

Turning to the Mystics



Thomas Merton: Session 3

with James Finley

Jim Finley: Greetings. I'm Jim Finley. Welcome to Turning to The Mystics.

Greetings everyone, and welcome to our time here together turning to the Christian mystic, Thomas Merton, to help deepen our experience and response to God's presence in our lives.

In this session, I want to share with you a passage in Merton's writings, which is *New Seeds of Contemplation*, and this is found in chapter five, "Things in Their Identity."¹ I'm selecting this passage because it's a seminal passage in which Merton expresses his way of sharing the ancient contemplative Christian tradition of our ultimate identity as persons created in the image and likeness of God. That is, it's a meditation on the deep question of who am I at the deepest possible level? What is my ultimate identity? And I want to break this passage down into three parts. In the first part I want to, which is really the second part in the passage from Merton, is that in the first part I want to first explore the way Merton expresses the poetry of our ultimate identity in God.

And then in the second part, I want to reflect on how he understands the foundations of our suffering as all the ways that we're exiled from the invincible preciousness of our ultimate identity in God. And then the third part is what is the path then in which we're healed from all that hinders us from finding our way out of the darkness into the light of joining God, and who God eternally knows us to be hidden with Christ in God forever from before the origins of the universe?

So, I'd like to break it down into those three phases. And, you can see here as we read these passages in Merton, how rich this is. It's the kind of thing that you just quietly sit with in daily prayer and meditation, or as a kind of daily rendezvous with God so that little, by little, by little, the depth and richness of this spiritual worldview and the path on which we learned to be faithful to it becomes clearer and clearer. This is how we turn to Thomas Merton, as our guide or as our teacher along this path, this way of life.

So first, the ultimate ground of our identity. And, again, excuse his sexist language. If you were writing today, you would be very careful to use inclusive language of God. Merton writes:

The secret of my identity is hidden in the love and mercy of God.

But whatever is in God is really identical with [God], for [God's] infinite simplicity admits no division and no distinction. Therefore I cannot hope to find myself anywhere except in Him.

Ultimately, the only way I can be myself is to become identified with Him in Whom is hidden the reason and the fulfillment of my existence.

Therefore there is only one problem on which all my existence, my peace and my happiness depend: to discover myself in discovering God. If I find [God], I will find myself and if I find my true self, I will find [God].

I'd like to reflect on this text and the poetry of this in terms of the Christian understanding of God's interdivine life as Trinity. Is that from all eternity, God the Father; that is, God as origin, God as father, God as mother, God as origin of God, and from all eternity, God the

1 Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1972), 35-36

Father is eternally expressing the infinite totality of himself, the infinite reality of the divinity of himself as his Word.

So, it is as Scripture says, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” And so, from all eternity then—Meister Eckhart uses the phrase, “God’s like a woman in labor giving birth to God.”—the interdivine life of God as God the Father in this poetic richness, speaking God, like birthing God as the Word of God.

And, through all eternity, God the Father eternally contemplates himself, herself, contemplates God in the Word. And the Word of God contemplates himself in the Father. And in their contemplative communion, in their oneness, in their infinite oneness with each other because God is one, the love that arises out of that union is the Holy Spirit.

So, the interdivine life of God is this life of infinite love and knowledge as the overflowing fullness of infinite reality itself, the mystery of God. Where we come in to this picture, this poetic vision, is if from all eternity God the Father is expressing himself or herself, as Word, and is contemplating himself/herself in the Word and then is eternally contemplating in the Word you, who you are so that when God creates you, creates you into the human plane of time and space, God did not have to think up who you might be. Because for all eternity, God eternally knows who you eternally are hidden with Christ in God forever before the origins of the universe.

So, this ultimate identity, this true self, this is the birthless you, the you that was never born because God never, never, never, never, never, never has not known who you eternally are hidden with Christ in God forever before the origins of the universe. In this birthless you, hidden with Christ in God, is the deathless you. For God will never, never, never, never, never, not know who you eternally are hidden with Christ in God forever. And this is your identity. It’s your ultimate identity with respect to your capacity to awaken to your God-given identity, which is religious experience, and in a way, in other words, it’s your capacity to realize that the depths of God is, by the generosity of God, being given to you as the depths of yourself in your nothingness without God.

In that intimate realization of that God-given godly nature of yourself and your nothingness without God is then your capacity in being awakened to that is to say “yes” to that, to give yourself in love to the love that gives itself to you. For in the reciprocity of love, destiny is fulfilled. That love is never imposed. It’s always offered, and we make our free “yes” to this love by giving ourself in love.

Jim Finley: So, this is the kind of majestic sense of laying out what we may think of in the Christian religious understanding is really the ultimate dignity of the human person as primacy of love in God’s personal creation as to the point of identity, identification in God. And that’s the first part.

The second part then focuses more on our human nature in which we awaken to this. That by human nature I mean the human experience—the historical you, the historical me; the moral you, the moral me; the sexual you, the sexual me; the feeling you, the feeling me, and so on—the human experience of ourselves in our passage through sequential time as a human being.

What we tend to see is how we tend not to see ourselves in this way. That is, what we tend to see is that our customary experience of ourself in human nature, is exiled or estranged from this invincible preciousness of ourself in God that is our very reality. And in that state of estrangement, the state of exile, is a sense that where the ego asserts itself; that it's in our finite ego that we come upon within our ego, which transcends our ego, which is this infinite mystery of the generosity of God being poured out as our deepest identity. We come upon that boundary-less oneness, that one life that is at once God's and our own. We come upon that within the ego, the finite ego, which is the glory of the ego and then to say "yes" to it. But that very finite ego that is awakened to this unitive mystery beyond itself, and to say "yes" to it is estranged from that, and this is the ego laying its claim on us as having the final say in who we are. That is, I am nothing but my personality. I am nothing but what I am as internalized conditions and states in my passage through time and genetic predispositions, and all of that, which is provisional and real, but we can't see past it. And in that exiled state, the identity formed in that state, Merton thinks of that as the false self.

And so, here's Merton. Merton puts it this way, same passages:

Every one of us is shadowed by an illusory person: a false self.

This is the [person] I want myself to be but who cannot exist, because God does not know anything about him. And to be unknown of God is altogether too much privacy.²

That's a great line.

My false and private self is the one who wants to exist outside the reach of God's will and God's love—outside of reality and outside of life. And such a self cannot help be but an illusion.

We are not very good at recognizing illusions, least of all the ones we cherish about ourselves—the ones that we were born with and which feed the roots of sin. For most [of the] people of the world, there is no greater subjective reality than this false self of theirs, which cannot exist. A life devoted to the cult of this shadow is what is called a life of sin.

All sin starts from the assumption that my false self, the self that exists only in my own egocentric desires, is [a] fundamental reality of life to which everything else in the universe is ordered. Thus I use up my life in the desire for pleasures and the thirst for experiences, for power, honor, knowledge, and love, to clothe this false self and construct its nothingness into something objectively real. And I wind experiences around myself and cover myself with pleasure[s] and glory like bandages in order to make myself perceptible to myself and to the world, as if I were an invisible body that could only become visible when something visible covered its surface.

But there is no substance under the things with which I am clothed. I am hollow and my structure of pleasures and ambitions has no foundation. I am objectified in them. But they are all destined by their very contingency to be destroyed. And when they

2 Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1972), 34

are gone there will be nothing left of me but my own nakedness and emptiness and hollowness to tell me that I am my own mistake.

So, this is a meditation then on an illusion that the ego has about itself. Namely, the illusion that it has the final say in who we are—an illusion that it harbors in this state of being exiled from the ultimate identity of ourself hidden with Christ in God in which we're to recognize in our ego and in recognizing it, internally say "yes" to it by dying to our ego as having the final say on who we are, which is really the work of love. It's a work of love to see this.

And so, sin here is not primarily moral. He's not looking at it as moral. But the moral dimension of sin is symptomatic of a kind of an epistemological or a kind of deeper kind of rootedness of an exiled state of estrangement from the one thing that alone is real, which is the infinite love pouring itself out and giving itself to us as every breath and heartbeat.

So, here's the thing, then, I think, it seems. To the extent we can sit and see things in this way; that is, to the extent we begin to see our tendency not to see the God-given godly nature of ourselves in everyone around us as the children of God; to the extent we begin to see our tendency not to see, which is humility, this deep seeing of our tendency not to see opens up to us a deeper way to see. That is, with God's grace, I see for myself the illusion that I harbor about myself. Because my egocentric desires—everything I'm capable of attaining or capable of losing—doesn't have the final say in who I am. It's not true. Only love has the final say in who I am, that's being poured out and given to me through, and through, and through, in the midst of the unresolved matters of my heart, unresolved matters of my mind, and as mercy.

So, seeing this then—which is conversion, I think—we're at the heart of the Gospel now, an experiential salvation, this deep surrender to the love that loves us so in our confusion. This then begins to open up the desire that sets us on the path of spiritual awakening. That is, it seems to me, one way of putting it is this: that in my hour of darkness-- By the way, in the earlier chapter when we were looking at the cosmic dance in creation, so that in my most child-like hour turning to see a flock of birds descending, or reading a child a good night story in the arms of the Beloved; or, in my darkest hour where everything seemed lost, I was granted a taste of a mystery without which I know my life will be forever incomplete, and I will not break faith with my awakened heart. I will not play the cynic. That is, I know it's true because I tasted it. I tasted it as true. I can't explain it, but I know that it's true. And knowing that it's true, these fleeting tastes where I'm granting taste to what's true, are not sufficient for me, for I begin to experience a desire to live in a daily abiding awareness of the depths so fleetingly glimpsed.

How can I learn to find my way out of the darkness of this claustrophobic world of imagining my finite conditions have authority to name who I am? And how can I learn to live in an habitual state of the divinity of every moment of my life? And how can I, in living in that state, live in fidelity to that state that I might share that generosity of God with others, really with all living things with the earth that sustains us all? And this then becomes the desire for the path.

And so, the passage ends this way. Merton says that is all the truth is, that if I find God, I will find myself. If I find myself, I will find God, that I join God in knowing who God knows me to be hidden with Christ in God forever.

Merton concludes:

But although this looks simple, [“that is as poetically stated”] it is in reality immensely difficult, [“to find myself in God and God in my self-identity”; ‘But although this looks simple, it is in reality, immensely difficult.’] In fact, if I am left to myself it will be utterly impossible. For although I can know something of God’s existence and nature by my own reason, there is no human and rational way in which I can arrive at that contact, that possession of [God], which will be the discovery of Who God really is and Who I am in [God].³

That is something that no one can ever do alone.

Nor can all the [people] in the world, and all created things in the universe help [me] in this work.

The Only One who can teach me to find God is God, Himself, Alone.

And then this brings us to prayer and meditation.

I think this life of devotional sincerity is we sit in kind of a rendezvous with God knowing that we’re sitting here in the presence of God all about us and within us, closer to us than we are to ourself. We know that God has touched our heart and awakened us with glimmers or glimpses of this divinity of ourself and our nothingness without God. Through the power of the Spirit like with utterable groanings, like birth pains, the Spirit within us is filling us with longings to be habitually grounded in this oneness, now and forever, up to and through our death and beyond. And yet by our own power, we can’t do it.

Jim Finley: Therefore, if it’s up to us, this isn’t looking good. If it’s up to us, this is not looking good. If it’s up to us, we’re finished. But it isn’t up to us for it lies within my power then to turn to God: “Out of the depths I cry unto thee, O Lord. O Lord, hear my voice.” And with a certain childlike confidence, in meditation and prayer, we can slowly begin to stabilize ourself in this clarity that leads to yet deeper clarity through the deep acceptance of our brokenness as being illumined by God every step of the way.

And by the way, this is already in progress or you wouldn’t be inclined to hear this talk. See, this is already unfolding within you, or this talk wouldn’t make any sense. But insofar as it resonates with something that you can’t explain but you know is true, we see Merton’s role as a spiritual teacher. See, the spiritual teacher bears witness to help us find words to express unexplainable things that express our deepest longings and offer trustworthy guidance in the consummation of those longings.

And so, with that then, sit in in prayer meditation, bringing this to God. And here just for a few moments in doing so, knowing that on your own as you’re so inclined each day, your sitting practice can be extended as grace and circumstances inclines you to do so. Okay?

3 Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1972), 36

So, I invite you then to-- By the way, I'm having this weird feeling that I'm not remembering the Our Father, "The Lord's Prayer," so if I say it, and it's not right, just know this is my frailty shining through here. We'll see what happens. I invite you to sit straight, fold your hands, and bow. Repeat after me.

Be still and know I am God.

Be still and know I am.

Be still and know.

Be still.

Be. [bell rings]

Jim Finley: Bow.

Let's slowly say "The Lord's Prayer" together:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, now and forever. Amen.

Mary, mother of contemplatives, pray for us. [music plays] Saint Benedict, pray for us. Saint Scholastica, pray for us.

Blessings until next time.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you for listening to this episode of Turning to The Mystics, a podcast created by the Center for Action and Contemplation. We're planning to do episodes that answer your questions, so if you have a question, please email us at podcasts@cac.org or send us a voicemail at cac.org/voicemails. All of this information can be found in the show notes. We'll see you again soon.