

Merton and King Reflection:
The Path from Spirituality to Activism

Notre Dame Seminary
SpT 202 – Survey of Christian Spirituality

Joseph Fessenden
Diocese of Nashville
January 28, 2013

In A Hidden Witness: Thomas Merton and Martin Luther King, Jr., Doctor Albert Raboteau reflects on the similarities in the expression of faith between these two renowned Christians of the twentieth century. He notes that, even though their origins and religious traditions have little in common, they arrived through differing means to a strikingly similar expression of their spiritual life in their everyday life. This fact was even so clear to them that they planned a retreat together that was only prevented by the untimely death of each.

Merton's parents were artists who both died before his sixteenth birthday. Raboteau notes that early in life, Merton "experienced the homelessness of the expatriate, the rootlessness of the transient adrift in an uncaring world, and the longing of the orphan for family stability." It is likely that this experience in his formative years gave him sympathy for the marginalized in a way that is often falsely imitated by some religious who find themselves in the press today. From the spiritual perspective, Merton reached his conclusions regarding the interrelatedness of persons—conclusions that necessitated his social, even through speech—through his reflection on the seed of God buried deep within each person. This seed, once identified and contemplated cannot but lead a person into an understanding that he is not an island, but rather, a part of an interrelated whole with the other persons on earth. Indeed, Merton has been criticized by some for trying to "claim the world's attention...by publishing book after book" even though he had embraced the life of a hermit, which, on the surface, seems antithetical to such a desire for recognition. However, such a question reveals a failure to understand Merton's spirituality. Rather than the life of a hermit leading him to further withdraw into himself, his

progressing experience of God and his personality as a creature led him to increasingly speak out for those who were unable to make themselves heard as his brothers and sisters.

King, on the other hand, was born into a line of protestant ministers, and raised with the expectation that he would enter ministry for himself when he reached adulthood. Albeit through a different path, he arrived at a similar conclusion regarding the nature of man. King, who Raboteau describes as a personalist, starts from the thought that “Every human being has etched in his personality the indelible stamp of the Creator.” Because of this, each person must be treated with the dignity and respect that is warranted by that stamp. It is notable that this is precisely the starting point from which the Church derives its views on the sanctity of life. From here, King asserts that treating someone in a way unbecoming to that image stamped into him does nothing to diminish his personhood, but rather it damages the soul of the person committing the violence. Like Merton, with this view of man, it was impossible for King to remain silent in the face the injustices and atrocities he saw about him in the world. In order to engage in this activism without falling into hypocrisy, King entered the short list of nonviolent resisters to injustice that the twentieth century produced, joining the ranks of Mahatma Gandhi in India and others.

It seems clear that both of these men expressed a deep spirituality in a way that is the necessary and natural result of any genuine spiritual depth. A common misconception of a deep spiritual life is that it turns a person inward, in the case of many Eastern Mysticism, or upward, in the case of a flawed understanding of

Christian spirituality and monasticism. In some other cases, spirituality in a vacuum, that is, lacking grounding in a larger system that provides ethics, morals, and metaphysical understanding, leads to the false or unfocused compassion that risks causing more harm than good. Instead, Merton's words about the result of "contemplative silence and solitude" can be extended to provide some measuring stick for any spirituality. The results of any genuine spiritual exercise and depth "should not be narcissistic self-absorption, but profound compassion for everyone and everything, a compassion which expresses itself in empathy and commitment."