

## Question: Who was Thomas Merton?

**Answer:** Undoubtedly a mystic, Thomas Merton has been considered by most the greatest contributor to Christian Spirituality in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Merton gave us the language to understand our own interiors in relation to both God and others. He also shed new light on contemplation and the call of all Christians to see Christ at church but in all things. Merton was seen by his contemporaries and those who study him today as a revolutionary in some ways. He was one of the first to speak out against the war in Vietnam and the injustices here at home to the marginalized of society. Perhaps more than his writings, the most amazing thing about Merton becoming the greatest contributor to Christian Spirituality in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the path he took to become the spiritual master that he is.

Thomas Merton was born on January 31, 1915 in Prades, France to Ruth and Owen Merton. Both of Merton's parents were unsuccessful artists, living simple and meager lives. Neither of them were religious. Thomas had one younger brother who was born in 1918 named John Paul. In 1921, at the tender age of six, Thomas' mother died of stomach cancer. This left his father Owen with two very young children. Unprepared to raise them himself, Owen left the children with his parents in New York. Leaving his small children behind, Owen traveled the world trying to sell paintings. Owen would see his sons sporadically, and when they became old enough, he would join his father on some of his journeys. Journeying to strange places with his father and living with strange people in various rough settings left Thomas with a sense of freedom and independence. It also required him to become an adult earlier than life usually allows. In 1934, Merton was diagnosed with cancer in the brain and died shortly thereafter. By the age of 15, Merton was an orphan. Even after the death of his parents, Merton still had no interest in religion and rather found solace in drinking, and carousing with friends and women. While attending school in Cambridge, England, Merton fathered a child out of wedlock and as a result was kicked out of his adoptive family's home and sent to his grandparents in New York. Leaving Europe behind, Merton in 1934, Merton enrolled in Columbia University interested in becoming a journalist.

Merton's illicit behavior continued. It wasn't until meeting the Hindu monk Bramachari on the Columbia University campus that Merton felt drawn to exploring Christianity for himself. Bramachari had come to the United States from India to be apart of the Congress of Religions at the World's Fair in Chicago. He had come from India without money by order of his superior, thus he arrived at the World's Fair months after it was over. Nevertheless, he remained in the United States staying with Merton and his friends. Even though Bramachari was Hindu, he played the role of a Christian missionary in Merton's life, drawing him up to the realities and mystique of the faith by recommending he read works such as St. Augustine's *Confessions*, and *The Imitation of Christ*. (Lives of Wisdom, Forrest)

Finally in 1938, Merton converted to Catholicism. Converting was not enough for Merton. He felt a strong calling from God to leading a religious life. What is impressive about this decision is that Merton was keenly interested in the Trappist Order, or the Order of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance, an extremely ascetic monastic order that required its members to not speak other than during prayer, to sleep on straw beds, and to do hard physical labor. Up to this point in his life, Merton had enjoyed a posh existence, drinking and merriment, being loud, and certainly not doing hard physical labor. Everything the Trappist Order stood for was the antithesis of how Merton had lived to this point in his life. He joined the Trappist's in 1941 in an effort to get away from the war torn world. Merton increasingly felt he had become alienated from the world.

A writer by trade, Merton was called to continue to do so in the Monastery. Merton wrote one of his signature pieces, *The Seven Storey Mountain* as a memoir in 1949. Most of his early writings regarded spirituality and contemplation. Ideas like contemplation, before Merton, were understood to be accomplished only by those who lived in monasteries. Instead, Merton spread the idea of contemplation to everyday Christians like you and me. He believed that contemplation could be accomplished by anyone who took the time daily to pray and spend time in quietude. To be a contemplative means to see God in all things and the opening up of our own interiors to the experience of God anywhere and everywhere. By becoming contemplatives we come to know and love ourselves and others more completely because in ourselves and others we see God. Another great contribution that Merton made to Christian Spirituality was the notion of the true self and false self. The true self is that part of us in union with God, others, and all being. Living in our true selves means living according to God's plan. In contrast, the false self is that part of us that seeks isolation, selfish ends, and living only for ourselves. In his book, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton made these ideas available to everyone, not just those in religious cloisters, the means to recognize in our own lives those aspects of our true self and false self to better align our lives with God's plan for us. These ideas intrigued the spiritually starved decades of the 40's, 50's, and 60's Merton was writing in.

During his lifetime, Merton himself underwent many transformations and changes. Probably the greatest came after an experience he had at Fourth and Main in Louisville KY in 1958. As he was walking downtown during the lunch rush, after speaking with a publisher in town, he suddenly had an epiphany. Merton realized that he was intimately bound to each one of the people that he saw walking on the street that day though he did not know any of them personally. Instead of his previous mindset of being disconnected from the population as a whole because he was a Trappist monk, he saw that he had a deep relation and responsibility to each one of them. It was here that he realized that his vocation as a monk did not mean disconnect from the world, instead, it meant that he must be intimately connected and involved with the fate of all those in it. Out of this experience, Merton began to aggressively write on the peace movement and verbally attack the isolation our nation had for wars. Merton began extending himself across faith traditions, even to Eastern religions like Buddhism and Hinduism. He believed that dialoguing with them would increase his own spiritual life and provide insights into new paths to God. On his first visit to the east, he met with the Dali Lama and plans to visit several other eastern spiritual masters. His journey however was sadly cut short when he was electrocuted accidentally by a stationary fan in his hotel room on December 10, 1968 in Bangkok, Thailand. Though Merton's life ended abruptly, his contribution to spirituality will live on in those who seek and strive for the oneness he calls us to see in all of God's creation.