

# Autonomy and Surrender, Solitude and Intimacy: A Belated Response to Walter E. Conn

by  
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One of the great attractions of Thomas Merton to those of us who have found sustenance in his writings, his story, lies in the possibility that here we may find insight into – even a paradigm for – our own particular faith-journeys. My present interest is in finding clues in the shape of Merton's life-fiction for our moral maturing, and more specifically the connection between moral and spiritual growth. A reasonable way into this vast question seemed to be in engaging with the work of another writer who has trodden this path before.

Back in October 1985 the *Journal of Religion* published an article by Walter E. Conn, "Merton's 'True Self': Moral Autonomy and Religious Conversion." Conn had previously written elsewhere on Merton's "conversion" to Roman Catholicism,<sup>1</sup> and then turned to a consideration of the mature Merton "in an attempt to illuminate the developmental aspect of the relationship between morality and religion or, more specifically, between the notions of moral autonomy and religious surrender."<sup>2</sup> In Merton's terms we might understand moral autonomy as the ability to say one's own yes and one's own no,<sup>3</sup> and religious surrender as a sinking into the heart of God.<sup>4</sup>

Conn's proposal in his 1985 paper is that "authentic self-realization includes both moral autonomy and the surrender of its absolute claims in religious conversion." With that as our starting point, and tracing Merton's own movement towards authentic self-realization, a significant theme is not made fully explicit in Conn's work, and this is where I come in.

In the opening essay of *Love and Living*, Merton writes that "the world is made up of the people who are fully alive in it: that is, of the people who can be themselves in it and can enter into a living and fruitful relationship with each other in it."<sup>5</sup> One assumption I will make here: that authentic self-realization is akin to Merton's notion of being "fully alive". In his terms, then, authentic self-realization involves an ability to "enter into living and fruitful relationship". This strand I want to trace with reference to Conn's work, and thereby in particular to put Merton's brief relationship with Margie Smith into some context.

The interpretative frame of reference behind Conn's essay is Lawrence Kohlberg's cognitive-developmental theory of moral reasoning. In brief, Kohlberg suggests that the journey towards moral maturity progresses from an egocentric, "preconventional" moral orientation (based on punishment and reward), through a "conventional" orientation of interpersonal approval and maintenance of the social order, and ultimately to an autonomous "postconventional" orientation of universal

ethical principles.<sup>6</sup> Conn then proposes that the finally-integrated self has "mediated a return to the immediacy of its own presence to itself." The matter raised by Merton's concern with relationship is whether moral maturity also requires a journey into the immediacy of presence unto another person. Ethics is by nature interpersonal, and moral maturity is worked out in relationship.

Conn, following Kohlberg, speaks of the radical movement towards religious and moral self-realization as a process of religious surrender, his thesis being that genuine religious surrender does not deny moral autonomy, but only the illusion of its absoluteness. Moral autonomy is "relativized," not sacrificed. Tracing the theme along relational lines, I would look for a parallel and interdependent process - a movement towards autonomous, relativized surrender - with regard to human intimacy, authentic relationship.

We are reminded by Conn that the development of Merton's moral reasoning was frequently inhibited by his own personal security needs and the authority-centred ethos of monastic life. This said, Merton's personal security needs also fuelled his journey and defined his vocation: In *The Seven Storey Mountain* he writes that, "As a child, and since then too, I have always tended to resist any kind of possessive affection on the part of any other human being - there has always been this profound instinct to keep clear, to keep free."<sup>7</sup> The freedom Merton sought was a freedom from the unpredictability and vulnerability of human intimacy. In choosing to love "God alone", he avoided the kind of relationship which might threaten his fragile self. God alone seemed to promise the "complete assurance and perfect fulfilment" he desired.

Anyone familiar with Merton's story is aware of how no Significant Other had been dependable: Merton had lost both parents at a young age, and a dear brother, all in tragic circumstances. The pattern of his early life was, in the words of Ann Hawkins, "a series of failed relationships - relationships that are either inadequate or incomplete in some way."<sup>8</sup> On the eve of his fiftieth birthday, almost twenty years after the writing of *Mountain*, Merton recalls how his early experience had affected other significant relationships:

I suppose I regret most of all my lack of love, my selfishness, my glibness, which covered a profound shyness and an urgent need for love. My glibness with girls who after all did love me, I think, for a time. My fault was my inability to believe it and my efforts to get complete assurance and perfect fulfilment.<sup>9</sup>

Obstacles in Merton prevented his accepting the love of those who sought to love him. One way or another, he had resisted love. Merton's resistance to love, his longing for assurance and perfect fulfilment, had become a barrier which blocked his own potential for loving. The monastery provided Merton with an emotional stability and a cognitive framework, but - even at his fiftieth birthday in 1965 - he has not been fully released from the emotional impact of those early bereavements.

In Conn's paper it is suggested, however, that Merton "broke through the walls of conventional morality and religious conformity by the time of his ordination"

(in 1947). Donald Grayston in his book *The Development of a Spiritual Theologian*, arrives at a similar conclusion when he writes that, after his ordination to the priesthood, and the eighteen months of illness which followed, Merton "emerged as the substantially whole person that his subsequent writings and the testimony of his friends and the students of his works reveal him to be. He had dealt successfully, in large part, with the problems he had taken with him into the monastery..."<sup>10</sup>

Yet Merton's anxieties surrounding the question of love and intimacy - however sublimated during earlier monastic years - continued to shadow him until they surfaced explicitly during the late 1950's. He refers to a sermon preached at the monastery on Palm Sunday, 1958, a sermon on the theme of love and friendship which struck Merton profoundly: "One reason I am so grateful for this morning's sermon is that my worst and inmost sickness is the despair of ever being able truly to love, because I despair of ever being worthy of love."<sup>11</sup>

After almost nineteen years in the monastery he once referred to as a "school of love", this is stark testimony to the persistence of deep concerns he carried with him. He was troubled. And he remained bound to a conventional morality insofar as a sense of his own worthiness seems to matter more than his happiness. Whilst declaring from time to time how happy he felt Merton was, by his own testimony, neither free to enjoy his life nor finally content in contemplative surrender. The inner journey was far from complete, and he was yet to attain the autonomy implicit in his own definition of being "fully alive". The region of concern, as ever, was the matter of relationship.

The vast deposits of Merton correspondence are evidence enough of a world of varied and rich relationships. There is no question of his having difficulty in entering relationship, sustaining friendship. The question which lingers, rather, is with an ability to be open, vulnerable and fully present in relationship. In this regard, writing has its limits. In May 1956, Merton writes in despairing tone to Naomi Burton:

You don't know yet that for me communication is not communication but a narcissistic gesture of some sort at which I happen to be quite clever. Do you think that I have ever in my life communicated with another person? Sacramentally, I hope, but not in writing.<sup>12</sup>

Writing is not enough. Writing is not presence.

Merton's work as Master of Scholastics (and then of Novices), though approached with apprehension, opened new vistas for his working out the tension between solitude and relationship, in light of which he refers to solitude not as avoidance but rather as the context of authentically human encounter:

The more I get to know my scholastics the more reverence I have for their individuality and the more I meet them in my own solitude.... All this experience replaces my theories of solitude.<sup>13</sup>

He remains nevertheless ambivalent about the work, writing to one friend that "Every moment of it makes me wish I lived alone in the woods."<sup>14</sup> And he continues (most urgently from 1952 onwards) to seek transfer to a more solitary order.

Solitude has so many textures and layers of meaning in Merton's writings, though on occasion it is clearly resistance to – and psychological withdrawal from – the overwhelming and distracting immediacy of others who, however unintentionally, threaten the fragile psychic or spiritual equilibrium which solitude could sustain. Thus he was at times sacralizing the aloneness he had learned as a child.

Solitude also offered a gift, and the gift was a vision of connectedness, of oneness. Merton gave voice to this experience of unity in solitude when writing in *The Sign of Jonas* of the wilderness whose name is compassion. The most vivid expressions come through accounts of his various visits to Louisville. Tracing broadly the development of his reflections from the Visit in 1948 accompanying Dom Gabriel Sortais, through to the celebrated "enlightenment" on Fourth and Walnut some ten years later, Merton's response to people he sees begins with a sense of sympathy, develops into compassion, and explodes into wonder and a celebration of indivisible unity. There is a definite and radical change; and yet there is nevertheless still an implicit distance, a separation within this relatedness. There is still no real possibility of other people impinging directly upon his solitude. There is no direct interaction or mutuality, and Merton's isolation remains unthreatened.

Merton's growing sense of relatedness, of being in some way connected to and "at one" with others – of being, quite simply, a "member of the human race" – is first and foremost a change in perception. This in turn stirs a desire to overcome whatsoever barriers sustain a separation from others. And here we move from relatedness to relationship, which implies a more interactive undertaking to relate to a particular other. "Relationship presupposes conscious intention," writes Ann Belford Ulanov. "To feel related to someone, in Jung's sense of the word, is not, then, necessarily to have a relationship with them .... A relationship may grow out of this sense of relatedness; its development demands conscious participation from the persons involved."<sup>15</sup>

Communal identification with brother monks nurtured and sustained a keen sense of relatedness in Merton. Contemplative vision extended that sense of relatedness eventually to the whole human race. Interwoven with this development is a less explicit but persistent concern with relationship – a concern which drove Merton. In his more distilled thinking, solitude can be breached by God alone, whilst the meeting of solitudes is authentic human encounter. Not only does solitude awaken an awareness of the need for other persons but, more importantly, an authentic interaction with others obviates the potentially distorting effect of isolation. In the end, however nuanced Merton's thinking about solitude became, his most profound yearning was never satisfied, nor was what he called his "woundedness" healed without redemptive experience of intimate human love.

In Kohlberg, the peak of religious and moral maturity opens out into "universal ethical principles". Merton was rarely content with principles per se, nor with the notion of "universal love"<sup>16</sup>. More pertinently, he questioned the possibility of a "spiritual, detached" love in one who has never entered maturely into an intimate human relationship:

In the monastery, with our vows of chastity, we are ideally supposed to go beyond married love into something more pure, more perfect, more totally oblate. This should make us the most *human* of all people. But that is the trouble: how can one go "further" than something to which one has not yet attained? ... it does mean that we cannot love perfectly if we have not in some way loved maturely and truly.<sup>17</sup>

Michael Mott narrates the emergence within Merton of a transforming feminine presence, namely the dream-figure of Proverb, Sophia, Wisdom – different guises of one "sent to me by God" (proclaims Merton in a journal entry addressed to Proverb). The feminine presence, long awaited, is welcomed and Merton, less fearful of latent yearnings, allows into conscious thought a female presence whose touch is a healing touch like no other. "How grateful I am to you," he addresses Proverb, "for loving in me something I thought I had entirely lost, and someone who, I thought, had long ago ceased to be."<sup>18</sup> That someone had not ceased to be, but had experienced rejection and abandonment. In words addressed to a young woman whose touch has awakened a sense of being loved, Merton testifies to an encounter with the Divine which is also, in imagination at least, fully human. He welcomes the human touch and the expression of love.

In a hospital bed in 1960 the dream takes flesh. In his journal he tells of how, whilst sleeping there early one morning, "the soft voice of the nurse awoke me gently from my dream – and it was like awakening for the first time from all the dreams in my life – as if the Blessed Virgin herself, as if Wisdom, had awakened me."<sup>19</sup> The Wisdom figure, also called Proverb, crosses over from the subconscious to the conscious, from the sacred to the fully human world.

The dreams had no direct effect on Merton's sense of being "worthy of love" even if they do seem to reinforce his sense of being loved by God. Merton continues to write despairingly about his ability to love maturely and truly. Yet the dreams pave the way for something more, until in the spring of 1966, Merton fell in love. Like the nurse who awakened him in 1960, like Proverb's embrace or the touch of her hand, another young nurse awakened in Merton something he had considered lost. On reflection, he would tend to discount this relationship as a reaction to his sense of helplessness at a particularly vulnerable time. But his poetry and the rhythm of his life suggest more. In a journal entry of May 1966, Merton writes of the awakening effected in him by this new relationship: "the deepest capacities for human love in me have never been tapped... I too can love with an awful completeness."<sup>20</sup> Having spent his entire monastic life in an attempt to learn love, Merton entered into this surprising moment. His questions continued but deep-seated anxieties, only latterly articulated, began to fade.

Returning finally to the matter of moral autonomy and religious surrender, we might ask whether this particular relationship, within the context of Merton's specific and unique story, is akin to religious surrender (relativized autonomy, in Conn's terms) or is it simply an aberration? I suggest that a clue lies in our reading of the dream sequence as a threshold between conscious/subconscious and sacred/human worlds, for there Merton experiences a divine embrace in a way which begins to release him (however temporarily) for a truly "postconventional" moral and religious orientation. "What we really seek and need," writes Merton, "comes as a gift." The dreams open a doorway into a deeper surrender and, in turn, to an immediacy of presence unto another person. Conn suggests that Merton, having reached a stage of advanced cognitive autonomy, needed only "existential, adult responsibilities" in order to reach a postconventional moral orientation.<sup>21</sup> Merton's response to this love was not a "responsible" action from a conventional standpoint: in practice (though he never fully reconciled theologically this biographical impulse) he discovered a willingness to risk vulnerability by falling in love.

There is no clear answer to the question as to how this episode is related to religious surrender. In the end, God alone knows. Nevertheless, the question is a pertinent one – for ourselves as much as for Merton. If Merton did become a finally-integrated, authentically realized self, then it was only in light of his confronting (and not only in imagination) residual anxieties surrounding the question of particular and intimate human love. Contemplative solitude was, to Merton, "withdrawal from an illusory level of being" in order to find one's True Self in surrender to God, who sustains the freedom implicit in proper moral autonomy. He writes that only in discovering one's True Self can one truly love others and yet, paradoxically, that the act of loving others is requisite for the awakening of the True Self. Both religious surrender and the equivalent surrender in human relationship are elements in Merton's pilgrimage towards that True Self. Just as genuine religious surrender does not deny moral autonomy but rather authenticates the same, might it not be that genuine solitude (as Merton describes) is not of necessity threatened by loving human relationship, but therein may find its true setting? Conn defines the finally-integrated self as a "religiously-converted, self-transcending subject that has mediated a return to the immediacy of its own presence to itself." In moral terms, perhaps we need to speak of one who has learned also to be fully present to others by taking down the walls of language and entering the silence of immediacy. A touch. A gaze. Entering silently the heart of another.

## Notes and References

1. Walter E. Conn, "Conversion: Merton's Early Experience and Psychology's Interpretation," *Perkins Journal* 37 (Summer 1984).
2. Conn, op. cit., in *Journal of Religion* 65 (October 1985), p.513.
3. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Br. Ed., London: Sheldon Press, 1977), p. 88. For more detailed thoughts on relative autonomy, see *Conjectures*, pp. 111 ff.
4. See for example Merton's *The Sign of Jonas*, (New York, Harcourt Brace & Co, 1953) various journal entries, inc. Dec. 13, 1946.
5. British Edition, (London: Sheldon Press, 1979) p. 3.
6. Conn directs his readers to the appendix of Kohlberg's *The Philosophy of Moral Development* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), pp.344-72 for a brief statement of the preconventional, conventional and postconventional moral orientations.
7. British Edition, (London: Sheldon Press, 1975) p. 57.
8. Ann Hunsaker Hawkins, *Archetypes of Conversion: The Autobiographies of Augustine, Bunyan and Merton* (London & Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1985), p.129
9. Th. Merton, *A Vow of Conversation: Journals 1964-65* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1988), p. 140
10. Donald Grayston, *Thomas Merton: The Development of a Spiritual Theologian* (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1985), p.9.
11. Journal entry of March 30, 1958, quoted in Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, (British Edition, London: Sheldon Press, 1986), p.317.
12. Letter to Naomi Burton-Stone, May 17, 1956, in W.H. Shannon (ed.), *Witness to Freedom: Letters of Thomas Merton in Times of Crisis*, p. 135.
13. Th. Merton, *Jonas*, (op.cit.,) pp. 328f.
14. Quoted in Sr. Thérèse Lentfoehr, "The Spiritual Writer," in *Thomas Merton/Monk: A Monastic Tribute*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1974), p. 111.
15. Ann Belford Ulanov, *The Feminine in Jungian Psychology and in Christian Theology* (Evanston: North Western University Press, 1971), p. 155
16. Merton finds expression of his distaste for universal principles and in particular the notion of universal love in the thought of Chuang Tzu. See Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (New York: New Directions, 1965), pp.28f. It is interesting to discover similar sentiments throughout the early novel, *My Argument with the Gestapo*.
17. *Conjectures*, pp 187 ff.
18. Quoted in Mott, p.313.
19. Quoted in Mott, p.361
20. Quoted in Mott, p.452
21. Conn, 1985, p.515