation'.

Thomas Merton writes about conversion, (*teshuva*), purity of heart, unity of being, the awakening of the inner self, giving examples from Zen and Sufism; so does Martin Buber. But in contrast to Buber's interpretation of John 14 cited above, Merton cites John 17, "That they all may be one as Thou Father in me and I in Thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou has sent me...I in them and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one" "the inner I is the sanctuary of the inmost self, the image of God in me, it is the spirit or 'pneuma', the spirit of Christ, indeed Christ, dwelling in us. 'For me to live is Christ.' (Gal.2,20)"⁷

Whereas Buber will find the "I/Thou" relation in abundance all through the Hebrew Bible and will draw our attention to it in writings that are profound and which resonate with Thomas Merton's he is also an ardent student of the New Testament. As Jew he will arrive at different conclusions. His is a different faith

stance. He begins with different hypotheses. Yet, when each one speaks of the encounter with God, the love of and for God, the way of life marked out for the one who is on the journey to realizing the image and likeness of God in oneself – their paths seem very often to converge.

Merton, in Part III of *The Inner Experience* writes about the sacred and the secular saying that the sacred attitude is essentially contemplative, and the secular attitude essentially active. He went on to say that this did not mean that there cannot be an activity that is sacred (based on love). "But such activity is sacred in so far as it tends to contemplation."⁸ Martin Buber does not discount this; he does maintain that the Hasid, the Jewish mystic, the man of God, should not divorce sacred from secular action; all action should be contemplative in that it is directed to God for the love of God; all should come from and go to God who is Love. All real living is meeting; all real living is bound up in "I/Thou" relations which emanate from the "I/Thou" relationship with God.

Neither Merton nor Buber claimed to have had mystical experiences but it seems apparent that they were not strangers to it. They were two of the creative minds of our age; sages, philosophers of religion, master teachers. Buber has been called the man who saved the Hasidic tradition for the modern age. Merton revitalized conversation between eastern and western religious leaders and towards the end of his lifetime worked tirelessly to renew western monasticism. He went to the East after he had delved into the Bible, the Church Fathers, the Hesychasts, the Sufis, and Buber's *Hasidic Tales*.

Martin Buber's life endeavour was to renew and recapture the essential spirit of Judaism and to recollect its nature by unearthing the core message of the Hebrew Bible. His idea was to free Judaism of its historical ballast and of everything extraneous and unimportant so that as a result of the clarification and simplification it can be recreated in terms that are valid and viable, listening to the address of God to the People of God. As Thomas Merton advanced in spirit, in grace, in freedom, he spoke more and more of returning to the message of Jesus found in the words of the prophets and the early church. He opposed war; he spoke out and wrote essays on behalf of civil rights. He sought renewal of structures in the monasteries of women and men and in the entire church.

As I close this paper I realize that new and interesting insights have come to light for me. Also, that new and interesting developments will take place for Jewish-Christian understanding/reconciliation if we continue to probe deeply the lives and writings of Thomas Merton and Martin Buber as well as other Jewish and Christian mystics. My original hypothesis, taken from Werner Heisenberg, has been substantiated. There are two different lines of thinking that meet in this particular study of Thomas Merton, the Bible, Martin Buber and mysticism (Jewish and Christian). I have found that they meet in the 'visionary mode'. These lines do have their roots in quite different parts of human culture and in different cultural environments as well as different religious traditions. Their modes of expression, their vocabularies are as often similar as not, both in the instance of Jewish and

Christian mysticism and in Thomas Merton and Martin Buber. I have found Buber and Merton closely related to each other as each one faced God, heard God address them personally. They responded to the words: "Hear O Israel, love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength." We are the inheritors and progenitors of their written realizations.

Of each it may be said,

Sleeping on the hearth of the living world
Yawning at home before the fire of life
Feeling the presence of the living God
like a great reassurance
a deep calm in the heart
a presence
as of the master sitting at the board
in his own greater being in the house of life.

[D.H. Lawrence, *Complete Poems*]

Notes and References

1. Fritjof Capra. *The Tao of Physics*. (London, Flamingo Press, 1975), forepage
2. Thomas Merton. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, (New York, Doubleday, 1966), p.271.
3. Gershom Scholem in 'Martin Buber's Interpretation of Hasidism' in his *Messianic Idea in Judaism*. (Allen and Urwin London, 1971) and in his work on Buber in *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, (Schocken, New York, 1976) discusses Buber's thought in depth; where he agrees and disagrees with his 'I and Thou' dialogical principle/relation. He says that the Actualization about which we are speaking here represents submersion in pure experience; the practical experience of the unity above polarities and tensions which creates reality out of experience.
4. See Pamela Vermes, *Buber on God and the Perfect Man*, (Scholars Press, Atlanta, 1980). Elie Wiesel, during a questioning period of a lecture on 'Telling the Tale' told of Martin Buber's answer to a question regarding Jesus and the Messiah: "I am a Jew and you are a Christian. We have different convictions about the Messiah and Jesus. Christians believe the Messiah has come and will come again. Jews believe that the Messiah has yet to come. Why don't we wait patiently, together, until he comes and then ask him, 'Have you been here before?'" He added, "I will tell him not to answer."
5. See Pamela Vermes, op cit.
6. Thomas Merton. "The Inner Experience". (*Cistercian Studies*, Volumes 18 and 19, 1983, 1984.)
7. *Ibid*.