

Thomas Merton

Ikon of commitment for the postmodern generation

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commit/commitment: from Latin committere, to join, join battle, practise, perpetrate, place with another for safety etc., entrust (see MISSION).

(Oxford dictionary of English etymology)

ALTHOUGH I FALL INTO THE GROUP REFERRED TO in this *Way Supplement* as ‘postmodern’ (just!), I am afraid commitment is not a topic on which I am an expert. I have no long-term partner, no wife and children, I am not in vows to any religious order – I even have difficulty maintaining my subscription to the National Trust. So perhaps I am typical of a generation that is constantly decried as ‘fickle’ or ‘unable to commit’.

Indeed, we are a funny lot, we strange twenty- and thirty-somethings – too young to be hippies and too old to be post-hippies or eco-activists. Someone once described us as the ‘lost generation’, and sometimes it feels a bit like that.

In terms of the religious world we were the generation who witnessed the break up of the *ancien régime* after the Second Vatican Council and then found ourselves (inexplicably to many) in the middle of an attempted ‘restoration’ – bemused and powerless as all the trappings of the old order were suddenly pronounced desirable after all – no wonder we hesitated to commit ourselves to such a system.

Yet a faithful remnant of our generation have tried to keep faith with our Christian tradition in this time of rapid and disorientating change. It has not been easy, and for those of us (like myself) who have tried to live out that commitment through traditional forms of religious life, it has often been testing and even in many cases destructive.

In 1988 I joined the Jesuit novitiate with eight others – a large number in contemporary terms. Of those nine, two have remained – yet the other seven have largely gone on to work in varying ways for the building of the kingdom as lay people. Perhaps this in itself is a lesson for those who decry the falling numbers of ‘vocations’ to religious

orders. We seem to be only at the dawn of the 'age of the laity', and who knows where the greater involvement of laity will bring the churches?

Then there is the question of the relationship of the rich countries of the West with our poorer neighbours in the 'developing' world. As the Sri Lankan theologian Tissa Balasuriya demonstrated in talks here in Salisbury last summer, whether we in the West like it or not, the time will come in this century when the West will not be able to maintain its position of power and privilege over the world – simply because of the demographics of the issue. Already the empty seminaries of the western countries are mirrored by the full ones of Africa and Asia. Long term this will inevitably change the nature of the churches.

With all this in mind I decided to reflect on what we actually mean by 'commitment' and what sort of commitment can we expect in such a time of transition. To help my reflection I chose the American Trappist monk, Thomas Merton (1915–1968), as a man who seemed to embody many of the struggles described above, and who articulated what commitment meant to him. In this article I aim to delineate how he responded to the issues presented above, especially the two related questions of, first, how we relate to ecclesial institutions in such a postmodern world and, second, what it means to commit ourselves to one path in a world of increasingly diverse articulations of belief and practice. To this end I shall concentrate on one year of his life, 1966, and how he expressed that struggle in his Journals.¹

Forest hermit

The year 1966 began well. Merton, now fifty, had finally been granted permission to live in his own hermitage somewhat away from the main monastery of Gethsemani, Kentucky, where he had been a monk for some twenty-five years. He enjoyed the solitude with some relish and when the first heavy snows of late January fell he seemed to slip into an almost ecstatic state of harmony with the cosmos where his manual work, prayer, meditations and simple acts of kindness to the woodland creatures that surrounded him all blended into one:

January 22, 1966

(Evening). Heavy snow all day. Traffic of birds on the porch; juncos first, the cardinals, a mocking bird, titmice, myrtle warblers, etc. Also at least 3 whitefooted mice (pretty with their brown face and big ears) came out of the wood piles – mice more interested than birds in the crumbs. Birds like the shelter and drink from the pools of melted snow.

January 23, 1966, III Sunday after Epiphany

Deep snow. A marvellous morning (early in the night hours) in which, among other things, I suddenly wrote a French poem. Had a good breakfast and the coffee turned out wonderfully this time: better than anything I have had for years except in hospital . . .

Curious dimensions of time: in four hours (besides writing this poem, getting breakfast and cleaning up) reread a few pages of Burt's book and perhaps twenty pages of Nishida. That was all. But the time was most fruitful in depth and awareness and I did not know what happened to all those hours . . .

As regards prayer – in the hermitage. To be snowed in is to be reminded that this is a place apart, from which praise goes up to God, and that my honor and responsibility are that praise. This is my joy, my only 'importance'. For it *is* important! To be chosen for this! And then the realization that the Spirit is given to me, the veil is removed from my heart, that I reflect 'with open face' the glory of Christ (II Cor 3., end). It would be easy to remain with one's heart veiled (as Rilke did in some sense) and it is not by any wisdom of my own but by God's gift that it *is* unveiled.

Already in these passages we see the essential elements of Merton's spirituality and his sense of commitment. First and foremost, there is a sense of commitment to the ordinary everyday reality of life. No distinction is made between the importance of writing a poem, praising God in the liturgy or making a good cup of coffee. Just as he attends to his own needs, he is aware of the needs of creation around him and provides food and shelter for them. As the winter draws to an end and the splendour of spring returns to his forests he writes:

March 2, 1966

Yesterday – more truly spring; and this is a spring dawn today, cold, but with birds singing. First time I have heard the whistling of the Towhee this year. And the cardinals up in the woods to the west. The promise grows more and more definite. I look up at the morning star: in all this God takes His joy, and in me also, since I am His creation and His son, His redeemed, and member of His Christ – sorrow at the fabulous confusion and violence of this world that does not understand His love – yet I am called not to interpret or condemn the misunderstanding, only to return the love which is the final and ultimate truth of everything and seeks men's awakening and response. To go out to walk slowly in this wood – this is a more important and significant means to understanding, at the moment, than a lot of analysis and a lot of reporting on the things 'of the spirit'.

Joining battle

However, Merton's hermit peace was about to be challenged. Over the early months of 1966 his back, never good, had been getting progressively worse. On 3 March an examination at the local hospital showed that an operation was unavoidable. So on 21 March, the feast of St Benedict, Merton began to make preparations to leave for hospital:

March 21, 1966, St Benedict

Song of robins and cardinals in pre-dawn dusk. I am trying to clear the porch of wood before going to the hospital, so though it is only 45 or so I had a fire, a bright one that flamed high and lit up all the ikons. Then drank my coffee with honey in it (to use up the honey – and am no longer using sugar) and read Angela of Foligno, who is great: intense purity, sincerity, penance, like the warm clear light of the Florentine primitive painters and those of Siena.

The operation took place on 25 March, the Feast of the Annunciation, and was successful. As he recovered from the operation Merton was tended by a young, attractive nurse, referred to in the Journal as 'M', but subsequently identified as Margie Smith.²

Merton describes his first encounter with her as follows:

One week after the operation Friday in Passion Week, I was able to get up and go out to walk while on the grass, and this made an enormous difference and also did the fact that I got a very friendly and devoted student nurse working on my compresses etc and this livened things up considerably. In fact we were getting perhaps too friendly by the time she went off on her Easter vacation, but her affection – undisguised and frank – was an *enormous* help in bringing me back to life fast.³

The inevitable began to happen as the couple 'clicked' and began to take a deeper interest in each other. John Howard Griffin in his uncompleted biographical sketch of Merton, *Thomas Merton: the hermitage years*,⁴ places the encounter in the wider context of Merton's life at that time, emphasizing the providential nature of the meeting:

Certain other factors made Merton believe the attachment might be providential. His surgery was changed from early to late March. If it had occurred as first scheduled, he would not have met Margie Smith. At fifty-one years of age, and after twenty-five years of monastic experience in an essentially masculine society, he was highly susceptible to the charms he found in the companionship of women.

The hospital experience itself, the medical destruction of certain reserves of physical modesty through sedation for pain and through the necessarily intimate handling of his body by nurses, left him with a high vulnerability to the idea of a love that could be profound and yet not impugn his vows or his vocation. Persuaded that this attachment was from God, he trusted God to protect the love and keep it from damaging either of them.⁵

Over the ensuing weeks and months Merton and 'M' fell increasingly in love – to the point where Merton began to wonder whether it was time to leave the order and marry M. The whole affair is described in intimate detail in the *Journal* – within the context of his monastic life their encounters often taking on a heart-rending, beautiful, tragic or farcical tone by turns. They snatch moments of bliss between the saying of monastic offices, visits to town to use the library or meetings with mutual friends.

The whole account is made poignantly moving by Merton's struggle with his own monastic vocation, his 'commitment', if you like, as he discovers love in a new, live and vibrant way:

April 19, 1966

The question of love: I have to face the fact that I have simply sidestepped it. Now it must be faced squarely. I cannot live without giving love back to a world that has given me so much. And of course it has to be the love of a man dedicated to God – and selfless, detached, free, completely open love.

April 25, 1966. Feast of St Mark

Now I see more and more that there is only one realistic answer: Love. I have got to dare to love, and to bear the anxiety of self-questioning that love arouses in me, until 'perfect love casts out fear' . . . Who knows anything at all about solitude if he has not been in love, and *in love in his solitude*? Love and solitude must test each other in the man who means to live alone: they must become one and the same thing in him, or he will only be half a person.

What is moving in the account is Merton's deep existential disturbance from the experience. For a man who had grown accustomed to a 'heady' response to the world, the opening up of the heart took him by storm. Yet throughout it all he has the courage to ride the storm, trusting in God's ultimate providence throughout:

May 4, 1966

Brilliant May days after the rain. Have walked out twice into the deep woods behind Dom F's lake. M is supposed to be coming out for a picnic this Saturday. More letters, another phone call (this time legal). She has settled down to a sweet little girl happiness that completely disarms and ravishes me. I just don't know what to do with my life, finding myself so much loved, and loving so much, when according to all standards it is all wrong, absurd, insane. Yet here it is. And I can't help coming back again and again to the realization that somehow it is not crazy – it makes sense. Here is someone who, because I exist, has been made much happier and who has made me happier, and revealed to me something I never thought to see so intimately again – the beauty of a girl's heart and of her gift of herself. But this is one of the great deep realities, like the spring itself and this blue day and the green hills and the light of the sun – much more real and perfect than all these, because conscious, aware and free.

Yet within it all Merton continues to keep placing his feelings and emotions before God in prayer. Out of all this, one telling note reveals how he understands commitment:

May 10, 1966

Whatever else I do, reading and meditation remain important, to keep in perfect touch with reality, to avoid the divisions created by yearning and speculation. One thing is evident – no use building my life on mere possibilities, whether an ideal self as a perfectly solitary hermit or a fulfilled and human self living with M somewhere on an island. I *am* myself. I do not *make* myself, or bring myself into conformity with some nonsensical ideal.

Fundamentally, Merton's commitment remains a commitment to *reality* – seeing myself *as I am* in the situation *where I am*. I believe his willingness to take the love affair with M to its extremes reflects this commitment – a commitment that somehow God's providence will guide us if we act out of truth and remain true to ourselves. We do not *make* ourselves, we *are* ourselves and in that essential being lies God.

Merton's commitment is a commitment to truth, reality and the here and now, and from this flows his commitment to love, nature, creation, openness and the power to change. They are all manifestations of his deep and intimate relationship with God.

The end of the affair

As the hot summer of 1966 wore on Merton realized the affair had no future for him – his commitment to reality lay in his situation as a hermit of the monastery. Although his superiors began to realize the truth of what was happening, Merton was clear that he would not decide to end the affair from a vague and impersonal commitment to an institution or hierarchy. His encounter with M seemed to reveal to him the danger of ‘religious correctness’ and the special and subtle form of pride that went with being a member of the religious establishment.

July 31, 1966

Suddenly I find myself looking from the outside into a world of religious correctness which has to some extent become alien. And that is the whole trouble. It is also the source of confusion. ‘You are no longer correct, as you used to be’ . . .

Anyone that thinks that I was whole and consistent before simply does not know me. My fall into inconsistency was nothing but the revelation of what I am. The fact that in community this could comfortably be hidden is to me the most valid argument why I should never under any circumstances get myself back into the comfort of pseudo-wholeness.

Only now, with the final revelation of who he is in the reality of his love for M, is Merton finally able to make the commitment required of him:

August 13, 1966

Fr Abbot said Thursday that I could make my ‘commitment’ or quasi-profession as a hermit. I was happy about this. It means stabilising myself officially and finally in the hermit state and for many reasons I want to do this.

The opening of the heart that had accompanied the affair seemed to have given Merton a new perspective on the dangers inherent in the religious life. To a conference of Loreto nuns, who asked him to explain Zen to them, he had this to say on the subject (as reported by John Howard Griffin):

The sisters persuaded Merton to talk about Zen. He told them religiously orientated people almost always convince themselves that they are special, an attitude that separates them from others. They tend to set up an ‘ideal-self’ in opposition to an ‘actual-self’ and then waste energy coping with the false problems that arise. Often these false

problems can be the excuse they fabricate to explain the gap between 'what I am' and 'what I think I should be', which gives rise to the constant need for self-justification.⁶

His affair with M seems to have opened himself up to his 'actual self' in a new and profound way. In a moving entry on 23 July he quotes from an article he is reading on *Oedipus at Colonus*:

'He has learned to cherish this world which he no longer sees, to accept well the unforeseen everyday events of his errant life. The proud solitude of the tyrant transformed into universal sympathy. The road which led him from Thebes to Colonus, where the gods came to ravish him in their presence, was a ceaseless rise where suffering played the main role.'

Merton's ikon of commitment

By the time the winter snows begin to fall again in November, Merton, older and wiser, reflects on the passion of the summer and the knowing he has acquired from it. His commitment is strengthened, yet subtly changed and tempered through experience of his actual self:

November 16, 1966

First streaks of dawn beginning to appear in the East. Arcturus rising is the only star left in that part of the sky. Cold but not freezing. All I can do is thank God that I am in this peace, solitude, joy. The ambiguity that love has brought into it is no cause for disturbance. Somehow in the depths of my being I know that love for her can coexist with my solitude, but everything depends on my fidelity to a vocation that there is no use trying too much to rationalize. It is *there*. It is a root fact of my existence. I cannot pretend to understand it perfectly. I know a certain response is required of me – and I try with God's grace to give it.

As for M, she finally left Kentucky and ended up married in Hawaii. Her side of the story was not committed to paper, yet it seems they kept a bond with each other on a very deep level.

How does this story relate to our original questions on commitment? At the beginning of the article I raised two questions:

- how we relate to ecclesial institutions in a postmodern world;
- what it means to commit ourselves to one path in a world of increasingly diverse articulations of belief and practice.

The Thomas Merton story above I believe clearly illustrates one solution to these problems. Having read the account, you may have said to yourself, 'Well, why didn't he just go off with her?' But in a way this is to miss the point, the point being that through the process of his struggle with two states of life, two ways of being in the world, Merton sees unfolded his actual self as opposed to his ideal self.

It is my contention that so much that has passed for 'commitment' to the notoriously gnostic term 'vocation' in church circles has been a commitment to an 'ideal self' that is somehow grafted onto the actual self. When a person (like some of my Jesuit friends – myself included) has made a commitment to an ideal self that is somehow awry from their true self, then surely a situation will inevitably arise where that commitment is exposed as a sham and the person has to change their life. Which is not to say all commitment to religious life is a sham (if I believed this I would not have taken Thomas Merton as an example), but that all of us – monks, priests, lay people, doctors, authors, lorry drivers – must continually question ourselves and renew our commitment to our true selves; our true selves where, as Christians, we believe God awaits us.

As Merton wrote in *New seeds of contemplation*:

Everyone of us is shadowed by a false self. This is the man I want myself to be but who cannot exist, because God does not know anything about him. And to be unknown to God is altogether too much privacy. 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 but be an illusion.⁷

As I read this I remember my time in religious life and how I would sometimes try to be 'more holy than God'. There seems to be a subtle temptation in the life of faith to take this road and it is an insidious and difficult temptation to root out.

Merton's spiritual genius, it seems to me, was his unerring ability to detect this 'religious correctness', as he termed it, as its source – that cloying hypocrisy that gnaws at the fabric of Christian faith and has been responsible for so much distrust in official channels and for so much of their failure to get the Christian message across.

I call Merton an 'ikon for the postmodern generation' as he seemed to have a natural suspicion for religious hypocrisy and pomp that is shared by my generation – the *Father Ted* generation who will not kowtow to accepted religious authority without question.

However, to read that suspicion of authority as a lack of faith is, I believe, to be deeply misled. Some of these same people are the most committed and deeply faith-full people I know – their commitment to the actual self, the self that relates deeply and directly to God, is beyond question. Today many are lay people, working as teachers, doctors or social workers, in retreat work and so on, all with a deep sense of commitment to the coming of God's kingdom in the here and now. They possess the commitment and faith that Kierkegaard once called the 'passionate embrace of the infinite'.

All commitment must have as its heart a commitment to our actual selves. All Christian commitment must consequently have as its source and goal the engagement of the actual self with its source in God our creator. Our dictionary definition with which we started defined commitment as 'placing ourselves with another for safety' as well as 'joining battle'. We are, I believe, called, in this time of rapid and disorientating change, to place ourselves in the arms of God while at the same time joining battle with the confusions and uncertain future that awaits our churches, knowing that our God leads us gently into darkness, supported and held like the beloved held by the lover.

As we enter into that insecurity, as we renew our Christian commitment, we can surely take comfort from reflection on that little log cabin in the Kentucky woods and the lonely hermit who found a way forward for himself in the confusion of our time.

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NOTES

1 All quotations are from Vol 6 of the Journals, *Learning to love* (HarperCollins, 1997), with thanks to Giovanni Felicioni and Ewa Webb for drawing this episode to my attention.

2 In the account that follows we have Merton's side of events but not Margie Smith's. She kept her own counsel, and never discussed the issue publicly.

3 *Learning to love*, p 38.

4 Burns & Oates, 1993.

5 *Thomas Merton: the hermitage years*, p 61.

6 Quoted in Griffin, *Thomas Merton*, p 81.

7 *New seeds of contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961).

HOPE – WHAT IS HOPE ? How do I define Hope? Where do I find Hope? What do I hope for? For my husband to arrive home before 8.00 p.m. one evening? For our eight-month-old baby boy to finally sleep through the night? For our girls to be able to play self-sufficiently without the constant cry of, ‘Mummy, I need . . .!’

As I pottered in the kitchen I was interrupted by the phone ringing. It was a friend whom I had not seen or spoken to for several months. In fact not really since the arrival of Peter, our baby son. As ever, my opening phrase ran something like, ‘Hello! How are you?’ There was silence followed by the calm statement, ‘Not too good’. I was soon to find out that her almost total recovery from major surgery and the remission of her cancer had turned on its head. Having already had a full hysterectomy, the medics were now proposing to remove anything that they could and she would be left without bladder or bowel.

I was speechless. I did not know what to say, or how to say it. ‘This is my path,’ she said. ‘I must walk it. I don’t know why God has left me no choice, but for my children and partner I must walk bravely and take everything and deal with it. I will be there for them, and I hope physically for some time yet.’ She carried on: ‘I trust in God, but I hope he knows what he is doing. It all seems very unfair. I hope I live to understand why this has happened to me, and I hope that my children will at some time come to terms with it.’ After more general conversation she finished: ‘Yes, remember me in your prayers – that is where my hope lies and I truly believe that God has the power to heal.’

For the first time in my rather ordinary, over-committed and at times spiritually barren life, I truly had a revelation as to the meaning of hope.

Joanna Nolan