

The seven storey mountain by thomas merton essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Thomas Merton can be seen as an author, monk, critic of society, and religious icon throughout the world. In his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton explores the tradition of religion and man's search for dialogue with God. One of the moral themes in the book is man's loneliness. For Merton, this deep-rooted loneliness was felt strongly as a child, as Merton he the death of his mother and father early in his life. As a child, Merton traveled between France, England, and the United States, which gave him contradicting exposures to Anglican and Protestant religions.

Out of this confusion, Merton turned away from God rather than towards him, and in his late teen years he rejected all religious beliefs entirely. As a result, he created his own bitter mantra, in which he stated, " I believe in nothing. " Merton turned to intellect rather than religion to fill his loneliness. He studied literature and politics, but continued to feel lonely and isolated.

Notably, one of the first impulses for Merton to pursue faith was the discovery of the book, *The Spirit Of Medieval Philosophy*, by Etienne Gilson. At first, Merton was reluctant to embrace the book, stating, " While I admired Catholic culture, I had always been afraid of the Catholic Church" (Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 188). Upon reading the book, Merton discovered the transliteration of God, and that " faith was something that had a very definite meaning and was a most cogent necessity" (Merton, p. 191).

At the age of twenty-three, Merton converted to Roman Catholicism after finding what he perceived to be the ultimate truth within the churches doctrines. After his conversion, Merton withdrew from society in order to

further pursue his search for true peace and fulfillment. At the age of twenty-six, following a rambunctious youth and adolescence, Merton took vows in the Abbey of Gethsemani, a community of Trappist monks belonging to the Order of Cistercians, the most ascetic Roman Catholic monastic order. At the monastery, "the four walls of my new freedom," Thomas Merton struggled to withdraw from the world, but eventually fully immersed himself in this new-found freedom. Merton's loneliness can be compared to that of St. Augustine's, in which he struggled to respond to God's spiritual call.

Free will for Merton provided the opportunity for him to experience the loneliness of life without God, and then experience the true peace of life with God. Much like St. Augustine's conversion, Merton first confesses to his derelictions of drinking and meaningless sexual encounters before his conversion to Catholicism. The two men are paralleled in their conversion by the path they take to finally find God. Each man's loneliness was unable to be satisfied with intellect, sex, or alcohol, and as a result, each man turned to God and no longer felt empty-they both in their struggle found a new freedom.

Reflection The moral autonomy argument, which is what Merton was struggling with in his loneliness with self, is a question of what is worthy to worship. In moral autonomy, the idea that any being is worthy of worship is difficult to comprehend. The act of worshipping is also an act of obedience, and in religion, man gives freely his obedience to an all-knowing and all-powerful being. The problem as it arose with Merton, and why so many identified with his struggle, is that although man admits that such a being

exists, he questions whether the being should be recognized as having “ unlimited claims” on his total obedience.

From Plato to Kant, the issue of moral authority is a never-ending struggle in which man places moral precepts on himself to behave in certain ways. When man fails in his attempt, he becomes filled with “ self-contempt and inner abhorrence. ” As these feelings isolate him and loneliness sets in to fill the space of isolation, he becomes a moral agent of God. In this light, a person with virtue is a person of integrity who acts in accordance with the precepts that allow for imperfection, because in a man’s heart there is a conscientious desire to improve. In other words, man makes his own decisions by following his heart rather than being obedient to God.

The contradiction Merton provides in *The Seven Storey Mountain* is between the role of worshipper and moral agent. In order to permanently feel a release from loneliness, it is necessary for the role of the worshiper to supersede any other role in his life. In times of conflict, man’s commitment to God takes on an all-consuming role over everything in man’s life. This is in direct contradiction to the role of moral agent, who is committed to do what his heart tells him is right. Those who remain lonely and isolated from God, fail to reconcile the argument of the existence and power of God. The battle in the isolated and lonely man is that if any being can be God, the standards that make him an object of complete obedience and worship must be fitting.

The argument continues intellectually that no being could possibly be so omniscient and fitting, that man would willingly abandon his own role as moral agent. What this means for the intellectual man, is that no being can

then be God, because man would never relinquish his right to be a moral agent. This argument or struggle keeps man isolated from God and trapped in his own loneliness that has been self-created. Men, like Thomas Merton, who commit to be obedient to God, build a relationship that is solely between worshipper and God who is being worshiped. This relationship between man and God is infinite since God is the Creator of all, is all-powerful, and is all consuming. The worshipper is one who follows God's laws and will be rewarded for doing so.

It is also important to note that the worshipper also believes that if there is not complete obedience, then punishment by God awaits him as well.

Conclusion At the core of Thomas Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain* are the search for the "true self" and man's need for a relationship with God. Merton notes that when man is apart from God, he experiences alienation as well as desolation, and that he must discover God as the center of his being to which all things tend and to whom all of our activity must be directed. Thomas Merton was attractive to so many after World War II because he provided a simple answer to loneliness-it was obedience to something greater than man himself.

In order to end the feeling of isolation and loneliness, man needed to simply change his behavior and submit his will to God. In doing so, as Thomas Merton described in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, man would be achieving his divine purpose, in which he would be rewarded with true peace and fulfillment. There is in the world today a thirst for God. People are seeking a reversal of the trends toward consumerism and materialism, as well as

prejudice and violence. People are discovering that what one does must be a means of both self-fulfillment as well as a service to others.

Thomas Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain* offers advice on how society today can be conscious and attentive to God, in order to hear the answers to the difficult questions in their lives.