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VIEWPOINT: Fight or Flight: Thomas Merton and the Bhagavad Gītā¹

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TWO commemorative events of landmark stature inspired the essay you are about to read: First, the year 2018 marks the 50th anniversary of Thomas Merton's abrupt departure from our material vision. Second, 2018 is also the semicentennial celebration of a consequential publication: It was in 1968 that His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedānta Swami Prabhupāda released his unprecedentedly influential *Bhagavad-gītā As It Is*. As we shall see, the trailblazing Western visionary, Merton, and this particular edition of the *Gītā* engaged in productive conversation with each other.

I joined that prodigious conversation, too, if from a distance and a few years later, not only as a disciple of Śrīla Prabhupāda and as an avid reader of his *Bhagavad-gītā*, but as a fan of Thomas Merton (1915-1968). For the uninitiated, Merton was a well-known Trappist monk, social activist, and author of well over 70 books. His profound insights on nonviolence and nonsectarian spirituality were particularly alluring. But it was reading Merton's bestselling autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948),

that transformed me from an admirer to an aficionado. From that time I knew that I would follow Merton's writings as a fan for life.

The famed Christian writer articulated something I intuitively knew: that there were untapped truths in the East, that there was something "out there" that could inform something "in here." That is to say, we both felt that although we were children of the Occident, our fate lay in the Orient, and that our dialogue with sages of the East was indispensable to understanding ultimate reality. In the words of author Alan Altany: "The dialogue was not a luxury, but a necessity. For Merton, if the West were to continue to ignore 'the spiritual heritage of the East,' it would 'hasten the tragedy that threatens man and his civilizations.'"²

In the winter of 1938, Merton graduated from Columbia University and six months later was introduced to Mahanambrata Brahmachari (1904-1999), a Bengali Vaishnava monk in New York visiting from the University of Chicago, where he had recently completed postdoctoral

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work on the philosophy of Jīva Goswāmin. The warm relationship between Brahmachari and Merton is a matter of public record.

Years after I had initially heard of Merton, I looked into his various exchanges with this Vaishnava monk, who seemed to have affected his life in a significant way. Merton mentioned this in his autobiography, saying that he was impressed by Brahmachari as a spiritual mentor and that they would always be friends.³

Moreover, Brahmachari's nonsectarian demeanor seems to have influenced Merton's approach to spirituality: Upon their first meeting, Merton expected Brahmachari to naturally endorse his own beliefs and tradition, as most determined practitioners would. Instead, Brahmachari encouraged Merton to more thoroughly explore his own religion, Christianity, suggesting that he would do well to read classics such as *The Confessions of Saint Augustine* and *The Imitation of Christ*. Merton was pleasantly surprised, and he not only complied with Brahmachari's suggestion but started a program of regular prayer that was directly influenced by his new friend.

I later realized that in his universalist, nonsectarian way, Mahanambrata Brahmachari was conveying to Merton the Gauḍīya tradition as I would eventually receive it from Śrīla A. C. Bhaktivedānta Swami Prabhupāda (1896–1977), who initiated me into Gauḍīya Vaishnavism. Taking up the practices of “Krishna consciousness” simply means fully embracing the science of religion. It is not the same as converting from one religion to another. Indeed, Prabhupāda came to the West not to make converts to “Hinduism,” as he often said, but to give genuine transcendental knowledge that can help a person in his own spiritual quest.

In the early 1970s, soon after becoming a practitioner, I was delighted to see that Merton had written a Preface for Śrīla Prabhupāda's *Bhagavad-gītā As It Is*. Although his prefatory essay showed only a rudimentary understanding of this key religious text, it included a number of insightful reflections. True to his overarching concerns regarding nonviolence and social justice, Merton pointed out that despite taking place on a battlefield, the *Gītā* does not justify war. Krishna's choice to speak at the onset of a major battle, Merton wrote, was meant to underscore that “even in what appears to be the most ‘unspiritual’ one can act with pure intentions and thus be guided by Krishna consciousness.”

Merton specifically praises Prabhupāda in the Preface, too: “Swami Bhaktivedānta brings to the West a salutary reminder that our highly activist and one-sided culture is faced with a crisis that may end in self-destruction because it lacks the inner depth of an authentic metaphysical consciousness.” That was precisely Prabhupāda's mission. He had said that people were suffering due to want of knowledge, and in bringing Krishna Consciousness to the West, he was hoping to alleviate that pain.

According to Dr. Paul Pearson, Director of the Thomas Merton Center (affiliated with Bellarmine University in Kentucky), Merton's Preface was specifically written for Śrīla Prabhupāda's *Gītā* in May 1968, and they still have the typescript for the essay in their archives. Pearson also has a record of Merton receiving a finished galley proof in August of that year, just a few months before Prabhupāda's book was published.

The exact same essay would again appear some five years later — though omitting the specific reference to “Swami Bhaktivedānta” —

as an appendix in *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*. Unfortunately, Merton would never see the publication of this *Asian Journal*, for it was released posthumously in 1973. Merton passed away soon after his essay appeared in Prabhupāda's book.

The need to secure rights for a possible future publication, which came to pass with *The Asian Journal*, was anticipated by James Wade, the senior editor at Macmillan. Wade duly wrote to Brahmānanda dāsa (Bruce Scharf), Prabhupāda's secretary, soon after the *Gita's* release:

The Macmillan Company
866 Third Avenue, New York, N.Y.
10022
March 19, 1969

Mr. Bruce Scharf
International Society For Krishna
Consciousness Inc.
61 Second Avenue
New York, N.Y.

Dear Bruce:

Shortly before his tragic and recent death Father Merton asked us to assign copyright for his "appreciation" to him in order to clear the way for a possible and future edition of his uniform collected works and essays. We promised to do so.

I would appreciate it very much if you would have Swami sign both assignment copies, with you as witness, and return them to us. This does not detract in any substantial way from the Swami's copyright and is, I think, a generous

gesture made to the memory of Thomas Merton.

Cordially,
James O. Wade
Editor

Prabhupāda signed both copies and had Brahmānanda send them back to Macmillan, as per Mr. Wade's request.

The Merton Preface was only published in Prabhupāda's abridged edition, along with the "appreciations" of two other poets: Allen Ginsberg and Denise Levertov. When the unabridged version was finally released in 1972, these three prefatory essays were replaced by a more tradition-specific Foreword — Edward C. Dimock, Jr. (1929–2001), famous as Professor Emeritus in the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago, directly praised Prabhupāda's edition and Prabhupāda himself as "the latest in a long succession of teachers," thus acknowledging the antiquity of the Krishna-Conscious tradition. Indeed, Dimock was the one to know: At the time he was the world's leading academic authority on Gauḍīya Vaishnavism.

Merton and Arjuna

As I learned more about both Merton and Krishna Consciousness, it occurred to me that early in Merton's life he had grappled with a dilemma that was reminiscent of Arjuna's in the *Bhagavad-gītā*.

Merton was torn: He was committed to being a monk and yet he wanted to be engaged in the world, as an activist, since Christianity, at least in his understanding of it, ultimately asks its votaries to extend Jesus's compassion to one and all. He received opposition from Church

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powers. Traditionally, a Catholic monk remains cloistered from the world, lest he become contaminated by it. Nonetheless, as Merton's monastic life reached maturity, he found the determination to be an "engaged contemplative," embarking on a writing career that positively affected the lives of millions.

It was for this reason, too, that the *Bhagavad-gītā* appealed to him. He especially noted the *Gītā*'s teaching of Karma-yoga (offering to Krishna the fruits of one's work). To be sure, Krishna encourages Arjuna to action: "The Blessed Lord said: The renunciation of work and work in devotion are both good for liberation. But, of the two, work in devotional service is better than renunciation of works." (5.2)

Traditionally, even in India, the spiritual aspirant tended to renounce, veering away from action in the material world and embracing the withdrawn, contemplative path of renunciation. According to Krishna, this was not sufficient. Instead, He encouraged Arjuna to act — but specifically for Him. Action in Krishna consciousness is not the same as action with fruitive intent, and Merton understood this.

Activities performed in full knowledge, under the guidance of a genuine spiritual master, facilitate one's advancement in spiritual life — and are even greater than mere renunciation. This is because without Krishna consciousness, mere renunciation of fruitive activities does not actually purify the heart. Moreover, action undertaken in negligence of Krishna's desire is necessarily imperfect, and thus further implicates one in material life, which is the source of all suffering.

The *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* (7.15.47), therefore, tells us that, "According to the Vedas, there are two kinds of activities -- *pravṛtti* [inclination for material enjoyment] and *nivṛtti* [cessation of

material enjoyment]. . . . Through *pravṛtti* activities one suffers from material entanglement, but by *nivṛtti* activities one is purified and becomes fit to enjoy eternal, blissful life." In other words, there is danger in action, and, therefore, for a spiritual practitioner, renunciation is generally preferred. But, as the Krishna Conscious tradition further teaches us, there is danger in renunciation, too -- that is, unless one is guided by a self-realized soul, who shows by both example and precept how to act on God's behalf. Under such direction, both action and renunciation have a place and can know proper application.

This is also articulated as *niṣkāma-karma*, or selfless action — action performed without any expectation of fruits or results, which is a central teaching of the *Bhagavad-gītā*. This is spiritually driven action, without any ulterior motive, wherein one moves beyond personal goals and agendas in pursuit of God's will, both in terms of directly serving Him and serving a spiritual purpose in the material world.

Merton understood these ideas, though he was likely unfamiliar with the technical terminology. He appreciated the fact that the contemplative's life can have an active, "this-worldly" component, unfettered by personal ambition and selfish motivation. This influenced his path of "Engaged Christianity," which was essentially a form of *bhakti*, or devotional service.

The parallels between Merton and Arjuna, and the perceived tension between contemplative and active spirituality, were insightfully observed by Paul Veliyathil, a Merton scholar and priest from the Archdiocese of Ernakulam, Kerala, India:

At the beginning of the *Gita*, Arjuna stands in the battlefield, unwilling to fight (2:1-2). At the start of his monastic life, Merton, too, was wary of the world and unwilling to get involved in its affairs. He saw the world as “evil,” “insipid,” and “insane,” and entered the monastery having “spurned New York, spat upon Chicago, and trampled 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.”

Just as Arjuna thought of contemplative life and engaging in the duties of the world in “either/or” categories, Merton also thought that contemplative life was superior to active life and made distinctions between “infused contemplation” and “active contemplation.” Arjuna experienced within himself the tension between his desire to flee the field of battle and to fight, and as a result he “cast aside his bow and arrow and sank down on his chariot-seat, his mind overcome with grief” (1:47). Similarly, Merton went through a grueling struggle between the writer in him and the monk. He felt such a contradiction between the active (Thomas Merton) and the contemplative (Brother Louis)⁴ aspects of his life that he mourned, “No one seems to understand that one of us has to die.”⁵

Ultimately, *bhakti* is beyond *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti*. Pure living beings want neither something for themselves in this world (*pravṛtti-*

mārga) nor renunciation or liberation (*nivṛtti-mārga*) in the usual sense. They simply want to serve the Lord with loving devotion, without any thought of getting something in return. Merton found himself moving in this direction.

“Disappearance”

“I last saw Merton in the late summer of 1968, a few months before his death,” wrote Edward J. Rice, Merton’s close friend from his days at Columbia. “I had been traveling around America working on a photographic book, and on my way home I stopped at Gethsemani and spent several days with him. He told me he finally was going to Asia, that he had been dreaming about it for a long time. He was not in good health, but he was still enthusiastic about the trip, looking forward to meeting holy people like the Dalai Lama. He had a long list of holy people to see in India, Japan, Vietnam and Indonesia. I believe he managed to see most of them.”

Prabhupāda’s edition of the *Bhagavad-gītā* was published that fall. Soon after that — within a month or two — Merton had embarked on his long awaited tour of South and Southeast Asia, where he stayed for nearly two months, visiting India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. While there, in Bangkok, without having yet seen the published version of his essay in Prabhupāda’s book, he passed away under unfortunate circumstances: accidental electrocution from a faulty electric fan would prematurely end his life on December 10. He was only 53 years old.

He had been attending an international conference on monasticism and was presenting a paper the morning before his accident. Although he clearly knew what he wanted to say, and was confident about his presentation, he was concerned, even uncomfortable, that a

television crew had arrived to film his lecture. His natural aversion to distinction and public display was underscored by his international fame, culminating in media interest as exemplified by the TV cameras in that Bangkok auditorium. Ironically, among the subjects discussed in that lecture were the role of a monk in the modern world and how to be a contemplative in the machine age.

When the talk was over, Merton didn't take questions, although normally he would have. For some reason, he said he would answer them later that evening. Before he left the lectern, he concluded with just five words: "So now I will disappear."

And within a few hours, indeed, he was gone. Literally, gone.

Although he probably didn't know it — and it is entirely unlikely that he anticipated his own death — Vaishnava tradition typically refers to leaving the body as "disappearing." Why? Because we in fact disappear from public view.

Death is merely a change of bodies. It is not that all is finished when we make our exit. We do not somehow go out of existence with death. We — as individual souls — are a quantum of energy, and energy cannot be created or destroyed. Rather, we merely escape from external vision; we inhabit another body, while our prior body evaporates. We disappear.

Thomas Merton had performed the most valuable service of assisting Prabhupāda by supplying a thought-provoking Preface, something that no doubt attracted many to Prabhupāda's original edition of the *Gītā*, particularly among the youth and the contemporary Christian audience of the day. Coupled with his life as a devout practitioner and being an accomplished author in his own right, changing the lives of millions, Merton

undoubtedly achieved much in human life and would certainly take a birth that facilitated further devotional service.

Fact is, he was already a devotee, and that is borne out by his dedication to the divine and his ever-developing theological point of view. He had started writing a book early on, in 1959, called *The Inner Experience*, and he continued polishing it and adding to it until the day he died. Although parts of this work had been serialized in the quarterly *Cistercian Studies*, it was published as a single volume well after his demise and is often considered his final book. There are two paragraphs in that climactic text that stand out for me, as a devotee of Krishna, and show how deeply he appreciated Krishna Consciousness:

There are facile generalizations about Hindu religion current in the West, which it would be well to take with extreme reserve: for instance, the statement that for the Hindu, there is no "personal God." On the contrary, the mysticism of *bhakti-yoga* is a mysticism of affective devotion and of ecstatic union with God under the most personal and human forms, sometimes very reminiscent of the "bridal mysticism" of so many Western mystics.

The *Bhagavad-gita* is a doctrine of pure love resembling in many points that preached by St. Bernard, Tauler, Fenelon, and many other Western mystics . . . The *Gita*, an ancient Sanskrit philosophical poem, preaches a contemplative way of serenity, detachment, and personal devotion to God in the form of Lord Krishna,

expressed most of all in detached activity—work done without concern

for results but with the pure intention of fulfilling the will of God.⁶

I think he got it.

Notes

¹ My thanks to the scholars of The Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, in Louisville, Kentucky. Dr. Paul M. Pearson, Director and Archivist, and Mark C. Meade, Assistant Director, were particularly helpful, sharing knowledge and materials that made this article possible.

² Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, reprint, 1999), p. 46.

³ See a published letter from Merton to Brahmachari in *The Road to Joy: The Letters Of Thomas Merton To New And Old Friends* (Boston: Mariner Books, 1993), pp. 122-123, and also Merton's description of their friendship in *The Seven Storey Mountain* (Boston: Mariner Books, 1999, reprint), pp. 122-123.

⁴ Brother Louis, or Father Louis, was the name Merton received in 1949 when he was ordained into the priesthood.

⁵ <http://opcentral.org/resources/2015/01/19/paul-veliyathil-east-west-dialogue-thomas-merton-a-modern-arjuna/>

⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation* (New York: HarperOne, 2003, reprint); also see The Right Reverend Edward Mccorkell, O.C.S.O., "A Monastic Encounter -- Hare Krishna Meets Priest" in *Back to Godhead* (Vol. 14, No. 12, December, 1979).