

## ‘WHAT DOES MYSTICISM HAVE TO DO WITH SOCIAL JUSTICE?’

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### Abstract

*Mysticism, understood as profound experience of the Divine, is not world-denying but has important implications for the ways persons respond to their social and political contexts. The meaning of mysticism is briefly traced from the patristic era to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The central argument of the article is that the Incarnation, a core Christian belief, provides the theological foundation for the unity of prayer and commitment to social justice. This is made evident in the lives of Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), Carmelite reformer, Dorothy Day (1897-1980), co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, and Thomas Merton (1915-1968), monk and social critic. Their insights demonstrate that mysticism has important social ramifications.*

**Key Words:** Mysticism; Social Justice; Teresa of Avila; Dorothy Day; Thomas Merton

The short answer is a great deal. The longer answer is that the theological roots of Christian mysticism in the Incarnation provide the foundation for commitment to justice, peace and the integrity of creation. Mysticism is not world-denying but fully engaged in the challenges of one's particular contexts. This will be demonstrated in the lives and writings of Teresa of Avila, 16<sup>th</sup> century Carmelite reformer, and two 20<sup>th</sup> century persons. Dorothy Day was the co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement and Thomas Merton was a Trappist monk and social critic. Their interpretations of the link between mysticism and social justice will be applied to the South African context of poverty and injustice.

### Mysticism and Religious Experience

The ordinary understanding of mysticism is that it is a very rare and unusual type of religious experience which involves various types of psychic phenomena such as locutions, trances, ecstasies and visions. However, contemporary interpretations of mysticism have broadened the perspective so that following William Johnston, it can be asserted that “Mysticism is the core of religious experience and it is for everyone.”<sup>1</sup>

The origin of the word *mysticism* comes from the mystery religions of the Greco-Roman empire in the first centuries of Christianity. The mystic (*mustes*) swore an oath of secrecy not to reveal the beliefs and rituals of the religions. The term also became associated with Neoplatonic philosophy with a new emphasis on withdrawal from the world “while the inner eye was open and searching for wisdom”.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William Johnston, *The Inner Eye of Love: Mysticism and Religion*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978:31.

<sup>2</sup> Johnston, *The Inner Eye*, 16.

Pseudo-Dionysius, an anonymous Syrian monk of the late 5th or early 6th century, introduced the word mysticism into the Christian vocabulary. His emphasis was also on withdrawal:

Do thou, in the intent practice of mystic contemplation, leave behind the senses and the operation of the intellect, and all things that the senses or the intellect can perceive, and all things which are not and things which are, and strain upwards in unknowing, as far as may be, towards the union with Him Who is above all things and knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

The interpretation of mysticism during the many centuries of the Christian tradition distinguishes between two kinds of mystical experience. One is a mysticism of wisdom, the desire to experience the inner being of God. Meister Eckhart (1260-1328), a German Dominican theologian, is an important example of the way of wisdom as the path to union with God. The second is the mysticism of love and union and is marked by the language of desire, often expressed in bridal and marital imagery. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), one of the subjects of this article, demonstrates the second type.

Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941), an English mystic and theologian whose book *Mysticism* has been in print continuously since 1911, gives this description of mysticism:

It is the name of that organic process which involves the perfect consummation of the Love of God: the achievement here and now of the immortal heritage of man. Or, if you like it better – for this means exactly the same thing – it is the art of establishing his conscious relation with the Absolute.<sup>4</sup>

Underhill describes four characteristics of authentic mysticism. It is “active and practical, not passive and theoretical. It is an organic life-process, a something which the whole self does.”<sup>5</sup> Secondly, the aims of mysticism are “wholly transcendental and spiritual. It is in no way concerned with adding to, exploring, re-arranging, or improving anything in the visible universe.”<sup>6</sup> Thirdly, “this One is for the mystic, not merely the Reality of all that is, but also a living and personal Object of Love” and lastly this union with the One “is a definite state or form of enhanced life” which entails “an arduous psychological and spiritual process – the so-called Mystic Way – entailing the complete remaking of character and the liberation of a new, or rather latent, form of consciousness.”<sup>7</sup>

Three of her characteristics remain true and relevant today. But the second invites criticism since the experience of growing union with the One, named as God or the Ground of Reality does challenge the person to be committed to make the world a place of greater justice, peace and love. This will be demonstrated in this article in the lives of Teresa, Day and Merton.

Karl Rahner SJ (1904-1984) describes two types of mystical experiences. The first is “the mysticism of everyday life, the discovery of God in all things”<sup>8</sup> which echoes the Ignatian vision he had absorbed as a Jesuit, of “seeking and finding God in all things”. The second is distinct mystical experiences which are described in Christianity and other world religions. Reflecting on the state of Christianity in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Rahner asserted that

<sup>3</sup> Pseudo Dionysius, *Mystica Theologia* I, I, quoted in Johnston, *The Inner Eye*, 17-18.

<sup>4</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism*. New York: EP Dutton & Co, Inc, 1911, 1961:81.

<sup>5</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 81.

<sup>6</sup> Underhill, 81.

<sup>7</sup> Underhill, 81

<sup>8</sup> Karl Rahner, *The Practice of Faith*, edited by Karl Lehmann and Albert Raffelt. New York: Crossroad, 1980:84.

“the devout Christian of the future will either be a ‘mystic’, one who has ‘experienced’ something, or he will cease to be anything at all.”<sup>9</sup>

## The Incarnation

The Incarnation, a fundamental Christian doctrine, asserts that the “Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us” (Jn 1:14) in the person of Jesus of Nazareth whose life, passion, death and resurrection are narrated in the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Incarnation means to take on flesh, to be one with humanity. Paul expresses it in the language of kenosis:

Who, being in the form of God,  
Did not count equality with God  
Something to be grasped.

But he emptied himself,  
Taking the form of a slave,  
Becoming as human beings are;

And being in every way like a human being,  
He was humbler yet,  
Even to accepting death, death on a cross. (Phil 2:6-8)

The Nicene Creed states this core belief: “For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary and was made man.” The decrees of the early councils such as Nicea and Chalcedon asserted *that* Christ is both human and divine; they did not try to explain *how* this is true.<sup>10</sup>

However, heterodox approaches tried to minimise the mystery. Docetists taught that Jesus only had the appearance (*dokein* – to seem) of a human person. The influence of Greek dualism on Christian theology devalued matter and exalted the spirit and so other groups such as the Manichees and their medieval descendants the Cathars or Albigensians taught the superiority of spirit over matter, thus undercutting the power and force of the Incarnation.

Today theology recognises that one of the important implications of the Incarnation is exactly what some earlier believers denied: that matter, creation, humanity is so beloved of God that in Christ all of matter is transfigured. The work of the scientist and theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) especially exemplified this. He wrote:

“God, in all that is most living and incarnate in Him, is not withdrawn from us beyond the tangible sphere... He is waiting for us at every moment in our action, in our work of the moment... To repeat, by virtue of the Creation, and still more, of the Incarnation, *nothing* here below is *profane* to those who know how to see.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Karl Rahner, “Christian Living Formerly and Today,” in *Theological Investigations 7*. Translated by David Bourke. London: Darton, Longman & Todd and New York: Herder and Herder, 1971:15.

<sup>10</sup> See Karl Rahner’s essay on Chalcedon 1500 years after the Council’s Christological statement: “Current Problems in Christology,” in *Theological Investigations 1*. Translated by Cornelius Ernst OP. Baltimore: Helicon Press and London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961:149-200.

<sup>11</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu*. New York and Evanston: Harper Torchbooks, 1965:64,66.

Contemporary eco-theology grounds its reverence for creation in the Incarnation.<sup>12</sup>

The Incarnation is a strong foundation for an engaged Christian mysticism in which the experience of finding God in prayer and contemplation is joined to finding God in all things. The 'all things' today includes the challenges of poverty, inequality, oppression and injustice.

### **Teresa of Avila (1515-1582): Contemplative Prayer and the Radiation of Love**

Teresa was born four years before Luther's break with Rome; when she died in 1582 Europe was divided on religious lines, although Spain, her home country, was generally isolated from the religious turmoil of the times. Spain was a great colonial power and the lure of riches led many young men to seek their fortunes in the Americas. This meant fewer marriages and so many more women found that convent life was their only other option. This social factor impacted Teresa's life as a Carmelite reformer.

Rowan Williams states that Teresa "lived in a society whose tensions and anxieties were more like those of modern South Africa than of Europe in the last quarter of the twentieth century."<sup>13</sup> There were many racial and social prejudices, especially for those of Jewish descent. Teresa inherited Jewish blood through her grandfather; when he converted to Catholicism he changed his name to hide his Jewish background.

She was born on 28 March 1515 in Avila in Castile. Her father, Don Alonso, was very wealthy and was extremely unusual for his social class since he did not own slaves. His second wife, Teresa's mother Dona Beatriz de Ahumada, had six children and died when Teresa was 13.

A 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish young woman had only two choices in life: marriage or the convent. Teresa experienced a great struggle in her decision. She saw marriage as slavery to a husband<sup>14</sup> and so decided to enter the Carmelite convent of the Incarnation in Avila. Her father opposed this decision violently but eventually supported her. She entered the convent on 2 November 1536 at the age of 21 and described that her 'marriage of convenience' later became one of love.

#### *Conversion and Reform*

The Carmel in Avila was large, with nearly 200 sisters. Some had entered with a true vocation while others had been unable to find a husband. It followed a mitigated form of the Carmelite Rule. Teresa especially enjoyed visiting friends and relatives in the convent parlour. She lived this relaxed form of religious life for a number of years until she had a dramatic conversion experience in 1553. One day she passed a small statue of the *Ecce Homo*, Christ in his passion, and her heart was broken in sorrow: "Beseeching Him to

<sup>12</sup> See Celia Deane-Drummond, *Eco-Theology*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2008, 99-100, 110-112 and Denis Edwards, *Ecology at the Heart of Faith*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2006, 58-64 in which he describes 'deep Incarnation'.

<sup>13</sup> Rowan Williams, *Teresa of Avila*. Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Morehouse Publishing, 1991:ix.

<sup>14</sup> Marcelle Auclair, *Saint Teresa of Avila*. Translated by Kathleen Pond. Petersham, Massachusetts: St. Bede's Publications, 1988:29.

strengthen me once and for all that I might not offend Him, I threw myself down before Him with the greatest outpouring of tears."<sup>15</sup>

She now began to avoid the parlour and spent much more time in prayer. The next year she had a second powerful experience while reading Augustine's *Confessions*:

As I began to read the *Confessions*, it seemed to me I saw myself in them... When I came to the passage where he speaks about his conversion and read how he heard that voice in the garden, it only seemed to me, according to what I felt in my heart, that it was I the Lord called.<sup>16</sup>

These two conversion experiences changed her radically. Not only did she now live the Rule very strictly, but she experienced many of the phenomena associated with 'mysticism' such as trances and ecstasies. This made her very controversial and various priests, including Francis Borgia SJ, were called to the convent to talk to her and decide if she was mad, possessed by the devil or genuine. Eventually the verdict was that this was of God.

Teresa began to desire a much more secluded life of prayer and solitude and so plans evolved for the reform of Carmel. The first reformed Carmel – small (only 13 women), poor, with strict enclosure and many hours of prayer – was founded in 1562. In 1567 she met John of the Cross who led the reform of male Carmelite life. For the rest of her life she travelled throughout Spain founding reformed Carmels and writing books on prayer (at the order of her spiritual director) including *The Book of Her Life*, *The Interior Castle* and *The Way of Perfection*. She died on 4 October 1562 and was canonised in 1622. In 1970 Pope Paul VI declared her and Catherine of Siena Doctors of the Church, the first two women so honoured.

## Teresa's Incarnational Mysticism

Teresa's writings focus on prayer and so she may seem an unlikely model of incarnational mysticism. She did not try to reform the social structures of her day, such as the inequality of her society, its love of wealth and power, and the colonial exploitation of the indigenous people of the Americas which was the source of Spain's wealth. She did challenge two social norms by admitting converted Jews and freed slaves into her reformed Carmels.

Teresa's contributions to social mysticism are foundational insights about the humanity of Christ and the importance of love of neighbour. She also had a unique interpretation of the relationship between Martha and Mary, the sisters of Luke's gospel, who became symbols of the active and contemplative lives in Christian spirituality.

### *The Humanity of Christ*

During the years after her two conversions, Teresa received conflicting advice from the various priests who were called to discern her experience of prayer. Some warned her that the devil was the cause of her sense of the presence of God. She asked a family friend known for his piety, Don Francesco de Saledo, for help. He suggested that she contact the Jesuits who had a house in Avila and write out a general confession "setting out forth the

<sup>15</sup> Teresa of Avila, *The Book of Her Life*, in *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, Volume One. Translated by Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD and Otilio Rodriguez, OCD. Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1987:9.1,101.

<sup>16</sup> Teresa of Avila, *The Book of Her Life*, 9.8:103.

state of her soul and the divine favours she believed were being bestowed upon her.”<sup>17</sup> A young Jesuit, Diego de Cetina, was sent to the convent.

When she shared the depth of her heart and how she was praying, he reassured her and said:

As our Master, Brother Ignatius, teaches us, meditate each day on a particular aspect of the passion to derive benefit from it. Concentrate upon the humanity of Christ. One cannot reach God without passing through the humanity of Jesus, the universal Mediator. That is where true humility lies. The results are extraordinary.<sup>18</sup>

Teresa was most consoled by the assistance this priest gave her: “He told me that I should devote prayer each day to a phase of the Passion; that I should benefit from this prayer and dwell only on the humanity”.<sup>19</sup>

As her prayer deepened, she began to realise the depth of the truth that Christ is both human and divine and that he is a friend.

I saw that He was man, even though He was God; that He wasn’t surprised by human weaknesses; that He understands our miserable make-up, subject to many falls on account of the first sin which He came to repair. I can speak with Him as with a friend, even though He is Lord.<sup>20</sup>

Teresa had learned that no matter how deep and quiet her prayer became, Christ was still its centre. In the sixth mansion of *The Interior Castle* she describes the various kinds of experiences which she had (and which she assumes others will have) as one comes closer to the centre of the Castle and union with God. It might be expected that prayer has now become entirely wordless and imageless, but Teresa insists on the importance of Christ. She emphasises the centrality of the Incarnation and speaks of “...Christ our Lord, in whom the divine and the human are joined and who is always that person’s companion.”<sup>21</sup> It is extremely important to keep focused on Christ:

Life is long, and there are in it many trials, and we need to look at Christ our model, how He suffered them, and also at His apostles and saints, so as to bear these trials with perfection. Jesus is too good a companion for us to turn away from Him and His most Blessed Mother...<sup>22</sup>

## Love of God and Neighbour

Teresa’s reflections on the relationship between the love of God and neighbour mirror those of Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) who spoke of “walking on the two feet of love”.<sup>23</sup> For

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<sup>17</sup> Jean-Jacques Antier, *Teresa of Avila: God Alone Suffices*. Translated by Claire Quintal. Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2007:73.

<sup>18</sup> Antier, 74. Antier is paraphrasing what de Cetina told her. See *Life*, 23.17.

<sup>19</sup> Teresa of Avila, *The Book of Her Life*, 23.17:208.

<sup>20</sup> Teresa of Avila, *Life* 37.5:325.

<sup>21</sup> Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle in The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, Volume Two. Translated by Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD and Otilio Rodriguez, OCD. Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1980 VI. 7.9:401. See also *The Way of Perfection*, 33.5 in which Teresa emphasises that Christ shares our nature.

<sup>22</sup> Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, VI.7.13:403.

<sup>23</sup> When Catherine understood that Christ wanted her to leave the seclusion and solitude of her family’s home to service others, she was very upset. Christ responded: “You know that the precepts of love are two: love of me, and love of the neighbour...I want you to fulfil these two commandments. You must walk, in fact with both feet, not one, and with two wings fly to heaven.” Raymond of Capua, *The Life of St. Catherine of Siena*. Translated by George Lamb. London: Harvill, 1960:107-108.

Teresa love was central and her teaching on prayer can be summarised in one sentence for she insisted that "...the important thing is not to think much but to love much; and so do that which best stirs you to love."<sup>24</sup>

She instructed her sisters that "...true perfection consists in love of God and neighbour; the more perfectly we keep these two commandments the more perfect we will be...This mutual love is so important that I would never want it to be forgotten."<sup>25</sup> Her small communities of 13 sisters in the reformed Carmels are to be places of love and friendship: "...all must be friends, all must be loved, all must be held dear, all must be helped."<sup>26</sup>

Teresa's instructions on the centrality love in the communities describe the way all Christians are to live. Teresa unites the two loves in her insight that "We cannot know whether or not we love God, although there are strong indications for recognizing that we do love Him; but we can know whether we love our neighbour. And be certain that the more advanced you see you are in love for your neighbour the more advanced you will be in the love of God."<sup>27</sup> She instructs her sisters to "beg our Lord to give you this perfect love of neighbour."<sup>28</sup>

This love is very demanding for "it is a love that costs dearly" since "this person does everything he can for the other's benefit."<sup>29</sup> Such love "seems to be imitating that love which the good lover Jesus had for us."<sup>30</sup>

Although Teresa's context was that of cloistered religious life for women<sup>31</sup> her travels on behalf of the reform took her to all parts of Spain and so she was very well aware of the challenges of 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish life. Her interpretations of the union of the love of God and neighbour are applicable to all believers of every era.

## **Martha and Mary United**

Another aspect of the dualism that infected Christian spirituality was the hierarchical relationship that was established between Martha and Mary, the two sisters and friends of Jesus as described in Luke's gospel (10:38-42).<sup>32</sup> Christ's words to Martha when she asked her sister to help her with the meal have been interpreted to exalt the contemplative life over an active live of service: "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken from her" (Lk 10:41-42).

Since Teresa was a reformer of contemplative life, it might be assumed that her interpretation of the relationship between the two sisters would follow the tradition of

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<sup>24</sup> *The Interior Castle*, IV.1.7:319.

<sup>25</sup> *The Interior Castle* 1.2:17-18, 295:296.

<sup>26</sup> Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection in The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, Volume Two. Translated by Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD and Otilio Rodriguez, OCD. Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1980:4.7,55.

<sup>27</sup> *The Interior Castle*, V.3.8:351.

<sup>28</sup> *The Interior Castle*, V.3.12:353.

<sup>29</sup> *The Way of Perfection*, 6.9:65.

<sup>30</sup> *The Way of Perfection*, 7.4:66.

<sup>31</sup> This had been mandated by the Council of Trent which had ended in 1565 and women religious such as the Ursulines who had established schools for young girls were now confined to their convents, where education continued in 'convent schools'.

<sup>32</sup> Susan Rakoczy, Martha and Mary: Sorting Out the Dilemma. *Studies in Spirituality* 8. 1998:58-80 and reprinted in Susan Rakoczy, *Great Mystics and Social Justice: Walking on the Two Feet of Love*. New York: Paulist Press, 2006:71-98.

emphasising prayer over action. Thus when a person entered the seventh mansion of the Castle, she or he might look forward to uninterrupted enjoyment of God's presence.

But Teresa surprises us and in her writings she describes the unity of Martha and Mary. In the seventh mansion the person finds that "God has now fortified, enlarged, and made the soul capable"<sup>33</sup> of doing good for others. She says that this is the purpose of the whole journey to God: "This is the reason for prayer, my daughters, the purpose of this spiritual marriage: the birth always of good works, good works."<sup>34</sup>

Now Martha and Mary are not in opposition to one another but are united: Believe me, Martha and Mary must join together in order to show hospitality to the Lord and have Him always present and not host Him badly by failing to give Him something to eat. How would Mary, always seated at His feet, provide Him with food if her sister did not help her? His food is that in every way possible we draw souls that they may be saved and praise Him always.<sup>35</sup>

As a person's prayer deepens, the unity between these two sisters also strengthens. Teresa is confident that "Martha and Mary never fail to work together when the soul is in this state. For in the active – and seemingly exterior – work the soul is working interiorly" and these good works "proceed from this tree of God's love and are done for Him alone".<sup>36</sup>

The love of God and others is joined in the unity of prayer and action as symbolised by Teresa's creative interpretation of the relation of Martha and Mary.

### **Teresa's Contribution**

Teresa's theology of prayer, forged in her experience of God, has continued to be both a challenge and support to believers down the centuries. As a reformer, she challenged her context in several ways, especially because as a woman she stretched the boundaries of women's ministry in the church through her reform of Carmelite life. In our time, liberation from the myriad injustices of societies continues to be an imperative. The Latin American liberation theologian Segundo Galilea asserts that "St. Teresa undertook the reform of Carmel precisely in order to make the religious life a sign of liberation from all the idols of her time."<sup>37</sup> Her life and teachings are a striking example of the power of the social radiation of the mystic.

### **Dorothy Day**

Dorothy Day, co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement with Peter Maurin, often quoted the phrase from the writings of Fyodor Dostoyevsky: "Love in practice is a harsh and dreadful thing". Her life of prayer, poverty and protest was a powerful example of incarnational mysticism.

She was born on 8 November 1897 in Brooklyn, New York, the middle child of five in her family of three brothers and a sister. When she was six, her family moved to San Francisco so that her father could take a new job as a sports writer. All her life she remembered the earthquake of April 1906 and how her mother gave away every piece of

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<sup>33</sup> *The Interior Castle*, VII.3.12:442.

<sup>34</sup> *The Interior Castle*, VII.4.6:446.

<sup>35</sup> *The Interior Castle*, VII.4.12:448.

<sup>36</sup> *Meditations on the Song of Songs*, 7.3:257.

<sup>37</sup> Segundo Galilea, *The Future of Our Past*. Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1985:86.



clothing other than that which they were wearing and all the food in the house to those made homeless by the earthquake.

Later the family moved to Chicago. She loved to read and inherited her father's writing gifts. As a teenager she read Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* which described the conditions in the stockyards in Chicago. As she took her younger brother for walks in his pram through the streets of the city, she began to notice the poverty around her and hoped "even then to play my part. I wanted to write such books that thousands upon thousands of readers would be convinced of the injustice of things as they were."<sup>38</sup>

At sixteen she won a scholarship to the University of Illinois. Her social conscience continued to grow and she joined the Socialist Party at the University. She ended her studies when her family moved to New York and she joined them. In 1917 she was arrested for the first time during a suffragist protest at the White House. The next years were a time of searching and difficult relationships. She met Forster Batterham and they had a daughter, Tamar Teresa, in 1926. But Batterham was an anarchist and didn't believe anyone should have children, including Dorothy and himself.

## Haunted by God

During these years friends described her as 'haunted by God'.<sup>39</sup> In her autobiography *The Long Loneliness* which was published in 1952, she describes some of the ways she searched for God even as a child. Her family was nominally Protestant but they seldom attended church services. She and her siblings "did not search for God when we were children. We took Him for granted."<sup>40</sup> In San Francisco a neighbour took the children to Methodist services and in Chicago another neighbour, Mrs Barrett, introduced Dorothy to Catholicism.

Later in her life she reflected on these early experiences and wrote: "All those years I believed. I had faith. The argument of authority, of conscience, of creation – I felt the validity of these."<sup>41</sup> But after she moved to New York and became absorbed with Socialist groups and literary friends, the sense of searching for God seemed to disappear. Religion appeared to impede the work for a just society, not support it.

But when she fell pregnant, to her surprise she had a powerful desire to pray. She wondered, "Do I really believe? Whom am I praying to?"<sup>42</sup> She worried that she was making prayer into an opiate, a drug to shut out the reality of her pregnancy, echoing Marx that religion is the opiate of the people. But she realised that she was praying because she was happy, not because she was worried or upset.

Her increasing search for God brought her into conflict with her partner, who derided all religion. When their daughter was born Dorothy had her baptised and after an explosive argument Forster left her. Teresa of Avila entered her life when she read her *Autobiography* and Dorothy recalled that "she had fallen in love with her" and the stories of her personality "made me love her and feel close to her".<sup>43</sup>

After Batterham deserted her and their daughter she was free to become a Catholic.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Eileen Egan, *Peace Be with You*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1999:263.

<sup>39</sup> James Allaire and Rosemary Broughton, *Praying with Dorothy Day*. Winona, Minnesota: Saint Mary's, Christian Brothers Publications, 1995:17.

<sup>40</sup> Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1952:17.

<sup>41</sup> Day, *The Long Loneliness*, 36.

<sup>42</sup> Day, 132.

<sup>43</sup> Day, 140, 141.

## A Catholic with a Social Conscience

She was now a member of a church that she and Batterham had regarded as “an institution that blessed injustice, practiced repression, and that had never repented its periods of torturing those suspected of heresy and burning those who were condemned”.<sup>44</sup> But Dorothy was attracted to the Church because of its communitarian nature. Yet the question remained: how was she to live her social conscience as a Catholic.

In December 1932 she was sent to Washington, DC by *Commonweal* magazine to write an article about a hunger march organised by Communists to draw attention to the deepening poverty in the United States. It was the Depression and millions were homeless and hungry. She felt frustrated that her new faith did not seem to connect with the deprivation she saw around her and she wrote:

I could write, I could protest, to arouse the conscience, but where was the Catholic leadership in the gathering bands of men and women together, for the actual works of mercy that the comrades had always made part of their technique in reaching the workers?<sup>45</sup>

After the march she went to the unfinished Shrine of the Immaculate Conception and prayed desperately for a way to combine her faith and her social conscience:

There I offered up a special prayer, a prayer which came with tears and anguish, that some way would open up for me to use what talents I possessed for my fellow workers, for the poor.<sup>46</sup>

When she returned to New York, Peter Maurin was waiting for her at her apartment.

## The Catholic Worker Movement

The movement which she and Maurin began in 1933 has several dimensions. There is direct service to the poor through soup and bread lines, an urgent need during the Depression which has continued, and houses of hospitality which are staffed by volunteers and open to anyone in need, including those with psychological illnesses. Dorothy Day was a natural writer and the newspaper *The Catholic Worker* (still only a penny a copy) gave her an outlet to write about justice issues, the Church, and the daily life at Worker houses. Farming communes were envisioned as places where people could learn to be self-sufficient. None of them, however, were ever very successful. Another element was protest. She was a life-long pacifist and although some Workers did not agree with her, especially during World War II, that was the stance of the paper. She protested against nuclear weapons, air raid drills in New York in the 50s and every form of injustice during her long life. Her last arrest was in the 1970s in California for supporting the farm workers who were being organised into a union by Cesar Chavez. From the beginning of the Worker, she was clear that they wanted to change the world:

<sup>44</sup> Jim Forest, *All is Grace: A Biography of Dorothy Day*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2011:79.

<sup>45</sup> Day, *The Long Loneliness*, 165.

<sup>46</sup> Day, 166.

What we would like to do is change the world – make it a little simpler for people to feed, clothe, and shelter themselves as God intended them to do. And to a certain extent, by fighting for better conditions, by crying out unceasingly for the rights of workers, of the poor, of the destitute...we can to a certain extent change the world...<sup>47</sup>

### **An Incarnational Mysticism**

Dorothy Day's life illustrates Johnston's assertion that mysticism is the core of religious experience and thus is not elitist, but the call of all believers. She lived a deep life of prayer, attending Mass daily, reading the Scriptures, especially the Psalms, and the writings of Teresa of Avila, Catherine of Siena, John of the Cross and others, and praying the rosary. The renewal of Vatican II brought her new writers and much to think about. She relished times of retreat which for her were absolutely essential:

It is not only for others that I must have these retreats. It is because I too am hungry and thirsty for the bread of the strong. I too must nourish myself to do the work I have undertaken: I too must drink at these good springs so that I may not be an empty cistern and unable to help others.<sup>48</sup>

God alone was her strength as she lived her life of voluntary poverty, raised her daughter in Catholic Worker houses and spoke, wrote and acted for justice. Prayer was utterly essential and she was absolutely sure that she could not have lived her life of poverty and love without it: "I would never have a glimpse of this mystery, an understanding of it. I could never have endured the sufferings involved, could never have persevered."<sup>49</sup> Sometimes the challenges of her life did overwhelm her and she wrote: "I have been overcome with grief at times, and felt my heart like a stone in my breast, it was so heavy, and always I have heard, too, that voice: 'Pray'."<sup>50</sup>

Dorothy Day's life and the Movement she began are profoundly incarnational, recognising the presence of Christ in everyone, most especially the poor. "Love is the reason for our existence," she said.<sup>51</sup> The "harsh and dreadful love" that she spoke of was the call to see Christ in everyone, in every circumstance, no matter how disguised this presence of Christ may seem in a senile old person or an angry young unemployed person. Her incarnational vision combined practical personal charity and the transformation of social structures.

This teaching, the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ, involves today the issue of unions (where men call each other brothers); it involves the racial question; it involves cooperatives, credit unions, crafts; it involves Houses of Hospitality and farming communes.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Dorothy Day, *Selected Writings*. Edited by Robert Ellsberg. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1983, 1992, 2005:98.

<sup>48</sup> Day, *The Long Loneliness*, 263.

<sup>49</sup> William D Miller, *A Harsh and Dreadful Love: Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1974:186.

<sup>50</sup> Day, *Selected Writings*, 184.

<sup>51</sup> Day, *Selected Writings*, 114.

<sup>52</sup> Day, *Selected Writings*, 91.

For Dorothy there was no dichotomy between the ‘spiritual’ and the ‘material’; it was one reality in which the text from Matthew 25 about feeding the hungry and sheltering the homeless was a daily challenge and joy.

Love was the measure of Dorothy Day’s life, but she was very realistic about the cost: “We pray for love. We get it, and it comes in strange forms and ways...We had better not presume to ask for love. God may take us at our word.”<sup>53</sup>

When she died at the age of 83 in 1980, people wondered if the Catholic Worker movement would continue without her charismatic presence. It has grown and changed but the core ideals remain: seeking and serving Christ in every person, working to change the world and as she said, “trying to make people happy.”<sup>54</sup>

### **Thomas Merton: Monastic Social Critic**

Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton were contemporaries and the collection of Merton’s letters on social concerns, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, contains 23 letters of Merton to Day between 1959 and his sudden death in 1968.

His early life also had some of the echoes of Day’s in his search for God.<sup>55</sup> Merton was born on 31 January 1915 in the south of France. His parents were artists and they were in France to paint. His father was from New Zealand and his mother from the United States. He had one brother, John Paul, born in 1918. His religious upbringing was occasional and scattered. His mother died of cancer when he was six and during the next years he travelled with his father and brother to France, England and the United States, attending various schools while his father painted. His father died of cancer when he was 16 and after completing secondary school in England he went to Clare College, Cambridge. This was a disastrous year and after he fathered a child his guardian sent him to the United States.

Here he began to settle down and earned his bachelor and master’s degrees in English from Columbia University in New York. His informal study of medieval philosophy helped him realise that God was not to be rejected as an old-fashioned idea and he became a Catholic in November 1938.

Like many new male converts he almost immediately thought of becoming a priest and applied to the Franciscans who rejected him because of the child he had fathered. Bitterly disappointed, he decided to live as a pious layman while teaching at a Franciscan tertiary institution. In April 1941 he made a retreat at the Trappist monastery of Our Lady of Gethesmani in Kentucky and was powerfully attracted to this austere monastic way of life. The Trappists accepted him and he entered the monastery on 7 December 1941. He took his solemn vows in 1947 and was ordained a priest in 1949. He died in Bangkok, Thailand, on 7 December 1968.

His monastic life of 27 years began in a very traditional way and it may have been assumed that he would be totally hidden from the world except to a few friends. But his autobiography *Seven Storey Mountain* published in 1948 stayed on the best-seller list for months. Merton, a gifted writer, gradually became a public monk through his writings.

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<sup>53</sup> Quoted in William D Miller, *Dorothy Day: A Biography*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982:363.

<sup>54</sup> Day, *Selected Writings*, 102.

<sup>55</sup> The classic reference is Merton’s autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. London: Sheldon, 1948. See also Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*. London: Sheldon, 1984, 1986.

However, his great desire was for more solitude and in 1965 he began to live as a 'full-time hermit' on the grounds of the monastery.

## **Merton and the World: From Rejection to Acceptance**

Merton was happy to leave 'the world' in 1941 – to leave his friends, late night drinking and jazz. He was also determined to leave his 'writer self' back in New York. Years later he described himself as "a sort of stereotype of the world denying contemplative – the man who spurned New York, spat on Chicago, and tromped on Louisville, heading for the woods with Thoreau in one pocket, John of the Cross in another, and holding the Bible open at the Apocalypse."<sup>56</sup>

Gradually he began to realise that his disgust with the 'world' had more to do with himself than the world and "perhaps the things I resented about the world when I left it were defects of my own that I had projected upon it."<sup>57</sup> His first trip outside the monastery was in 1948 and he comments: "Although I felt completely alienated from everything in the world and its activity, I did not necessarily feel out of sympathy with the people who were walking around."<sup>58</sup>

In March 1958 Merton experienced a profound experience of 'seeing' the reality of people in God. It happened in a very ordinary way:

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed by the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world renunciation and supposed holiness. The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream... This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud and I suppose my happiness could have taken form in the words: "Thank God, thank God that I *am* like other men, that I am only a man among others."<sup>59</sup>

Soon after this experience he wrote that "I must see and embrace God in the whole world."<sup>60</sup>

## **Solitude and Compassion**

Merton had a great thirst for solitude and struggled to find a way to live this call in a large monastery that at one point had over 300 monks. Gradually he realised the difference between 'true and false' solitude: the first was shown when the contemplative had nothing to give the world while "true solitude separates one man from the rest in order that he may

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<sup>56</sup> Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998:141.

<sup>57</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*. London: Hollis & Carter, 1953:87.

<sup>58</sup> Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: The Journals of Thomas Merton*, volume 2, 1941-1952. Edited by Jonathan Montaldo. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996:223.

<sup>59</sup> Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday Image, 1968:156-157.

The original reflections on this event are in his journal for that year: *A Search for Solitude: The Journals of Thomas Merton*, volume 3, 1952-1960. Edited by Lawrence S Cunningham. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996:181-182.

<sup>60</sup> Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, 200.

freely develop the good that is his own, and then fulfil his true destiny by putting himself in the service of everyone else.”<sup>61</sup>

This tension between true and false solitude is rooted in Merton’s understanding of the ‘true self’ and the ‘false self’. The search for authentic solitude is the seeking and finding of one’s true self. The ‘false self’ tries to live outside God’s love, which is impossible. To be one’s true self is to be holy: “For me to be a saint means to be myself. Therefore the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self.”<sup>62</sup>

Merton’s journey to his true self was a discovery that the world was not an enemy to be rejected, but it is full of people “all walking around shining like the sun.”<sup>63</sup> Merton’s call to love one’s neighbour did not stop with his brothers at Gethsemani but gradually began to embrace the whole world as he spoke from solitude to the problems of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. He became convinced that a monk receives *parrhesia* or ‘free speech’ which “enables one to look at the world and state what one sees.”<sup>64</sup>

And so Merton began to speak through his writings: on race issues, on poverty, on peace, on non-violence, on the evil of nuclear weapons. His words were welcomed by many but they often angered his superiors who thought that monks should not comment on the problems of ‘the world’. He defended his call to address the issues of his day. Yes, prayer is central but “it is also an obligation on my part to speak out insofar as I am able, and to speak as clearly, as forthrightly and as uncompromisingly as I can.”<sup>65</sup>

## Merton’s Living Christ

In a letter written to the theologian Rosemary Radford Reuther in 1967, Merton remarks that “my coming into the Church was marked by a pretty strong and dazzled belief in the Christ of the Nicene Creed” in contrast to the Christ he had learned about in his various encounters with Protestantism with its ‘fogginess and subjectivity’.<sup>66</sup> The Christ Merton believed in was not the Christ of dogma but the living Christ.

Writing to Daisetz T Suzuki, who taught him much about Zen Buddhism, Merton asserts: “The Christ we see is within us, in our inmost self, *is* our inmost self, and yet infinitely transcends ourselves.... But Christ Himself is in us as unknown and unseen... He is ourself.”<sup>67</sup>

But Merton’s understanding of Christ was not only one of deep interior unity; it widened to see Christ as the “Lord of History and with Christ the King and Saviour... We must confront him in the awful paradoxes of our day, in which we see that our society is being judged.”<sup>68</sup> One of the ways this was happening in the United States in the 1960s was the civil rights movement. Merton wrote that “Christ in the world today is not white, nor black either: but He is certainly present and suffering in the black people and coloured

<sup>61</sup> Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island*. New York: Doubleday, 1955:185.

<sup>62</sup> Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*. New York: New Directions, 1961:31.

<sup>63</sup> Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, 157.

<sup>64</sup> Thomas M King, *Thomas Merton: Mystic at the Heart of America*. Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1992:125.

<sup>65</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*. Selected and edited by William H Shannon. New York and London: Harcourt Brace, Jovanovich, Publishers, 1985:347.

<sup>66</sup> Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, 500-501.

<sup>67</sup> Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, 564.

<sup>68</sup> Merton, *The Hidden Ground*, 187.

people of the earth."<sup>69</sup> That letter to Robert Lawrence Williams, a young black tenor, was written in 1968, when apartheid in South Africa was trying to strangle the hope of freedom.

## **Peace and Non-Violence**

The 1950s and 1960s in the United States were shadowed by the threat of nuclear war since the US and the Soviet Union were engaged in a deadly arms race, each trying to build more lethal nuclear devices. The Cuban missile crisis in October 1962 brought the world to the very brink of a nuclear holocaust. Many American Catholics, including some of Merton's monastic superiors, felt an obligation to defend US policies lest they be seen as less than patriotic.

But not Merton. While he asserted that "I am not an absolute pacifist"...he was contending "that the Church definitely frowns on and forbids an all-out use of nuclear weapons on a massive or indiscriminate scale".<sup>70</sup> Writing to Dorothy Day and complimenting her on a strong piece about the 'fallout shelter mentality' taking hold in the US in 1961, Merton speaks of Christ's presence in the 'enemy'. When we refuse to love this 'enemy' "we can see him not as our other self, not as Christ, but as our demon, our evil beast, our nightmare."<sup>71</sup>

Merton's opposition to war, especially nuclear war, was clearly based on the implications of the Incarnation:

This means recognition that human nature, identical in all men,<sup>72</sup> was assumed by the Logos in the Incarnation, and that Christ died out of love for all men, in order to live in all men. Consequently, we have the obligation to treat every other man as Christ Himself, respecting his life as if it were the life of Christ, his rights as if they were the rights of Christ.<sup>73</sup>

Thus nuclear war must be viewed "from the viewpoint of humanity and of God made man, from the viewpoint of the Mystical Body of Christ, and not merely from the viewpoint of abstract formulas"<sup>74</sup> such as one current at that time of 'Red (Communist) or Dead'. The implications for Christians are very demanding: "Every individual Christian has a grave responsibility to protest clearly and forcibly against trends that lead inevitably to crimes which the Church deplores and condemns. Ambiguity, hesitation and compromise are no longer possible."<sup>75</sup>

This is a very different Merton from the young man who entered the Trappists to escape the moral pollution of the United States in the 1940s. The fruits of his prayer and reflection – and the grace of the experience in Louisville in 1958 – are seen in his socially engaged mysticism. He realised that in sharing a common humanity with all persons – although living a very different life from the majority of people – he was one with them in Christ.

## **South Africa and Incarnational Mysticism**

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<sup>69</sup> Merton, *The Hidden Ground*, 602.

<sup>70</sup> Merton, *The Hidden Ground*, 180.

<sup>71</sup> Merton, *The Hidden Ground*, 141.

<sup>72</sup> Merton was writing in the 1960s, before the use of inclusive language, hence his use of 'men' to mean 'all people'.

<sup>73</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative*. Edited by Gordon C Zahn. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1971, 1980:112.

<sup>74</sup> Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative*, 121.

<sup>75</sup> Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative*, 127-128.

South Africa is a predominantly Christian country; millions of people are members of Catholic, mainline Protestant churches and evangelical and charismatic healing communities. In this diversity, belief in the centrality of Jesus the Christ, human and divine, is held as a foundation of faith.

Most Christians probably intend to live a life of prayer and service according to the Gospel. Yet South Africa in this early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is plagued by increasing inequality, poverty, the HIV and AIDS pandemic, gender based violence, and many other social evils. We may ask, why the disconnection between such a high percentage of Christian belief and the social conditions which contradict the call to love one's neighbour as oneself?

The narratives of three Christians – Teresa of Avila, Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton – demonstrate that a socially engaged mysticism (understood as real experience of the divine) flows from an understanding of the Incarnation which sees all persons as another Christ. Teresa's emphasis on the humanity of Christ led her to stress that life in the reformed Carmels (and by extension, everywhere else) must be enlivened by practical love: Mary and Martha working together. Dorothy Day took the Gospel literally and served the poor, lived a life of poverty and protested against social conditions which dehumanised persons. Her strength came from the wellspring of her prayer. Thomas Merton learned that while he had 'left the world' for monastic life, the people of the world remained his brothers and sisters. His contemplative life made him a powerful critic of the social problems of his era.

What does mysticism have to do with social justice? Everything!