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Modernity's 'Big Questions' and forming a Christian identity

Chase Nordengren | Jul. 21, 2011

In contemporary church circles, modernism and its proponents are often regarded somewhere between annoyance and existential threat. In *Contemplation in a World of Action*, Thomas Merton treats the modernism which touches the hopes and questions of his novices at Gethsemane Abbey as less a threat than a challenge: how can contemporary people, framed by the tandem forces of individualism and mass media, take on a monastic "desert life" designed in a decidedly different era?

Not surprisingly, Merton argues both monk and monastery must adapt to each other. First, monasteries must remain open to postulants who come seeking the opportunity to answer their own deep questions.

Chase Nordengren [1] has joined NCR *as a new voice for our Young Voices Column. This is his first column.*

Modern life is awash in diverse thinkers -- Marx, Darwin, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Dewey among many others -- all of whom attempt to explain a uniquely modern set of anxieties and fears. Monastic authorities, Merton argues, demand the novice quash the questions created by thinkers rather than confront the doubts those figures may raise.

The monk laboring to resolve these questions is not asking to be force-fed an alternative, less confrontational ideology. Instead, he seeks acknowledgement that his individual, personal crises are real challenges to how a monastic lives.

Where the pre-modern church confronted human beings primarily in their sin, the modern church must comfort increasingly literate Christians awash in a sea of new ideologies. Unless the church can join the modern conversation and meet modern people on their level, Merton writes, the new monk "will not find himself because he will not be able to seek himself."

Reform of liturgy or the monastic rule, while important, are not the root of the problem; the futile attempt to control personal thought is.

New monks in turn, Merton writes, must seek a self-definition founded not so much on doing as on being. Being is not only a rejection of a culture which measures value solely on what someone accomplishes, it is also the difficult and constant choice to live by one's own innate values and ideals.

Christians, Merton writes, should seek the "final integration" proposed by psychologist A. Reza Araseth. Final integration is a sort of pre-enlightenment: a complete understanding of one's own identity despite the external challenges posed to that identity by a consumeristic culture obsessed with death.

Freudian psychology, writes Araseth, labels the young person with core identity questions a neurotic. The anxieties created by those questions are instead a call to a revolutionary, counter-cultural form of living.

For Christians, then, final integration is the choice to follow Christ into the desert, accepting new and different notions of hope, justice and love. The integrated person is, at once, in the world but not of the world. Living in such a way is the ultimate individuality: the freedom to feel joy and suffering without being dominated by emotion.

The integrated Christian, Merton argues, is truly catholic, accepting all the people, places and ideas around her as different manifestations of the same truth, loving them all.

"Love alone," Merton writes, "is enough, regardless if it produces anything."

The need for the spiritual renewal Merton describes is as much in parishioner and parish as it is in monk and monastery. Final integration can happen in our churches, too -- if we as the church open ourselves to what the Second Vatican Council called "the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties" of the modern age.

While religious academics have devoted great time and energy to theology -- the study of the divine nature -- they have devoted considerably less time to anthropology, psychology and sociology -- the studies of how human beings think, live together and construct meaning out of their ordinary lives.

That?s why I?m starting here at Young Voices: I want to begin a Christian conversation about the sociologists, shrinks, skeptics and storytellers who have explored the human condition in our recent history.

Many of these figures are not Christian, or advance entirely non-Christian premises. Still, the body of work examining the human condition creates for us a meta-narrative through which we can better understand what makes us as people tick and, therefore, respect our divinely-created human natures that much better.

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