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THOMAS MERTON'S NOVITIATE CONFERENCES ON PHILOXENOS OF MABBUG (APRIL-JUNE 1965): PHILOXENOS ON THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE SPIRITUAL LIFE AND THE RECOVERY OF SIMPLICITY[1]

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents Thomas Merton in a relatively unexamined role: that of novice master, teacher, and scholar of monastic history. Transcribed here for the first time in print are Merton's novitiate conferences on Philoxenos' first two Discourses. This material, however, is not only a study of a 5th/6th century Syrian mind. When examined through the lens of one of the most synthetic and creative monastic theologians of the 20th century, Philoxenos comes alive in a unique and strikingly contemporary way as Merton draws comparisons to Mencius, Zen Buddhism, the insights of C.G. Jung, Martin Buber and others.

HUGOYE GUEST EDITOR'S NOTE

Thomas Merton may seem a surprising source for Syriac studies and Philoxenos of Mabbug in particular. A Roman Catholic Trappist monk who died tragically in 1968, Merton was a prolific author on the spiritual life, monasticism and prayer. His early autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948) was a remarkable best-seller for decades and can still be found in most major bookstores. Two of his many important works introduced readers—such as myself in the early 1970's—to the Desert Fathers of Egypt. *The Wisdom of the Desert Fathers: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century* (1960) is his own selection of apophthegmata from the Latin version, and in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (1968), Merton juxtaposed the sayings of the Desert Fathers with the stories of Japanese Zen Buddhist monks he was enthusiastically discovering. In his introductions he notes that the Desert Father material was also recorded in Syriac, Coptic... a subliminal message that would eventually lead me to take a course in Syriac.

Merton was also a prodigious keeper of diaries, correspondent by letters to all sorts of public and private figures, and the novice master at Our Lady of Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky. In the years since Merton's death, the corpus of his works has vastly expanded as his diaries and letters have been edited,

and now audio recordings of his novice conferences have been released and transcribed. Several of these lectures/conferences are transcribed for the first time below by David Odorisio.

Merton came across a volume in the early years of the French *Sources Chrétiennes* series: *Philoxène de Mabboug. Homélies* (1956), translated and introduced by Eugène Lemoine. Merton approached Philoxenos not from an academic or scientific perspective, but as a student and practitioner of the monastic and spiritual life and art. Cistercian Publications has collected his lecture notes on the early church fathers in two volumes entitled *Pre-Benedictine Monasticism*. The second volume includes 46 pages of his notes and commentary on Philoxenos' *Discourses*. Sidney Griffith wrote the Preface for the second volume, helping to locate the Syriac tradition within the purview of Merton's conferences for an audience interested primarily in Merton. Griffith observes, "It is startling to find in his novitiate conferences what one now realizes must have been the first general survey in America of several of the works of the major 'monastic' thinkers among the Syriac-speaking Fathers of the Church" [*Pre-Benedictine Monasticism: Initiation into the monastic tradition*, Vol. 2, by Thomas Merton (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2006), viii]. Merton also treats the works of Aphrahat and Ephrem, but it is with Philoxenos that the form of the latter's *Discourses* most closely matches the situation in which Merton finds himself—conferences with novices in the monastic journey. David Odorisio's efforts enable us to listen in on an ancient conversation that has become remarkably modern—Philoxenos speaking with an American accent.—R. Kitchen.

INTRODUCTION

Arguably the most influential spiritual writer of the 20th century, Thomas Merton (1915–1968) was a monk, poet, author, contemplative and student of monastic history. His entrance into the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance (Trappists) at the age of 26 marked the beginning of a life long quest for deeper solitude, silence, personal integration, and the interior peace of a heart surrendered to God. Merton died at the age of 53 in Bangkok,

Thailand, while attending a conference on monastic inter-religious dialogue.

From 1955–1965 Merton (who received the name "Louis" upon entering religious life) served his monastic community as Master of Novices—a responsibility which involved the formation and education of the young men aspiring to enter the community. Merton gave conferences multiple times a week on topics ranging widely from current liturgical trends in Catholic worship, to Sufi mysticism, to literary greats such as Rilke and Faulker's work, "The Bear." The majority of the conferences, however, centered on monastic history, Cistercian spirituality, and Merton's own brand of practical wisdom and humor centered upon the reality of the monastic lifestyle. It was during this period as novice master that Merton first encountered, and later re-visited in depth, the writings of the 5th/6th century Syrian bishop, monastic, and theologian Philoxenos of Mabbug.

It was in the spring and summer of 1965 while working on material for his novitiate conferences on pre-Benedictine monasticism that Merton began to devote more and more time to the 13 *memre* (homilies) on the ascetic life by Philoxenos.[2] In total, Merton gave 13 recorded novitiate conferences on Philoxenos.[3] Selections of four of these live conferences,[4] pertaining particularly to Philoxenos' first *memra* on the foundations of the spiritual life

[2] For a brief, yet thorough, introduction of Philoxenos with bibliography see *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life*, trans. Sebastian Brock, CS 101 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1987) 102–5, 132–3.

[3] For an encyclopedic introduction to the Philoxenos material in Merton's novitiate conference notes, see, Thomas Merton, *Pre-Benedictine Monasticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 2*, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 2006) xliii–l. A list cataloging the entirety of the Philoxenos conferences can be found in Appendix B (*ibid.*, pp. 361–2). The Philoxenos material begins with Merton's 3–14–65 conference (tape # 141–3) and concludes on 8–15–65 (tape # 153–4). This material, along with his hand written (and later typed) conference notes, is archived at the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University.

[4] Merton's first conference on Philoxenos and simplicity is not included here, due not only to its length, but also because Merton mostly summarizes the *memra* and is quite faithful to his conferences notes, which have already been published in *Pre-Benedictine Monasticism*, 289–91.

and his two *memre* on simplicity are published here for the first time.[5]

There are many fruits of Merton's reading of Philoxenos. He makes an important appearance in Merton's essay, "Rain and the Rhinoceros,"[6] as well as a notable mention in "Day of a Stranger."[7] There are also 46 pages of novitiate conference notes, more than any other early monastic figure that Merton presented to his novices.[8] As Patrick O'Connell points out, Merton also uses the Philoxenos material to draw important comparative insights between Christianity and Zen Buddhism as evidenced both in a 1965 letter to D.T. Suzuki and in Merton's posthumously published, *The Inner Experience*.[9] There are minimal references to Philoxenos in the journals.[10]

I believe this material is important for a variety of reasons. Merton's ability to creatively and prophetically draw connections between monastic figures of late antiquity and their relevance to the modern world is simply masterful. Through Merton, Philoxenos' voice comes to life in a vivid and contemporary way. Another important reason for studying this material is that these

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[5] *Discourses 1, 4 & 5*. For an ET see, *The Discourses of Philoxenos Bishop of Mabbogh, A.D. 485–510*, Vol. II, trans. E.A. Wallis Budge (London: Asher, 1894), 70–152. A modern English translation of this text has yet to be completed. See, *Syriac Fathers* 106–131, for other Philoxenos material.

[6] Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), 9–23. For an excellent commentary on the Philoxenos material in "Rain," see *Pre-Benedictine Monasticism* xlvii-iii.

[7] Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981) 35. For a rough draft of this essay see, Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963–1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 239–242. Philoxenos forms part of Merton's "mental ecology" in the hermitage (*Day of a Stranger* 35).

[8] *Pre-Benedictine Monasticism* 279–325.

[9] *Ibid.*, xlviii–l. For the letter to D.T. Suzuki, see, Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux) 570–1. For the reference in *Inner Experience*, see, Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation*, ed. William H. Shannon (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2003) 20.

[10] See, for example, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, 217, 227, 252.

conferences provide ample and clear evidence of Merton's inter-religious thinking, and act as an important hermeneutical tool for how respectful and credible monastic inter-religious dialogue can be accomplished in a contemplative milieu. These conferences also show Merton's unfolding interest in the anthropology of religion and the psychological and religious insights of C.G. Jung.

My hope is that these transcriptions highlight Merton's powerful insights on the nature and importance of simplicity in the spiritual life, his critique of the increasing complexity of monastic and religious institutions, and his developing inter-religious thought.

SELECTIONS FROM THE NOVITIATE CONFERENCE RECORDINGS: PART I: ON THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

From Merton's first conference on Philoxenos, *Homily 1*[11]

Now maybe we've got 5 minutes to get back to our friend Philoxenos.[12] So we'll start out with his *Homilies*. He's got one sort of general introduction on the spiritual life. The idea is, where do you begin? What is the proper way to start out on this whole question of spiritual ascent? He says that the basic idea, the basic thing you have to get clear is the importance of a certain order in the spiritual life. Why is there an order? Because the spiritual life, like everything else, is an art. What does [this] mean? A discipline. An art in the sense of carpentry being an art, or cooking being an art. In this context, art means the way of doing something by means of a skill—a training—especially a traditional training.

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[11] Thomas Merton, Tape #142–4 [recorded 4–11–65] (Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY). Subsequent references will be cited as "TMC." For an ET of Philoxenos' first *memra*, see, *Discourses* 1–22. For Merton's corresponding conference notes, see, *Pre-Benedictine Monasticism*, 284–5.

[12] Merton spends the first 10 minutes of this conference updating the novices on current events, including segregation protests in Alabama, the war in Vietnam, and deaths in the Order. For the next 17 minutes he lectures on Angela of Foligno, whom he describes as "very modern" in her anthropology, fitting in "fine with people like Jung."

Now, the spiritual life, in the monastic context, is a traditional art, a traditional discipline, a training, and in the time of Philoxenos when you went to be a monk, it was understood that you had to learn a craft, a job, a spiritual art—you get this in the *Rule of St. Benedict*, he talks about the instruments of good works being the instruments of a spiritual art and the monastery being a workshop[13]—this is important to stress because we don't think of this today, we don't think in these terms, you don't get this kind of training today. You get a different kind of training. You get a technical training, you go to school—engineering school—you get courses in it. But here, you learn the spiritual life the way you learn to be a carpenter, or the way you learn how to be a basket-maker, or any of those things—a potter, a ceramist—any of the crafts a person exercised in these days, a traditional craft, you learn it from a master, who has learned it from a master, who's learned the archetypal way of making a basket—they have traditional forms for making a basket. Each one takes the traditional form that he got from way back and it goes back to some god or other who first invented the basket and gave it to man.[14] And the idea is that it is something that has a root in a sacred origin, a sacred past, which is outside of history and above history.

Well, transferring that into the realm of the spiritual life—goes back to a past, which we know—the past of the first Christians. But [Philoxenos says,] in an apprenticeship, in a craft, you always have to start out at the beginning. And in a craft you go to be an apprentice to a basket maker and what is the first thing you do with the basket maker? You go out and cut willows. You listen to Brother Gerard for several days [laughter] on the history of basket-making in this monastery—which is very traditional actually—with this goes the history of how it was done. [Br. Gerard] wasn't just gabbing when he said this. This is something which is implanted in man's nature that he hands down with his craft stories about the people who have practiced the craft so that you are in contact with the ancestors of your job. And you are in contact with brother so-

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[13] *RB* 4.75–78. *The Rule of Saint Benedict 1980*, ed., Timothy Fry (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1981) 187.

[14] Merton, being a person of his time as well as speaking to an all-male monastic audience, did not use gender inclusive language. In order to be faithful to the conferences, I have left his original phrasings.

and-so and brother so-and-so who made baskets in 1890 and brother so-and-so who made baskets in 1860 and before him the whole line of basket makers who made baskets in France—and this ties in with a tradition of basket making that goes back to pre-Roman times in Western France [laughter]—but this is no joke! It's true! So the art which you guys have learned goes back to Western France in the days of the Celts—or it should [laughter].

If you're wrestling, [Philoxenos] says—and prize-fighting is part of the same thing—when you learn how to wrestle you don't rush blindly into the ring and start a bout, or when you learn how to box—what is the first thing you learn when you learn how to box? [Monk answers: "the first thing I learned was how to defend myself!"] Well, the first thing in how to defend yourself is to learn how to square off, the position to get into, how do you hold your hands, what is the traditional way of holding your hands and putting your feet. And it's much more complicated than that if you've ever learned fencing—weeks and weeks and weeks of moving up and down this strip of matting that you fence on—how do you advance and how do you retire, how do you lunge?

If somebody really wants to learn or to read about learning a traditional craft in a spiritual context, read a book called *Zen in the Art of Archery.*[15] This fellow, a European, for years goes to a Japanese master, and all [the master] shows him is how to hold a bow. So for years he's still standing there [laughter]. Finally the master says to him, "Well, you want to know how to shoot the thing?" And the fellow says, "Yeah, let me see." [And the master says,] "Well, watch." And he turns out the light. It's completely black and [he] gets five arrows and shoots them in the dark: one, two, three, four, five, zing, zing, zing. And [then he] turns on the light and they're all one on top of each other in the middle of the target. [Bell rings to end conference]

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[15] Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery* (New York: Pantheon, 1953).

From Merton's second conference on Philoxenos, *Homily 1* [16]

Now let's get back to Philoxenos and the fundamentals that he is talking about. The first blow you learn in boxing is a straight left, normally, because that is what you keep the other guy away from you with. Alright, well, the first thing you learn in the monastic life is a straight left. Very useful! Is that just a joke? Not exactly. Is the monastic life a battle or isn't it? Who are you fighting? Are you fighting or aren't you? Who do you fight in the monastic life?

You have to learn to keep your passions at arms length. And of course the first thing [is that] you've got to see what it is you're hitting, you've got to see the passions. So the first thing that [Philoxenos] stresses here is getting to know [the passions]. [Merton reads an extended passage from Philoxenos' 1st *memra* on the multiplicity and complexity of the passions].[17]

What he's really trying to do is make you realize how much you don't know. All these things can possibly happen to you and you don't know any of them. And that therefore the conclusion is, if you are going to begin the spiritual life you've got to be convinced that you've got to learn. To have a real conviction that one needs to learn. A person who comes in with a conviction that he doesn't know anything about it and that there is a great deal to learn is liable to learn a lot. This goes on all your life. You find that in the real spiritual life as you get along you never really learn anything—you learn very little. And the little bit that you do learn, you got to keep re-learning it, and re-learning it over and over and over again. And really the only thing that you actually learn in the spiritual life is first of all how much you don't know about it and then eventually how much you're never going to know about it and then it begins to dawn on you that how much nobody in the joint knows about it.

And this is very important, a person has to have at the same time this feeling of a great need for knowledge of what's necessary in the spiritual life and a realization that it's very hard to get and that people don't have it, and if they have it they can't communicate it. And so what you get there is then a feeling, an

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[16] Thomas Merton, Tape #144–2 [recorded 4–25–65] (TMC). For Merton's corresponding conference notes, see, *Pre-Benedictine Monasticism* 285–7. Merton introduces this conference with the tentative title, "In Church with Louie: Monastic Life in the Raw."

[17] *Pre-Benedictine Monasticism* 285–6.

attitude, of constant dependence on God, that one is going to learn through life, through living itself, and that the first thing one has to do before he is going to learn anything, is he has to get to the point that he is certain that he is committed to this for life, because unless a person makes that commitment he never learns. You don't begin to learn until you've really made that commitment. And then somehow or other you begin to learn a little bit from God. But that commitment has to first be made. Until you learn in depth—you can learn a great deal on the surface *about* the life—but the first step in really learning about the life is [making the commitment to the life]. Of course this commitment has to be renewed and if you're going to learn more deeply as life goes on, it comes from a deepening of one's commitment, a renewal of one's commitment on a deeper level, in a different way.

[Through examining the passions, Philoxenos] is trying to get all kinds of confusion and ambiguity out of the life. Now this is very important, too, because we are constantly confused. We are living in a state of almost perpetual confusion and what we try to do, we try to get out of the confusion by making something definite on a level where its very easy to make it definite, like its definitely the *Rule* to do this and not definitely the *Rule* to do that because that looks clear, but it isn't, because it's not clear on a level where clarity is needed and what he's getting at is this idea that a person has to be extremely clear and definite on certain things. What can you be clear and definite about? About what you really mean. There is such a thing as a person being clear about what he's after. What am I trying to do? What do I want? What do I mean? And of course this has to constantly be checked and re-checked because it is well known that we can kid ourselves on this too. It has to be worked over and renewed.

But one of the most important things about [clarity] is that it's *not* saying what we *don't* mean. This is actually much more common. Let's say I say three things that I do mean. I [then] proceed to say about 5,000 things I don't mean! That I can't mean! We have a habit in the spiritual life of saying with great firmness things that we couldn't possibly mean. But we tell ourselves if we put enough 'oompf' into it we really do mean it, but we don't! I mean this business of, 'Oh, Jesus, I love you more than anything' but to translate into common English means 'I wish I did,' but in point of fact I love more things than you, namely, me!

Now a couple of Zen stories will illustrate this business of being clear in the spiritual life by not obfuscating the spiritual life by things about which you're not clear. Now the first story is of course not clear at all, Zen isn't at all clear, except the thing about it is that there's a clarity in it, which is so obvious that you can't see it!

Now this first story is actually very clear indeed, but there's no explanation of it. A monk goes to one of the Zen masters and he says, "Master, resolve my doubts, I have many doubts, I am full of doubts." Now the Master says, "Fine, that is very good, come around we'll have a conference and you will come up and I will resolve your doubts." So the conference starts and the monk comes out and stands in front of him and makes a bow in front of him and the Master jumps down and shakes the guy and says, "Man, look at this fellow! Here is a monk with doubts!" And then he just drops him and walks out. And that's the end of the conference [Laughter]. Now it's actually extremely simple, I'm not going to explain it! But you see it, in point of fact, he cleared everything up for the monk right then and there!

And then there's another Zen story. This is simpler and can be explained. A fellow comes to a Zen master and he says, "Master, I want you to show me your eye which deceives no one." Now this is a Japanese way of saying, I want you to show me a direct intuition into the heart of reality. Direct, straight, sure, guaranteed, no faking. Straight stuff. And the Master looks out and he says, "Well, its winter." Period. And the disciple says, "No, but I want the ultimate principles!" And the Master says, "After winter, it will be spring" [Laughter].

And now what is the point of this in terms of what I was saying—about certainty, no doubts and that sort of thing? [A monk answers, "You start where you are."] You start where you are! The Master is not adding anything on to this, no theory, no explanation about anything. Because a theory or explanation or reasoning is *added on* to what's [already] there. If you want the straight stuff you take what's right in front of your nose. If you start adding theories onto it, they may be very fine, they may be very good, and they may be very deep and very religious, but do you know what you are talking about? If you know what you are talking about, fine, but if you're not sure you know what you're talking about sooner or later you are going to get to a point where you make a big fool out of

yourself and everybody else. And that is the point that they are making there.

And that is what we don't do. We don't start with what's right in front of our nose. We have this business of starting with a big theory. Or a big statement that's been made about it by somebody else. And you pick up the big statement that's been made about it by someone and here we are in the monastic life. What is the monastic life? The monastic life is this thing [bangs a post] and this table and this microphone and you people, that's the monastic life. But oh no! The monastic life is some big fantastic theory of the monastic life that somebody thought up a thousand years ago and you got to know this theory and then you got to pass it through your head and chew it and so forth and then come out and regurgitate this theory in your own words and then you go through this then you argue about it with somebody, then you write an article about it in a monastic magazine, then somebody else attacks it, then you write a book about it to refute this guy's attack and then you get everybody completely confused, along with you, and this is how you're learning to live the monastic life. But all the while what the monastic life is all about is this table and this post and this microphone and you people. And that's the value in this because about this we're certain. [Bell rings to end conference].

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PART II: ON SIMPLICITY

From Merton's second conference on Philoxenos, *Homily 4*[18]

Let's get back to this description of real simplicity. This is Adam and Eve before the fall. This is one of these passages where you can really take every word and do something with it. Remember this idea that God would come and walk with Adam and Eve in the evening in the garden of paradise. And so here is what [Philoxenos] says:

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[18] Thomas Merton, Tape # 147–4 [recorded 5–27–65] (TMC). For an ET of Philoxenos' fourth *memra*, "On Faith, and How by Simplicity a Man May Receive the Commandments of Christ," see, *Discourses* 70–114. For Merton's corresponding conference notes, see, *Pre-Benedictine Monasticism*, 291–2.

> And He showed them everything from near at hand like a man. And they received no thought about Him in their Spirit.

Now this is the important stuff, this of course is important for the contemplative life. This is really a description of the simplicity of the contemplative life, "they received no thought about Him in their Spirit." No thought about Him.

> They never asked: Where does He live who shows us these things? How long has He existed? And if He created all else, was He also created? And we, why has He created us? Why has He placed us in this Paradise? Why has He given us this Law? All these things were far from their minds, because simplicity does not think such things, but is completely absorbed in listening to what it hears, and all its thought is mingled with the word of him who speaks, as is the little child absorbed in the one who speaks to him. So, then, God put simplicity into the first leaders of our race, and it was to simplicity that he gave the first commandment.[19]

This is very important, because this is the whole story of the contemplative life. This is what the contemplative life is. And what the contemplative life *is not* is a simplicity upon which you reflect. And this whole business of cultivating a simplicity upon which you reflect is self-contradictory but its what we do. Being simple and being aware that you're simple is not the thing, all this does is make you tired!

So the first thing Adam and Eve *never* did was that they never *tried* to be simple. They never made the slightest effort to be simple. As soon as you try to be simple you're through, you've had it. You're already complicated. So this is a most important point. The thing to do is to absorb this and immediately forget it. When you walk out of this room, don't give simplicity another thought for the

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[19] *Pre-Benedictine Monasticism*, 292; *Discourses,* 79–80. This is the passage Merton included in his 1965 letter to D.T. Suzuki: "I have been reading a remarkable passage in a Syrian Christian thinker of the fifth century, Philoxenos…. I think you will especially like this passage which discusses the *simplicity* which is a prime essential of spiritual life, and which was 'normal' to Adam and Eve in paradise. Hence it is a description of the 'paradise life' of prajna and emptiness" (*Hidden Ground of Love* 570).

rest of your life! Have nothing more to do with simplicity. Simply walk with God in the reality that He has given us, in which we're not thinking about Him—we are immediately united with Him—and we just simply walk with God. We are not aware we are walking with God, because 9/10's of the trouble comes from wanting to *see* that we are walking with God and not with somebody else. How do I know it's you? That's not the question one asks. Adam and Eve didn't think about Him. They didn't say, "Where did you come from? Where were you at 9:00 this morning? You weren't here then, you're coming only in the afternoon!" [Laughter]. And "Who made you?" Well, mind your own business! [Laughter]. I think this is a very excellent expression of what this whole idea of simplicity is and where [Philoxenos] really gets it across is where he speaks about the child being completely mingled with the word of Him who speaks.

And what this does, this throws Buber out the window right away fast. What there is in simplicity is there isn't even an "I-Thou" relationship.[20] And all this "I-Thou" relationship business is very nice but the way it is usually expressed is that its too complicated, because all there is, is the "Thou" which is "I" because the "Thou" and the "I" are the same. There isn't an "I" and a "Thou," the "I" has become "Thou" and the "Thou" has become "I." That's simplicity. And as soon as you start dividing them up then you've already got the fallen state.

The point about the [monastic] life is, you don't come here and then start thinking about how to be simple. If we can keep the life the way its supposed to be or make the life the way its supposed to be, keep it simple in itself—and as primitive and as uncomplicated as we can—then everything else follows. Then if you eat when you eat and sleep when you sleep and pray when you pray it's all done for you. [Bell rings to end conference]

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[20] Merton is referring to Jewish philosopher and scholar Martin Buber, specifically his work, *I and Thou* (New York: Scribner's, 1970).

From Merton's third conference on Philoxenos, *Homily 4* [21]

So let's get back to Philoxenos and simplicity and so forth. Now underlying Philoxenos, underlying this view of simplicity is [the] idea of human nature. What are people really like? And underlying this basic idea of simplicity is the idea that people are really what? That people are naturally what? Naturally simple. Which means to say that this is an optimistic view of human nature. That people are basically good, by nature they are simple. Even after the fall, they are still naturally simple. Philoxenos pushes the thing so far that he says that actually people are naturally simple it's society that makes them un-simple. They're so naturally simple that even after the fall if you can keep them away from society they'll still be all right, and that it is society that is fallen.[22]

I think you have all had experience of this. One of my earliest memories of the 'school of hard knocks' is you go to school and you're talking to Johnny so-and-so by himself, just him and you, and he's a real nice guy, and then all of a sudden one day Johnny so-and-so and then Bill-this and Jim-that all appear together and none of them are very nice at all, see they all land on you and beat your head in for no reason! For no reason at all except that they're together, and they decide that this is what they're going to do. And then later on you meet Johnny so-and-so by himself and he's a real nice guy, but after that you know!

And there are reasons for this, reasons that make this understandable. Because actually, people function with other people in a way that is not purely their own self and this is one of the most important things about the coenobitic life, which is to

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[21] Thomas Merton, Tape # 148–3 [recorded 6–7–65] (TMC). In his opening announcements and updates prior to beginning the conference Merton remarks, "Now I hope you noticed today, that when the concelebrants were giving each other the kiss of peace, the fraternal charity was so powerful that the lighting system went [out] [Laughter]. That tells you how spiritual power is generated right there in the sanctuary! So I hope it was edifying, it was fun for us."

[22] See Merton's notes here in *Pre-Benedictine Monasticism*, "Man is made *simple by nature*. He comes simple from the hand of God. *Society endows him with craftiness and duplicity*" (289). Compare this to Merton's juxtaposition in "Rain and the Rhinoceros" of "the rain" and his own life in the woods with "the city" where "the rain brings no renewal" (*Raids* 9–12).

learn to live with other people so that you are a community and not a gang. To learn to live with other people so that you can continue to deal with other people *as you are* and *as they are* and you still function as a group and you don't affect each other for the worse, but for the better. This is why the coenobitic life is extremely important. If you take this and deduce, 'well, the thing to do is just to stay away from people,' this isn't going to work either, because after all, the other side of the thing is you need people. You can't simply stay away from people. [Philoxenos] says if you just leave somebody in the desert that they'll grow up OK, but let's be realistic.[23] To grow up properly you have to deal with other people, because you need the relationship that you establish with other people to become a person yourself. You can't be a person if you never deal with any body else. Let's assume that Tarzan did OK with the apes, but normally, to be a person you have to be able to recognize yourself in another. And if you don't recognize yourself in another and learn how to treat the other as yourself you don't grow.[24]

Let's see what Philoxenos says here:

> If someone were to take a year-old child and go forth and bring him up in the desert … where there is no occupation of men and no use of things of this world, and where he will see absolutely nothing of the activity of men, the child can maintain himself in all the simplicity of nature even when he has attained to the age of man, and he can quite easily perceive divine visions and spiritual thoughts and can promptly become a receptacle that will accept the divine wisdom.[25]

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[23] See Merton's notes, "If a man were to remain in the desert, untouched by social influences, he would remain simple" (*Pre-Benedictine Monasticism* 289).

[24] See Merton's (at this point) yet-to-be-written essay, "Love and Need": "We do not become fully human until we give ourselves to each other in love" (*Love and Living* [New York: FSG, 1979] 27).

[25] *Pre-Benedictine Monasticism*, 292; see *Discourses*, 80–81. Philoxenos illustrates this argument scripturally, using first the example of John the Baptist who, "became a receptacle [of simplicity] in the desert" and was able to perceive "the things which none of the early prophets had

So now what he's saying here is if you leave people alone and don't corrupt them with society, with social life, and get them involved in artificial life, then they are by nature open to the action of grace [and therefore, divine wisdom].[26]

One of the places where this comes up [the fundamental question of whether human nature is good or evil] is in ancient China.[27] This came out very clearly between some of the Confucian philosophers, especially Mencius and he wrote what he called [The Ox Mountain] parable [as] a way of explaining the basic goodness of human nature against those who say that they can't see any good in man.[28]

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perceived" (*Discourses* 81). Philoxenos then turns to the Exodus narrative to explain how, "when God redeemed the people out of Egypt, He led them out into the desolate wilderness where simplicity could be obtained, and I believe that He brought them forth into the desert that, being freed from the customs and habits of mankind, and from the cunning and wisdom of the world which they had received in the land of Egypt, they might become accustomed to the simplicity of nature, and receive divine instruction with sincerity" (*Discourses* 81–2). Philoxenos interprets the wilderness experience of the Israelite people as a purgation of a learned evil carried by the first generation out of Egypt; however, as they begin to die off it is the second generation—raised in the simplicity of the desert—that "might go in and inherit the land of promise" (*Discourses* 82).

[26] This line of thought is strikingly similar to Merton's underlying thesis in "Rain" (see fn. 22 above). Merton continues: "Normally when we get too involved—when we become 'city slickers' or something like that—we no longer have that simplicity."

[27] Before turning to ancient Chinese thought, Merton briefly discusses the differences in the basic social philosophies of democracy versus communism: "The more pessimistic a view you have of human nature the more you're going to get dictatorship." There was much conversation between Merton and the novices which made it difficult to render a coherent transcription.

[28] Merton then summarizes Mencius' Ox Mountain Parable, introducing it with, "Now this is a point on which I feel deeply, so I will tell this story with feeling!" See O'Connell's note in *Pre-Benedictine Monasticism* 292–3 (fn. 440). Merton's translation of the Ox Mountain Parable can be found at the conclusion of his essay, "Classic Chinese Thought," in *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: FSG, 1967) 65–68.

So human nature is like that too. If you are constantly cutting everything down and constantly burning over it and making it take a beating and so forth well then pretty soon there's nothing left. But still [Mencius] kept saying basically there is this good there and that's what Philoxenos believed.

Now in this Mencius parable, [he] emphasizes these periods of rest when the rain and the dew came, the dew of the night, helping things to start growing back. Now Philoxenos says, its very important that we should create in our lives these periods of silence and peace and refreshing 'dew and rain' to help our simplicity to grow back. So the thing that he says then, is alright, it's been pretty well chewed up and pretty well beaten but its still there and if you provide the right conditions it will come back. Now I think that is one of the basic things of the monastic life…[29]

So therefore [Philoxenos] says, 'Thou therefore, O disciple remain in the purity of thy spirit. It is for the Lord to know how He will guide thy life and He will deal with thee as is best for thee.'[30] It sounds like purity of heart, but actually it is a some-what more biblical concept than purity of heart….[31] What is Cassian's 'purity of heart'? On the first level, freedom from passions, and on the second level, is freedom from thoughts. Now what is the purity of the spirit here? Your spirit is pure of what? Anxiety about yourself. What is going to happen to me? Now this, I would say, is extremely important. This is *the* big thought. And this is *the* thought that we as monks really need to learn how to handle. This is *the* thought. What is going to become of poor me? One year from now, ten years from now, where am I going to be? What is going to happen? How's it going to be? So I'm going to croak, but how, when, where? It doesn't matter. What we have to do is attain this

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[29] Here Merton continues with his previous thought on human nature as good or evil (tied to political theory) and compares it to the monastery. The first view ("the right view") is that the monastery needs to provide the conditions for a monk's natural simplicity to unfold. The second is that the monks "are all potential convicts" who need to be "reigned in pretty tightly or else they will wreck the place" which creates "an extremely regimented existence."

[30] *Pre-Benedictine Monasticism* 293.

[31] There is much dialogue here between Merton and the novices which I have chosen to leave out of the transcription for brevity's sake.

purity of spirit and let God take care of it. What is going to happen to me is of no importance. Why? Not because in itself it is of no importance. But it is useless for me to worry about it because it is already taken care of.

So this is purity of spirit in this particular context. And this is simplicity. [You] don't stand back and judge what God has said or done. In this particular case you don't stand back and judge what God is making out of your life. This is absolutely essential. What we are constantly doing [is] constantly looking at our lives: where are we going, how is it going, how are we going to get there, how am I going to get around the next corner and what happens at 5 pm or 5:26 and what's going to happen at 5:27? How am I going to get this done? What's going to happen if he says this, what do I say? And if Reverend Father makes the foundation in Norway, then what?

This is what we have to learn not to do. It's extremely important for the contemplative life. And this is the real contemplative life to stop doing this! But it's extremely hard. It's very difficult indeed. And so what we have all got in our heads is a whole lot of gimmicks about 'how to make it' and 'how can I handle this' and all these eventualities and so forth. So there's a great deal of anxiety. And the answer is hope. We have got to have real hope in God, because when we're thinking about ourselves and figuring out about ourselves we're not hoping—we're figuring! To figure is not to hope!

We have to put all the important stuff in God's hands. [Which means] not being pre-occupied with this 'I' who is going to be there tomorrow.

Where the trouble comes [from] is this centering our thoughts on the 'I' that is here: 'Here I am.' But this 'I' is not all that important because it isn't all that real. What we experience as ourselves is 99% imagination. We construct an imaginary self that we have to live with, and this is not for real. And it's not important. The real self, the depth of our true self that is going to last, is a self that we don't see, we can't observe and can't plan for. And that self is in God's hands, and is constantly safe, constantly secure, can't get out of God's hands. Everything that is real in us belongs completely to God and he isn't going to let go of it for two seconds. He is not worried about the unreal in ourselves, but we are. So constantly if we are worrying about the unreal part of

ourselves, which is the part that we worry about, then we have to constantly keep constructing it, and protecting it, and defending it, and fixing it up so that it won't collapse and pushing it along so that it will get through these things and so forth. And there's nothing there! But we waste all this time worrying about this. And if we can get rid of this we [would have] a great more time for doing more important things and we can forget about this business of keeping this self which isn't really that important and really isn't that much there. We can forget about this and think about God and not worry about ourselves and He'll take care of the rest. So hope then is this great important thing.[32]

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_____. Tape #144–2 [recorded 4–25–65] (TMC).

[32] Merton asks the class which figure from the Old Testament Philoxenos uses as a model for simplicity, and when one of the monks guesses correctly (Jacob), Merton enthusiastically responds, "How did you get into my notes?" The bell immediately rings to end class amidst laughter.

_____. Tape # 147–4 [recorded 5–27–65] (TMC).
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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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