

Mysticism

Finding good source material is always important for being able to discuss a range of ideas and thinkers at A2. **David Kendall** offers a useful review of the life of Thomas Merton, which can be used in appropriate responses to Unit 4A.

In this article I will be looking at a particular understanding of the human situation in relation to God or Ultimate Reality through the example of Thomas Merton, an American mystic. His emphasis on action following contemplation of the divine is not unique, but it is apparent that he 'walked the walk' as well as 'talked the talk' in his own life. Selfless service was his watch word but, unlike many who are committed to helping others, the strength he gained from his experience of the 'hidden' God was the energy source that allowed him to work tirelessly on behalf of other people. It was his connection with God through meditation and mystical awareness from his vantage point as a monk that gave him, in his view, an ability to connect with the great issues that affected the world during his

lifetime. He saw his task as that of bringing the power of the Ultimate Reality into the workings of the world, and by connecting the Christian and Buddhist traditions saw his role as that of leading people to a living connection with Christ which would transcend any formulas or doctrines that the established Christian churches might seek to impose.

It is in the ordinary duties and labours of life that the Christian can and should develop his spiritual union with God.

(Merton, brainyquote, 2006)

By reading the scriptures I am so renewed that all nature seems renewed around me and with me. The sky seems to be a pure, a cooler blue, the trees a deeper green. The whole world is

charged with the glory of God and I feel fire and music under my feet.

(Merton, brainyquote, 2006)

Gethsemani

Thomas Merton had a relatively privileged upbringing and led something of a dissolute life until he converted to Catholicism in his early twenties. He was finally accepted as a postulant to the choir (with the intention of becoming a priest) at the Trappist Abbey of Gethsemani near Bardstown, Kentucky in 1941. During his long years at Gethsemani (where he was encouraged to write), Merton changed from the passionately inward-looking young monk of his most famous book, the autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*, to a contemplative writer and poet who became well known for his dialogue with people of other faiths and his stand on non-violence, and finally achieved the solitude he had long desired in a hermitage in 1965. During these years he had many battles with his abbot about not being allowed out of the monastery, balanced by his international reputation and voluminous correspondence with well-known figures of the day.

A new abbot allowed him the freedom to undertake a tour of Asia at the end of 1968, during which he memorably met the Dalai Lama in India. He also made a visit to Polonnaruwa (in what was then Ceylon), where he had a religious experience while viewing enormous statues of the Buddha. There is speculation that Merton wished to remain in Asia as a hermit. However, he



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died in Bangkok on 10 December 1968, having touched a badly-grounded electric fan while stepping out of his bath. His body was flown back to Gethsemani, where he is buried. Since his death, his influence has continued to grow and he is considered by many to be a twentieth-century American mystic.

Thomas Merton's spiritual quest is both contemplative and socially activist, and ultimately became a synthesis of Catholicism and Zen. He believed that each individual is separated from God, and our 'self' is a distortion of the self made in God's image. Life's task is to attain one's true identity by returning to the infinite ground of pure reality. Through inner struggle in the inner desert and by sharing in the suffering and resurrection of Christ, one may find one's true self and achieve a loving union with God. He stresses that contemplation requires self-emptying, a form of spiritual death in anticipation of the divine life. This 'letting go' allows one to experience the presence of God which revolutionises our inner life.

Self-understanding

Exploration of the inner self is a prelude to action. This is evident when Merton writes in *Contemplation in a World of Action* that whoever attempts to do things for another or for the world without first attaining self-understanding will not have anything to give. Contemplation therefore is of fundamental importance in attaining authentic selfhood which alone can provide a framework for effective social action. In Merton's view, such selfless service to others gives rise to an apophatic experience of the hidden God — the belief that God can be known to humans only in terms of what He is not — such as 'God is unknowable'. In fact, contemplation is more effective when the contemplator is unaware that the process is happening. Like the 'Jesus Prayer' of the Orthodox, and drawing on the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, contemplation is more pure

when it is barely recognised, and happens as he or she performs his or her daily tasks.

The 1950s was a time of crisis for Merton. He recognised that monastic life was not separate from and superior to the ways others lived. A compassion for people in distress also led Merton to begin writing on social issues, including civil rights and nuclear weapons. Some people wanted him to leave the monastery and join the movements for peace and social justice, but Merton felt his view from the monastery was both unique and indelibly his to retain. It was his Christian mysticism that he saw as the necessary foundation for anything of value he might have to say about suffering in the world and to people of other religions.

The contemplative life

Merton had no intention of abandoning his Christian faith and tradition but was very drawn towards Eastern religions through his inter-faith studies. Just as the early Church had to face the influence of Hellenistic thought and the later Church the rise of modern science, so too the contemporary Church had to take seriously the other religions of the world and the reality of religiously pluralistic cultures.

Merton thought it was the contemplative Buddhist and the contemplative Christian who could best make contact with the other. He would even come to say that he felt more in common with such Buddhists than with non-contemplative Christians. It was Zen's concentration upon direct experience instead of doctrinal formulations, and its rejection of the false self or ego, that spoke directly to Merton, who believed God was experienced in the centre of the true self.

The dialogue would therefore include a focus upon points of contact between the Buddhist teaching of anatta (no self) and what Merton understood by the true self in the context of his idea that 'Zen is perfectly compatible with Christian belief and indeed with Christian mysticism' (Merton 1968).

Merton's view of the sacred as becoming ever more manifested in human experience was informed by this study of and dialogue with Zen Buddhism. Merton could (with Protestant theologian Paul Tillich) say that God is beyond 'God', that God as God is, is beyond conceptions. This is reminiscent of the words of the Christian Gregory of Nyssa in the fourth century: 'Every thought grasped by the mind becomes an obstacle to those who search.' Even the most profound ideas about 'God' or Buddha nature can become idols. Zen's pointing towards sunyata (the void) and emptiness had meaning for Merton in connection with the Christian mysticism of 'unknowing' and the 'divine dark'.

Merton found in Buddhism and particularly in Zen a way to see the Christian faith in its original spirit, before the theological formulations based upon Hellenistic philosophy became central. He states:

This obsession with doctrinal formulas, juridical order and ritual exactitude has often made people forget that the heart of Catholicism, too, is a living experience of unity in Christ which far transcends all conceptual formulations. (ibid., p. 39)

The Buddhist-Christian dialogue had stimulated and further disclosed, in his view, his journey into the true self where God is, where 'all is emptiness and all is compassion'.

References

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- * Merton, T. (1968) *Zen and Birds of Appetite*, New Directions.

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St Teresa of Avila



The mysticism of St Teresa of Avila is a useful topic in your studies of religious experience. **David Kendall** looks at the life of this remarkable woman.

The mystical experience leaves the subject absolutely convinced of its reality.

The door of entry into this castle is prayer and meditation.

(The Life of St Teresa of Avila by Herself, Penguin Classics 2004)

This article explores the mystical experience of St Teresa of Avila and considers the intimacy of the God-soul encounter that she describes. Throughout, I am indebted to the work of Nelson Pike in *Mystic Union: An Essay in the Phenomenology of Mysticism* (Cornell University Press 1992).

Saint Teresa was born in Avila, Spain, on 28 March 1515. She died in Alba on 4 October 1582. She entered the Carmelite Monastery of the Incarnation at Avila on 2 November 1535, and began wholeheartedly to give herself to prayer and penance. The accounts of her spiritual life contained in *The Life of St Teresa of Avila by Herself* (completed in 1565, an earlier version being lost), in the *Relations* and in *Interior Castle* (Christian Classics 2007) form a remarkable spiritual biography, including such extraordinary manifestations as the piercing or transverberation of her heart, the spiritual espousals, the mystical marriage, and a vision of the place destined for her in hell in case she should have been unfaithful to grace.

After many troubles and much opposition St Teresa founded the convent of Discalced Carmelite Nuns of the Primitive Rule of St Joseph at Avila, on 24 August 1562.

St Teresa's position among writers on mystical theology is unique — her deep insight and analytical gifts enabling her to explain with clarity her personal experiences. Nelson Pike takes the

writings of Teresa of Avila and explores three verbal pictures from her texts which describe the three mystical states: the Prayer of Quiet, the Prayer of Union and Rapture (ecstasy / the flight of the Spirit).

The Prayer of Quiet

In *The Way of Perfection* (Tan Books and Publishers 1997) Teresa starts with 'Recollection', a non-verbal, non-discursive (proceeding to a conclusion through intuition rather than reason) activity that one approaches through concentrating on 'an image or a picture of the Lord — one that you like' and sinking deeply and without interruption into it. The idea is to bring the mind into tight focus — to collect or recollect the usually scattered and diversified mental contents that make up the mind. Those skilled at this state that there comes a point at which one feels oneself taken over by an outside force, pulled, as it were, into a dark, deep, peaceful space. A sense of quiet falls over the mind. One is suspended in a region where everything is still.

Whereas Recollection is self-imposed, the Prayer of Quiet is imposed by another — a supernatural being (this distinction is stressed by Teresa in 'Fourth Mansions', chapter 11 of *Interior Castle*). It is a state that Christian mystical theologians, following John of the Cross, have come to characterise as 'infused' by God, a gift.

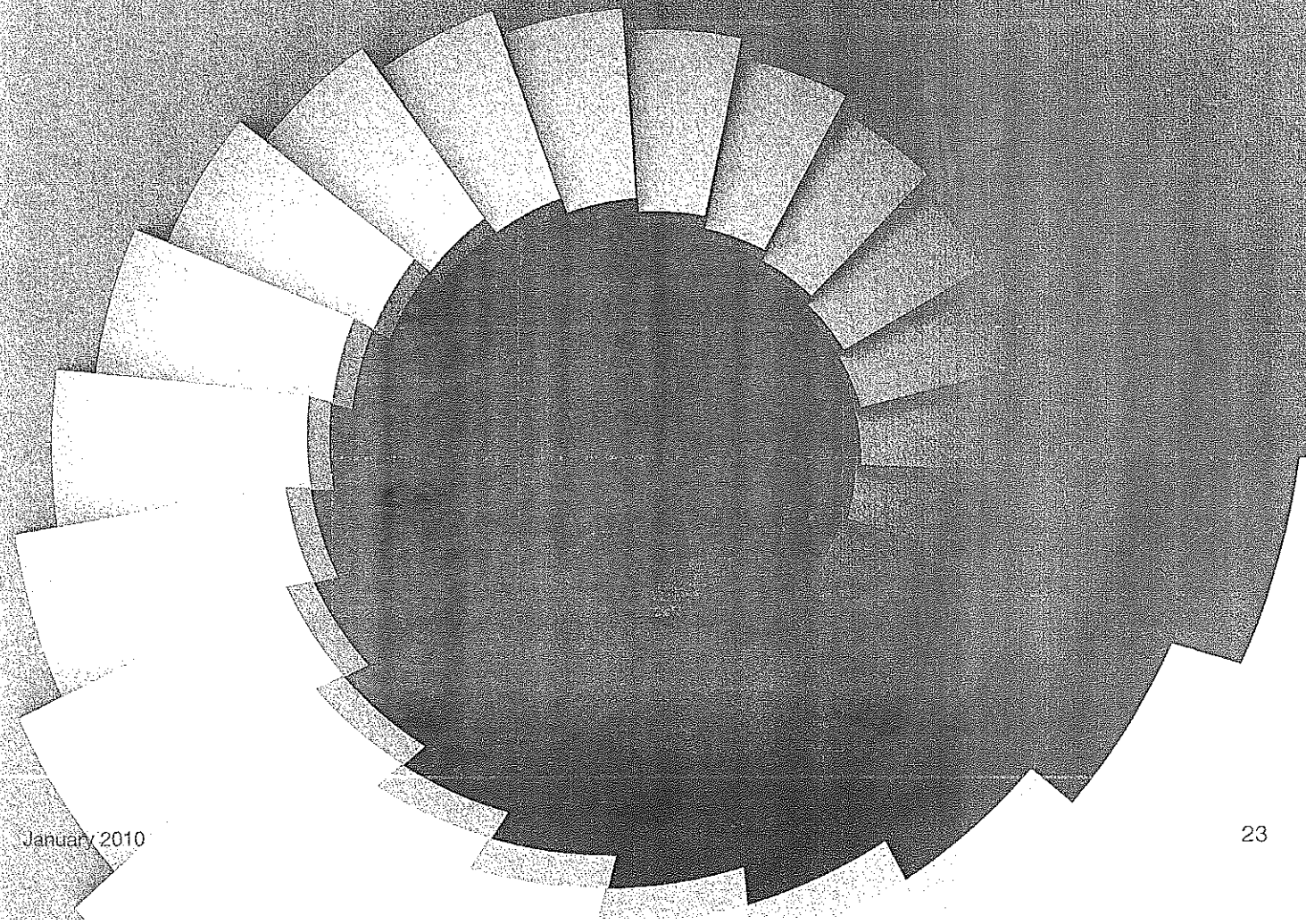
The following paragraph is from chapter 31 of Teresa's *Way of Perfection*, and is often taken to be the definitive description of the Prayer of Quiet.

This is a supernatural state and, however hard we try, we cannot reach it for ourselves; for it is a state in which the soul enters into peace, or, rather, in which the Lord gives it peace through his presence,

St Teresa's position among writers on mystical theology is unique

as he did that just from Simon. In this state, all the faculties are suited. The soul, in a way which has nothing to do with the outward senses, realizes that it is now very close to its God and that if it were but a little closer it would be as one with him through union. This is not because it sees Him either with its body or its spiritual eyes. The just man since he saw no more of him the glorious infant — a poor child, who, to judge from the swaddling clothes in which he was wrapped and the small number of people who held him as a remnant to take him up to the temple, might well have been the son of these people, called him the Son of his Heavenly Father, but the child himself revealed to him who he was. Just so, though less clearly, does the soul know who He is. It cannot understand how it knows of Him, yet it sees that it is in the Kingdom (or at least it is near the King who will give it the Kingdom), and it feels such reverence that it dare ask for nothing. It is, as it were, in a second, both inwardly and outwardly, so that the outward man (the one called the body) and then you will understand the better does not wish to move, but it is like one who has almost reached the end of his journey, so that it may the better start again upon its way, with a doubled strength for its task.

Throughout, the soul is encountering (or close to encountering) God as Spirit, and one 'sees' Him in the sense that one is 'aware' of Him. This takes place in the soul of the mystic — an idea that initially appears to be rather muddled, as the soul would be *in* the soul and *near to* the soul (could the apple be in the pie and also near to it?). However, it is made clear in *Interior Castle* where Teresa talks of the soul as 'spacious, ample and lofty', made up of seven compartments, each with many rooms with the body as its 'outer wall'. These compartments are arranged in such a way that one moves in sequence from the first to the sixth, encircling and, at the same time, coming closer to the seventh, which is located at the centre: *an inward spiralling floor plan*. (Pike). Teresa has God and the soul as occupants, where the word 'soul' is used to mean a region or domain (an interior world) and an entity (the essential part of the soul). This is what St John called the substance of the soul' (*The Living Flame of Love*, BiblioBazaar 2009) — the same substance Pike suspects that Descartes identified as the self that which thinks (perceives, doubts) and animates the body. Teresa uses the tortoise as her model



This is now more like an astronaut thrust above the vault of the seventh heaven by the engines of the Supreme Being

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to show that it is on some occasions more deeply within itself than on others. So soul, the entity, has penetrated soul, the domain, to be close to the seventh compartment where God is.

The Prayer of Union

In 'Fifth Mansions', chapter 1 of *Interior Castle*, Teresa writes as follows concerning Full Union:

God implants Himself in the interior of that soul in such a way that, when it returns to itself, it cannot possibly doubt that God has been in it and it has been in God; so firmly does this truth remain within it that, although for years God may never grant it that favour again, it can neither forget it nor doubt that it has received it (and this quite apart from the effects which remain within it).

This is clearly soul, the entity, which according to Teresa meets God 'in the wine cellar' which is identified as the 'centre of the soul', the domain. The gap between them has been closed. For Teresa the soul is like a sponge, submerged and soaked in God. It has been absorbed into God and God has also been absorbed into soul. This is a new picture. Prior to this point God was within soul (the domain) and engulfed soul (the entity). Now God has also pierced and penetrated soul (the entity). To use the tortoise metaphor, God is not only within the shell, He has invaded the soft body as well.

Rapture

Teresa refers to this as 'elevation', 'flight of spirit', 'transport' and 'ecstasy'. She devotes the whole of chapter 20 in *The Life of Teresa of Jesus* (Forgotten Books 2008) to this topic. Here she writes:

The Lord gathers up the soul as a cloud gathers up the vapours from the earth, and raises it up till it is right out of itself and the cloud rises to Heaven and takes the soul with it, and begins to reveal to it things concerning the Kingdom that He has prepared for it.

In these raptures the soul seems no longer to animate the body. No means of resistance is possible, whereas in union, where we are on our own home ground, such a means exists: resistance may be painful and violent but it can almost always

be effected. But with rapture there is no such possibility: often it comes like a strong, swift impulse, before your thought can forewarn you of it or you can do anything to help yourself; you see and feel the cloud, or this powerful eagle, rising and bearing you up with it on its wings.

In this state of rapture, the soul (entity) seems to leave the body: 'This little bird of the spirit seems to have escaped out of this wretchedness of the flesh, out of the prison of this body and now, disentangled therefrom, is able to be more intent on that which the Lord is giving it' (Teresa, *Relations*). During this state the body is 'as if dead'. (Teresa, *Life*). Speaking of his own Rapture experience in 2 Corinthians 1:12, St Paul said 'Whether [the soul] is in the body or out of the body I know not. God knows.' And Teresa herself, like Paul, does not seem to know for sure whether her soul leaves her body or not. What is apparent is that the soul is transported to 'another world' and is 'united with' or 'engulfed by' God where she finds herself 'in the Bosom of the Father' and in 'the arms of our Lord'.

Pike notes that the Rapture state strains the format imagery of *Interior Castle*. The image of a miner burrowing into 'home ground' can no longer be sustained (as in Prayer of Quiet and Prayer of Union). This is now more like an astronaut thrust above the vault of the seventh heaven by the engines of the Supreme Being. Teresa seems indifferent to this. But then pictures should be retained only as long as they work.

Summary

The three states have been sketched in terms of the relative position of God and the soul of the mystic during the mystical encounter and the place or domain in which the encounter takes place. Full Union seems to stand between the other two having a feature common to each one, that being in each case the point of contrast to the other. Thus the place where the encounter takes place unites the first two and the intimacy of the God-soul encounter unites the latter two.

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