

How postmodern is Thomas Merton?

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TO BE ABLE TO answer the question of this paper we need to go into what postmodernity is about. But first let me make a general outline of Merton's life during the decade of the sixties.

1968 – the year of Merton's death – is also, roughly, the year of the dawning of postmodernity.

The sixties were for Merton a decade of change and transformation, a time of breaking away from traditional Christianity. He sought new ways and came close to the views of Zen Buddhism. Merton had grown out of the old belief, of which perhaps the Epiphany of Louisville is a good expression. From now on he is trying to find new ways while still retaining what is best of his old beliefs.

We know that Merton felt close to the youth of the Sixties. He liked their ways of questioning traditional or conventional values. He appreciated their freshness and spontaneity. He felt akin. How could this be? Merton a monk in his fifties and these hippies in their teens? There is of course not a simple answer, but if I should try to give a spontaneous answer it will concern Merton's empathy and his yearning for authenticity. He saw in the hippie movement something of himself. And I would like to argue that this brought him close to what postmodernity is in general about: a deep dissatisfaction with Western philosophy, culture and views on the human being.

Merton's ability to empathise made him unusually perceptive of what was going on in his time. Although he was not familiar with the term "postmodernity" he caught its wind.

Another answer is rooted in Merton's dissatisfaction with the isolation and outer observance of monastic life. He writes: "What the monastic life should provide, then, is a special awareness and perspective, an authentic understanding of God's presence in the

world and His intentions for man. A merely fictitious and abstract isolation does not provide this awareness."¹ These lines disclose Merton's dissatisfaction with abstraction and his longing for lived life: do not think, live! This attitude of his is certainly in accordance with the hippies' drive for life not hindered by what society claims.

What is postmodernity?

Postmodernity is in its essence — if there is any essence — a philosophy which is characterized by its questioning of Western civilisation and the idealistic philosophy from Plato down to our time. The critique concerns one main area: metaphysics. Predominantly, metaphysics is perceived as dualism. Dualism, in this context, is the idea of two worlds, where this world of human beings has a lesser value, sometimes no value, in comparison with the other world, the world of reason, concepts and spirit. Our world, the world of the material, in so far as it has any value, derives its value from the world of spirit. The consequence of this kind of reasoning is that our material world appears as void of meaning. It derives its meaning and purpose from the other world, but lacks intrinsic value. This concept is questioned by postmodern philosophies. It puts the word "philosophy" in the plural, and thereby indicates that postmodernity is not one philosophy: it is characterized by diversity, multiplicity and a stress on the concrete and the variety of experience.

Another characteristic of postmodernity is deconstructivism. It ought to be labelled a concept — although postmodernity is critical of conceptualization. Deconstructivism aims at exactly what the word connotes, deconstructing what has hitherto been held as true, the objective truth of life, reality and knowledge. What is found after the project of deconstruction? Nothing really; or what used to be described as substance or essence is shown to be an illusion. Some philosophers claim there is no other reality than what language creates.

The kernel, perhaps, of postmodernity is a deep mistrust of essentialism. This mistrust has to do with what was earlier said about dualism. If the belief is that there are not two worlds, and that this world has a value of its own, anti-essentialism is a natural result.

Two main ideas have been the target of the postmodern deconstruction. The deconstruction of the self and of the concept of

truth. (I have taken the following from Rosemary Tong and her book *Feminist Thought*, p. 219):

So total is the anti-essentialism of the deconstructionist, that he or she questions two of the assumptions that almost everyone holds: that there is an essential unity of self through time and space termed *self-identity* and that there is an essential relationship between language and reality termed *truth*. The notion of a unified, or integrated, self is challenged by reference to the idea that the self is fundamentally split between its conscious and unconscious dimensions. In turn, the notion of truth is challenged by reference to the idea that language and reality are variable and shifting, missing each other in a Heraclitean flux. Words do not stand for things, for pieces of reality. Rather, reality eludes language...

The point is that there is no fixed, objective world where truth, reality and the self are one and the same through time and independent of history and cultural formation. There is no substance behind the flux of time, culture and history which is the essence that gives identity and upholds appearances. Appearances, so to speak, are all there is. Truth is only partial; it is popular to speak of "contextualization." What we experience, and what we label as true are dependent upon my attitude, the perspective I bring to my experience, the context I am surrounded by, the culture I am part of, my ethnic belonging and my gender. What I am is not given. What I am is something I become; it is obvious here how alike postmodern thinking is to prevalent ideas of existentialism. That in itself is not surprising. Postmodernity succeeds existentialism and both are French phenomena, although the "father" of existentialism is the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard.

What postmodernity discloses is the illusion of something given. We believe we are born into something fixed, almost God-given: this is a naive and realistic position, but which nevertheless has had a strong hold in our history. It is as if we "eat" and digest the meaning of life *presented* to us. We believe and act as if language mirrors an objective reality. We act as passive subjects with the only task to receive what is already there. This is in part a consequence of dualistic thinking. Now, postmodernity challenges this view but does not really put something in the void which is created when the old thinking is declared dead. Absence and void are in themselves part of life and a description of reality and must not therefore be pretended

to be otherwise. We only know presence through absence, and vice versa.

Postmodernity takes apart and disrupts and is reluctant to build anew and make a synthesis as that, the argument goes, is to falsify the character of reality. Postmodernity has, on these grounds, been reproached as having fragmented life and the individual: there are no truths, no reality, no assurance, no fidelity. Everything is absurd and as such we are not obliged to feel responsible for anything. This is correct but not altogether because what is forgotten in this picture is the complete freedom given to man. Man is released from a prison where he has been put by those in power claiming the authority of interpreting truth and objectivity. Postmodernity has given human beings their freedom back and handed over the possibility to start all over, no longer as a prisoner of what is claimed to be eternal truths. I think existentialism is right when talking about anxiety following the realization of complete freedom. In a sense, human life as a whole, can be described as escaping freedom. God "himself" is complete freedom, according to Kierkegaard, and this is what causes anxiety! What is free cannot be controlled. Postmodernity has let loose a way of experiencing life the way life "is," uncontrolled.

Furthermore, postmodernity is characterized by a Freudian Renaissance. One of the modern followers of Freud is Lacan. A psycho-dynamic outlook prevails in most postmodern philosophers, and a few even practise as psychoanalysts. This reveals, I think, that what philosophy is, is actually a question of who we are, how our knowledge has its origin in self-knowledge, and the activity of the subject; to become is a process. We are not born ready-made. We are not concepts of human being, we become humans.

Final point; postmodernity concerns itself with language and, in perhaps a simplistic way. It can be said that the stress is on the verb as compared to a language mainly using substantives.

Thomas Merton and the atmosphere of postmodernity

As far as I have read Merton, he is critical of two main concepts: dualism and the prevalent figuration of the subject originating in René Descartes (1596-1650). His critique of dualism becomes obvious in his agreement with Zen Buddhism and in his opinions concerning traditional Christianity and monastic life. His beliefs

concerning the subject becomes clear in his critique of the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*.

Zen Buddhism and Merton

I would like to argue that Merton in an implicit way carries out a critique of Christian metaphysics by approaching Zen Buddhism. Buddhism is actually a philosophy of reality, of metaphysics, associated with postmodernity. First and last, Zen Buddhism is characterized by its monistic outlook; there is just one reality and *satori*, enlightenment, and that is to come to grips with this "truth" concerning reality.

Zen Buddhism denies abstract thinking as not being authentic thinking; the only reality is lived experience; there is no abstract, logical truth. Or, abstraction is there, but it is an illusion to believe it to be the substance of the subject and reality. The purpose of life, for the individual, is to reach the bottom of herself or himself. At this bottom is realized that what I "is" is emptiness, that is to say, there is no substance. What is, is what is not; this is the paradoxical way of expressing that reality which can never be defined in a rational and logical way.

My opinion is that these briefly sketched views of Zen Buddhism are in accordance with essential features of postmodernity, features that Merton actually embraced. Further, Zen Buddhism expresses itself by using verbs instead of substantives, in expressing reality as something ongoing, not as something "there." To give an example. If you become a doctor, you are not a doctor rather you practise as a doctor. You can never "own" an ability as an essence, you can only make it actual by living it.

Subjectivity

Merton in his critique of René Descartes, in his kinship with Zen, is against a dualistic perception of reality, his apprehension of the contemplative experience is in line with postmodern thinking.

Let us look into what Merton says of Descartes. There are many instances in his material where he articulates a deep dissatisfaction with Descartes' basic formula *cogito ergo sum*, "I think, therefore I am." I would like to argue that this dissatisfaction discloses something essential in Merton's apprehension of reality and the human being. In *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton writes:

Nothing could be more alien to contemplation than the *cogito ergo sum* of Descartes... This is the declaration of an alienated being, ...compelled to seek some comfort in a proof for his own existence (!) based on the observation that he 'thinks'... He is reducing himself to a concept... He arrives at his own being as if it were an objective reality, that is to say he strives to become aware of himself as he would of some 'thing' alien to himself. And he proves that the 'thing' exists.²

These lines by Merton are written in the sixties. He is critical of Descartes by using what has become a Marxist vocabulary, 'alien.' Being alienated sums up a basic experience of our century, it occurs again and again: in Marxism, in psycho-analysis, in existentialism, in postmodernity. It has to do with a person's experience of being objectified, not treated and apprehended as a subject. This has been pointed out as a tragic feature in our modern era as a consequence of technology and industrialization. This alienation also has a philosophical root, which is the passivity of the subject. The subject is treated as a monad, an atom, circulating without any emotional contact with other atoms or human beings. The human being is treated as something to be proved, as a concept, in a way, beside the body, the ordinary life, and the daily routines. The subject as perceived as a free-floating reason and a reason, furthermore, equated with male reason. Merton is clear on this point. He stresses the subjectivity of the human being. Further, he is convinced in his critique of the old dualism, of the human being as regarded as part body, part soul. When Merton refers to a person he looks upon him or her as a whole. And in his concept of "the true self" it becomes clear that he is not dealing with a concept, an entity; it is lived experience.

He does not make a distinction between consciousness and being conscious which is comparable with the old distinction between object and subject. Not to use this distinction is to overcome alienation and to perceive oneself, not as an atom, but as a subject in process. Merton arrives at this through his contemplative experience and through how he himself apprehends himself and reality:

Contemplation... is the experiential grasp of reality as subjective, not so much 'mine' (which would signify 'belonging to the external self') but 'myself' in existential mystery. Contemplation does not arrive at reality after a process of deduction, but by an intuitive awakening in which our free and personal reality becomes fully alive...³

It is further clear in *Contemplation in a World of Action* that he thinks and argues in a context of psychodynamic reasoning, for example in his chapter "The Identity Crisis." I find this kind of reasoning typical of the climate of postmodernity. Increasing fatigue with positivism and a static view of reality, bring into focus the idea that human beings and the world that they inhabit have, in fact, no reality independent of one another:

When 'the world' is hypostatized... it becomes another of those dangerous and destructive fictions which we are trying vainly to grapple... The world as pure object is something that is not there. It is not a reality outside us for which we exist. It is not a firm and absolute objective structure which has to be accepted on its own inexorable terms. The world has in fact no terms of its own. It dictates no terms to man. We and our world interpenetrate. If anything, the world exists for us and we exist for ourselves.⁴

I find these words enlightening. When Merton writes "we and our world interpenetrate" he is indeed hitting the core of postmodernity. And further, when he writes that "the world has in fact no terms of its own" he is indeed doing away with the objectivity of something out there to which the human being must be submissive. Instead humans are their own masters, or in Merton's own favourite words towards the end of his life: "to stand on my own two feet." That, to me, is the message of postmodernity, to give humans their authority, creativity and self-confidence back, although along with an anxiety which seems to follow the release from traditional metaphysics.

Merton's deepest concern was the restoration of the contemplative life. He returned to the early sources of Western monasticism and brought them into modern life. In this restoration he once more came close to postmodern thinking; he wants life to break through and not to be captured by old structures. He asks for a new outlook and a new faith:

What is needed is not only new rules but new structures and new life. The new life stirs, but faintly, incoherently. It does not know if it can exist without the old structures. What is also needed is a new outlook and a new faith in the capacities of modern men to be monks in a new way.⁵

It is, of course, necessary to point out that postmodern thinking is not religious, or at least that it does not take account of religion.

It can be interpreted as if religion is regarded as an old structure, the old metaphysics. But I would like to stress that religion, in this sense, is also an issue for Merton. Reading the following lines, where Merton refers to Thomas Aquinas, is clarifying: "However, this view too is static rather than dynamic, hierarchic, layer upon layer, rather than on-going and self-creating, the fulfilment of a predetermined intellectual plan rather than the creative project of a free and self-building love."⁶

Is Merton postmodern and in what sense?

Now to my question: is Merton postmodern and in what sense? If I look at the phenomenon of postmodernity and its situation in time; no, Merton is not postmodern. What we now view as postmodernity was not fully articulated and labelled as postmodernity while Merton lived, although there are expressions like "post-Christian" in *Contemplation in a World of Action*. But if I look upon postmodernity as something in the air; yes, Merton was postmodern. He was not postmodern in a strict philosophical sense as the French philosophers like Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault and Kristeva. But Merton was not a philosopher! He was a well-educated, well-read Trappist monk with a keen interest in his time and curious about what was going on, but as that, never losing his identity as a monk. He always speaks and talks as a monk, even though his awareness of himself as a monk shifts, transforms and deepens. But I dare to say, it is exactly in this sense that Merton is most truly postmodern: he develops his own thinking, he stands on his own two feet, he challenges old ways of thinking and beliefs, he is bold in his move into Zen Buddhism, firmly believing that the truth of yourself is always truer than the truth of objectivity and what is imposed on a person. Merton's postmodernity is a lived example of what postmodernity might do to you!

Notes and References

1. Thomas Merton: *Contemplation in a World of Action*, p.27 [New York, Doubleday, 1971, p.8]
2. Thomas Merton: *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p.8 [Wheathampstead, Hertfordshire, Anthony Clarke, 1972, p.6]
3. *Ibid.*, pp.8-9 [Anthony Clarke, p.7]
4. *Contemplation in a World of Action*, op.cit., p 169 [Doubleday, p.154]
5. *Ibid.*, p.29 [Doubleday, p.9]
6. *Ibid.*, p. ? [Doubleday, p.147]