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Introduction to Jesus' Command, to Thomas Merton, and to Ideas about the Spirit of the Child

In three of the four gospels Jesus commands those wanting to follow him to change, to receive his teachings and experience discipleship as a young child:

Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matt 18:3)

Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of heaven as a little child will never enter it. (Mark 10:15; the exact same words are repeated in Luke 18:17)

What did Jesus mean by his statement to become like children—or the “little children” of Mark and Luke? What does it really mean to become as a small child when you are an adult and now in this secular twenty-first century? Is it only possible to become as a small child and so receive the kingdom of heaven when you are weak, ill, or vulnerable or could we choose to search for it? Is it possible to find a spiritual practice that encourages this without becoming sentimental and mawkish, or regressive and pathological in some way? How can this be understood as part of our contemporary spirituality? Is it just about being immature or is it in some mysterious and paradoxical way the path towards spiritual maturity?

Although the gospel words are regularly read and widely known, certainly amongst Christians, the command is so counter-cultural and so personally challenging that perhaps there is often only a superficial sense of what it might really mean. Most grown-ups feel that they have left childhood far behind and for anyone who has struggled to escape from the long

shadow that a difficult childhood can cast over adult life anything that might seem like a form of regression is anticipated as a potential danger zone. Yet all grown-ups, including theologians, carry within them both the child they were and memories of childhood; these can be happy or sad or, as for most people, a bit of a mixture.

Alongside this there can be often also a feeling of shame when childish thoughts or feelings belonging to the past suddenly re-emerge. This may be especially so around belief, or worship and the personal relationship with God. Perhaps it feels we have to be very grown up and reasonable and rational with God, so what is judged as childish emotions have to be suppressed or disowned. However, perhaps when particularly weak and susceptible, the illusion of adulthood seems to melt away and we are left turning to God stripped of our usual defences. In such moments we can feel quite small and vulnerable and this is often an uncomfortable and an unwanted feeling.

“Unless you change and become like children”—Jesus’ command in Matthew is quite clearly about a process of disruption and development. None of us like to change as it means breaking up what seems to be familiar and predictable—even if one is stuck in a place that is not particularly helpful or comfortable. There is always a resistance to interrupting what we usually do and who we usually see ourselves as; there is often apprehension of what a change might lead to. “Become” means to begin to be, to come into existence, to change and to grow, to develop into. It is a word that describes movement and a process. It is about potential, it seems to be about moving forward, but in the context of becoming a small child it is also paradoxical. It then seems to be a backward step and a contradiction to become something that we have already once been.

The poet Czeslaw Milosz wrote: “The child who dwells inside us trusts that there are wise men somewhere who know the truth,”¹ and it is here that Thomas Merton can be of real help. The Trappist monk and writer Thomas Merton (1915–1968) has been an inspiration and influence to many. The centenary of his birth—he was born 31 January 1915—has given another opportunity to reconsider his legacy and welcome his often unconventional and penetrating insights. He was born in France and spent part of his youth in England before settling in the United States. He became a monk based in the Abbey of Gethsemani, in Kentucky, North America for twenty-seven years, and was a prolific writer and a poet. He wrote over seventy books including volumes of journals, poetry, and spiritual writing, as well as about 250 essays on all sorts of issues including peace, social justice, and inter-religious dialogue. He also wrote at a conservative estimate at least

1. Heaney, “Door Stands Open,” xv.

10,000 letters to around 2,100 correspondents. The probable number is much higher. Correspondents included many who sought spiritual advice and guidance from someone whom they recognized as having struggled to make sense of life and to find God.

Thomas Merton has been called a theologian of experience as he wrote about his own life experiences, his environment, and the world in all its complexities. In that sense he is an experience-near as distinct from an experience-distant writer and thinker. He thought and wrote about what he personally knew and about what had affected him. He carried as an adult the child that he once was and he wrote about his childhood in an early autobiography. This account will be explored in a later chapter. He also wrote about something that he called the child mind. This book is in part an exploration of what he may have meant by that term. In his writings about his life and his spiritual insights he sometimes used the term “child mind”—as in the quote at the start of this book—to describe a way of being with God. Indeed he thought that it was the real way to be with God—it was the only mind worth having.

Both spiritual and psychological insights can be helpful here, and it is possible to use ideas from both as a way to understand what Merton might have meant and beyond that to illuminate that most enigmatic of commands from Jesus: “Unless you change and become like children.” It is a command and a direct piece of guidance from Jesus and yet also a concept that becomes cluttered, confused, and resisted by our own experiences of childhood, our ambivalent experiences around children, and the societal views of what and how children are or even should be.

The command is enriching and surprising, and as my understanding of what it might mean has deepened so I appreciate that it is less about the clinging and neediness of an actual infant—though dependency plays a part; nor is it only about accepting a sense of humility, loss of status, and powerlessness—though that is another aspect. It is not about returning or regressing in a pathological way to one’s own past, though some elements may be relevant. It is not about sentimentality or a stereotyped view of innocence, and it is not about pretending to be simple or simple-minded. It is not about denying or decrying adulthood. What it is about is the adult mind uncovering, discovering, recognizing, and then integrating the eternal child—the Christ child—who is present and within the psyche of everyone.

The central suggestion in this book is that as he matured spiritually Thomas Merton came to embody the spirit of the child and that he is the ideal spiritual guide who can help to illuminate this process and the command—“Unless you become . . .” There is no specific work in which Merton wrote on this—rather he lived it, and it is the becoming and the living of it

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that shines through in his writings and that can provide inspiration. It is worth noting that if you look in the index of any of the published volumes of his journal, there is only one reference to the word “child” or “children.” This reference though is absolutely central to Merton’s life and work; this is about what it might mean to become a child of God.

To say I am a child of God is to say, before everything else, that I grow. That I begin . . . The idea “Child of God” is therefore one of living growth, becoming, possibility, risk, and joy in the negotiation of risk. In this God is pleased; that His child grows in wisdom and grace.²

Thomas Merton’s spiritual journey, from the time before he entered the monastery and including his many years there, was a journey to become the person that God intended him to be. He wrote about recovering the promise of childhood spirituality as he described what happened to his sense of self during contemplative prayer. He wrote about a way of being alive, and he thought that as adults this state of mind, when it happened, brought us spiritual wisdom and led to maturity. He understood this as paradox, an apparent contradiction but a contradiction that was worth exploring both from a psychological and spiritual perspective.

For Merton the spirit of the child found in the child mind was above all about a lack of self-consciousness; for him this was a process of letting go of the self or the disguise that we present to the world. He called this the false self, an idea discussed later in the book. It involves a process of renewal, almost a re-emergence of another more genuine part of our selves, which he called the true self. In Merton’s experience the child mind also involved a journey towards a simplicity, trust, and openness in the adult relationship with God. Although as an adult Merton was clearly an independent person he was always open to God and Merton’s ongoing cycle of conversion and renewal inevitably brought increased closeness to God—what I later refer to as a state of being-in-dependence with God. Thomas Merton understood that this was a state of being-in-dependence with Being. It was not about a sentimental nostalgia for an idealized time in his childhood, nor about psychological collapse into pretend babyhood. Instead it was about recapturing qualities of attentiveness and receptivity. It was about being awake to connections and the life force within all creation. It was therefore about a change of consciousness, or rather a return as an adult to an earlier state

2. Merton, *Dancing in the Water*, 334.

of consciousness that is actually known to everyone from infancy. Thomas Merton thought that this restoration essentially came about through contemplation.

As in contemplation, this developing consciousness is about being totally present to the moment and is something that each of us already has experienced when very small. It involves times when thinking is minimized, and when the focus on God excludes some of our usual self-consciousness. It is in other words a state where, even if only for a second, we are preoccupied with and absorbed in God. Many of the other writers, whose thinking and experiences are also included in this book, would agree with Merton that this can be approached through the stilling of the mind in contemplative prayer. For contemplation brings with it a change of consciousness. Gradually in the silence old preconceptions and ways of being can begin to loosen and a different way of relating both to God and to ourselves becomes apparent. This in turn affects how we are with others and how we are towards creation and the environment.

Contemplation can, over time, bring us to an appreciation that all is connected, and all is held in creation by the merciful God. Merton wrote extensively about contemplation and believed that it is the way in which each person can let go of the false self—the mask or disguise that we carry—and come to know the true self. In this book one of the suggestions is that this true self, present in each of us, is the child mind. It is the spirit of the child, where we can recover the promise of a childhood spirituality we have all once known, a spirituality that can be returned to without dismissing what we have become.

It is suggested that within each person is the early mysticism known to every small child—a state of heightened experience and amazement. This amazement is about wonder and can also include fear. It can lead to a remarkable and seemingly firm certainty of oneness and connection within the world. This childhood mysticism becomes buried in the journey to adulthood and the reasons for this are explored in the book. Yet the feelings linger somewhere within the psyche and it is seen as “something that shines into the childhood of all and in which no one has yet been: homeland.”³

Edward Bouverie Pusey, the nineteenth-century Tractarian, thought that the words of a child spoke greater truth than they (the child) knew; they had a glimmering of the truth though they could not grasp it.

And yet they hear it will rightly wonder at it, and they who understand it better than the child itself, will yet confess that they could not have uttered it so simply and so forcibly. . . . It comes

3. Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, 1376.

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not from the child itself, but from a power within it; they are in truth the words of God, in the mouth of the little one, so lately come from its Maker's hand.⁴

As adults there can be such moments of re-experiencing deep connections where we forget our everyday self, and where we return to an earlier simplicity. It could be seen that we join with the presence of the eternal child deep within each one of us. It can be a moment of grace through which each can be renewed, a moment of rebirth. At that moment we reconnect with the true self and the experience of God. Merton, in a much quoted passage, wrote about contemplation as the experience of God's life and presence within us "as the transcendent source of our own subjectivity."⁵ In other words we lose the separation between ourselves and Divinity—the connection that is obscured as we grow older.

It is ironical that the qualities belonging to childhood spirituality can only be re-experienced once we are grown up, through our adult consciousness. Inevitably this will at some point include thinking about them. This then leads to the definition about the central idea of this book which is that an understanding of the promise of the spirit of the child can be interwoven through adult experience and from this integration a third position becomes possible. This is the synthesis of the two apparently opposite states of mind and this third position is what Thomas Merton called the child mind.

The book takes the reader on a journey exploring the process of reaching this synthesis—the process of "becoming." The book is divided into three parts. The first part—chapters 2 to 6—is essentially about understanding. These chapters explore the basic elements involved in the child mind and the different perspectives used in the book. Thus chapter 2 looks at what it means to be an infant and what the infant makes of the world. Here and throughout the book insights from poets have proved illuminating, and so their reflections on innocence and the lack of self-consciousness found in small children are included. The mysterious state of childhood, as seen by such poets, has been fruitfully explored by psychoanalysts and analytical psychologists in particular Carl Jung. The terminology used by Jung and others, and the basic ideas, are explained. As the mind of the small child begins to respond to their environment there is a developing sense of self—and it is the child's sense of "me" and what that might mean that is particularly important. These insights are then contrasted with those about how the child's state of mind can effect later religious belief and our relationship with God. Jesus' command to become as a small child lies at the heart of the book

4. Allchin, *Joy of all Creation*, 151–52.

5. Merton, *New Man*, 19.

and so it is useful to explore again Jesus' interactions both with children and with his adult disciples. In both the psychoanalytic and the religious view of the child mind the theme of the original "me" prior to the formation processes from the society the child is born into is of crucial significance.

Chapter 3 explores the paradoxical idea of God as parent and God as child. Understanding psychoanalytic ideas about the unconscious and the relationship between conscious and unconscious thought has a bearing on our relationship with God especially in our society where negative feelings tend to be repressed. How the infant attaches to the parent early on often dominates the later life of the adult albeit in an unconscious way. Bringing these insights from the unconscious into the light can fundamentally alter conventional views. However it is fascinating to see that in considering God as parent some of the experiences of saints and mystics such as Catherine of Siena and Meister Eckhart are comparable with modern analytical insights. They describe the need to become open, vulnerable, and thereby dependent. The maternal imagery used by Cistercian monastics and the specific visions of Julian of Norwich guide us to thinking of God as mother opening up the whole question of the gender of the person one is dependent on and so the nature of the dependent person's response. But there is also in Christianity a profound relationship with God as a child. Thinking in this way, the incarnation and the fellowship of the crib offer deep connections to the potential spirit of the child within the adult. Of particular importance is the exemplar of Mary. It is possible to think in terms of the eternal child—the Christ child—being already within us as is witnessed by many such insights by saints and mystics.

Having looked at some of this background material, in chapter 4 I bring Thomas Merton more sharply into focus especially looking at the influence on his monastic thinking on the spiritual maturity of the child mind. Bernard of Clairvaux and Gueric of Igny were both twelfth-century Cistercians whose writings Merton studied intensely and whose thinking he shared in his teaching of the novices at the Abbey of Gethsemani. Both Bernard of Clairvaux and Gueric of Igny proposed that childlikeness is linked with simplicity and humility. This was taken further by Nicholas of Cusa who developed the paradoxical view of "learned ignorance," which is a central tenet of this book. Another influence on Thomas Merton was Franciscan spirituality with which Merton was initially directly involved with and later, after becoming a Cistercian, continued to explore. From the recent past Thérèse of Lisieux had a great influence on Merton and his vocation as a monastic. Her "little way" of spiritual childhood is again an important contribution to the ideas of this book. All the material discussed so far can

be seen under the rubric of Jesus' command to become as little children. The chapter ends with a brief overview of some of its theological interpretations.

In chapter 5 the perspective widens to move away from Christianity and to look at the contribution of Eastern teachings to Thomas Merton's understanding of the child mind. As elsewhere in Part 1 the approach is informative and intended as an aid to understanding. The idea of the child mind as an authentic experience across spiritual traditions is thus of major importance occurring in Aldous Huxley's perennial philosophy and in other writers outside the Christian tradition. For Merton, and for the purposes of this book, the correspondence between John Wu and Merton is especially illuminating, as is Merton's exploration and comments on Taoist texts. Merton had a deep connection with Zen as a way of "emptying out" the mind and arriving at a state of "spiritual poverty," which has a connection with Zen teachings on the child mind.

Chapter 6, the final chapter in Part 1, discusses the move away from the experience of childhood spirituality into the adult life of care. This process of growing up and taking responsibility can produce a two-dimensional personality. The terms "shadow" and "disguise" are considered from both a spiritual and psychological perspective, thus helping in our understanding of the development of the false self. The adult life of care obscures the image of God within the person but Jesus' command to return to become like a small child goes against all the prejudices that are built in to the adult personality. Thomas Merton was well aware of the numbing of our lives through the life of care as is illustrated by one of his talks as novice master. Merton also addressed the seduction and dangerous limitations of materialism and technology and looking at his views here helps our understanding of how early experiences can become clouded and dulled.

The second part of the book, chapters 7 to 10, is about the process of re-finding the spirit of the child. This section looks at practical ways of orienting the adult mind to re-enter the mind of the child. Informed by the material in Part 1 intended for understanding, Part 2 enters more fully into the voyage of becoming. Chapter 7 is an exploration of the sense of an enchanted world of childhood. This is the world we grow out of as cultural and social norms take over, making us capable of playing designated roles in the world, but, at the same time, carrying a sense of disenchantment. The archetypal memory of enchantment is sometimes deeply buried; we retain traces of the associated sense of mystery somewhere in the adult psyche. This is the thread we need to follow on the path of re-finding. The memory of enchantment is present in myths and legends and also in accounts of personal experiences of revisiting childhood memories of the world's appearance. Thomas Merton suggests that we have a vocation from God to

expand these glimpses of enchantment and to choose a different way of looking at things as adults specifically to see them as enchanted images of God's creation. For some this can be a moment of actual willed decision, for others there is a mystical aspect accompanied by a moment of revelation.

Chapter 8 confronts the great obstacle in the way of re-finding aspects of one's childhood: the legacy of a damaged upbringing. All of us carry childhood wounds but in some cases there is major trauma. This can have a negative effect on any possibility of recovering a child-like relationship with God based on simplicity, trust, and dependence. Childhood experiences can be carried by the child and later adult as personal secrets remaining undiscussed. Deep damage can be caused—the term “soul murder” has been used in the darkest cases. It is impossible to discuss the child mind without acknowledging the terrible experiences of some children. Once again Thomas Merton acts as our example and his disturbed upbringing characterized by loss, loneliness, and uncertainty illustrates many of the difficulties in developing a spiritual life from childhood suffering. Despite these difficulties it is apparent that the spirit of the child can still survive, albeit hidden and secret.

Chapter 9 looks at three different but interconnected ways that enable healing of early childhood trauma. One is the idea of grace occurring as an entirely unforeseen divine breakthrough. This is where grace builds on the natural world and on a person's life experiences to allow healing to take place. The numerous scripture stories of this are well known but there are also extraordinary personal accounts of the intervention of grace. A second form of healing can come from spiritual direction. Here a person can be helped to face past pain and begin to reveal their inmost self, using methods derived from longstanding traditions where spiritual exercises and practices have been developed. The third way is the more modern process of psychotherapy. Although this differs from spiritual direction in many aspects both methods share the idea of a personal interaction between two people where the director/therapist role is not judgmental or one of superiority. Thomas Merton experienced psychological healing through the structure of his monastic life as well as through actual encounters with secular therapy.

To complete Part 2, chapter 10 invites us as adults to find again glimpses of paradise. One way of beginning to do this is through the spiritual practice of really looking and minimising conceptual thought. Working on being aware can change one's consciousness and lead to new ways of seeing. The resulting transformation can feel like a rebirth and is indeed a route toward the child mind. People's experiences of a different level of consciousness through such a transformation have been seen as an entry into a golden world following a golden string connecting us with paradise.

This connecting string is not outside ourselves but already lies deep within each person. We are aware of it as a nostalgic longing to return to paradise.

Part 3 comprises chapters 11 to 15 and moves on to the process of becoming. The emphasis shifts away from the person's understanding of the child mind concept (Part 1) and re-finding it (Part 2), and turns to centering attention on the enchanted world itself. Chapter 11 looks at our innate attraction to movement as part of the cosmic dance and how we are invited to join in and feel our connection and interdependence as part of all creation. The love of creation and the recognition of the divine spark in nature are part of a heightened consciousness where all can be seen as sacramental. This brings the adult back to the experiences of children and to nature mysticism, aspects that poetry seems to have a special ability to explore. Recapturing that original vision cannot but lead us to ecological compassion and to a deepening of our connection with all living things. Thomas Merton's environmental awareness gradually emerged as he became more attuned with nature and this led to his being an early critic of our destruction of the environment.

Chapter 12 picks up the theme of poetry from the last chapter. In poetry words are refined in simplicity and so can be seen as forming the ideal language of the child mind. The poet as the paradise-hearer can cut through the shadow and the disguise of the reader or listener by reaching to the heart of the subject. Some poets have written directly about innocence and experience, both those who felt that only innocence should prevail and those who understood the importance of adult experience in reaching a synthesis of innocence and experience and hence moving to a different dimension. William Blake is the great example of the latter and his longer poems work out his ideas on what he called "organized innocence." Blake himself came to live a creative life very close to Jesus' command to change and become like a child. Interestingly Merton wrote an MA thesis on Blake before entering the monastery and never left his sphere of influence as is especially notable in his own late "antipoetry"—an expression of the language of infancy by an adult.

Chapter 13 brings us to the core activity of the child: play. The child's playing is fundamentally an exploration of creativity and of the power of the imagination. Yet this is one of the principal areas that alter as childhood is left behind. Analysis of the child at play has revealed an extraordinary process whereby the infant imaginatively endows objects—described by one psychotherapist as transitional objects—with the power to bridge the gap between themselves and the world. There is no great step from this idea to the sense that the adult concept of God occupies this transitional space and that God can be met through play. Creativity is a way of connecting with

God and breaking through to eternity and the connection can happen if we recover the idea of developing a transitional space to allow creativity and the imagination to flourish and where we can play with a playful God.

Chapter 14 explores the internal landscape of the child mind. It looks at the question of how this mind, the one that Merton thought was the only one worth having, might be characterized. Here our notions of who we are begin to deconstruct themselves. Our self, our identity and what we call "I" are all brought into question. When the self becomes problematic and capable of being challenged it is possible to think of positive ways of detaching those parts of our self that obscure our vision of God. The painful process of separating out the false and the true self is at the core of the process of becoming. It is not a process that is undertaken in isolation but one that occurs in relationship and in the world as it is. The movement to the child mind is away from independence—the initial goal of growing up—to dependence on others, on the world and on God. Thomas Merton and other writers offer us models and guidelines of the child mind way of being as lying beyond words and discursive thinking in a realm dominated by the mystery of the return to God.

The last chapter, chapter 15, explores three epiphanies of the child mind in depth. These are all taken from Thomas Merton's own experiences at different stages in his life and are used to help illustrate the central suggestions covered in the book. The first comes from the time of Merton's ordination as priest in the monastery and turned on his experience of the Mass. The second occurred at a street corner in Louisville when Merton saw that everyone was walking around luminous with God's love and so shining like the sun. The last came just over a week before his death and took place at the feet of the great carved Buddhas at Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka. All three act as a summing up of one person's experience of the child mind that is open to all of us.

The final Afterword in the book concludes this exploration of Jesus' command—"unless you become as a small child"—and what it might mean to experience the child mind as the only mind worth having.