EXHIBITION

# The Word through a lens

Images from a monastic darkroom

MADOC CAIRNS

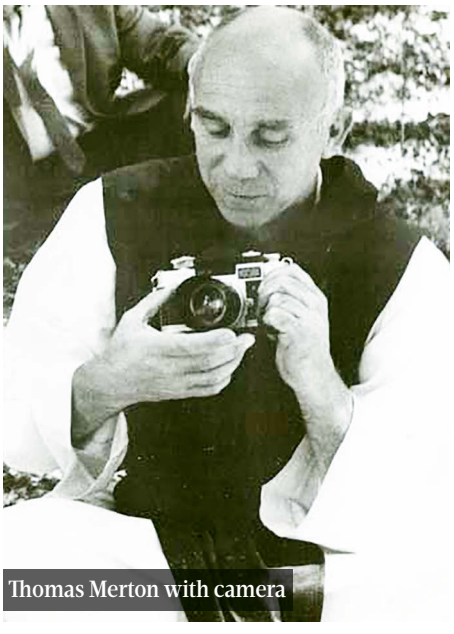
**Thomas Merton: A Photographic Exhibition**
UNIVERSITY CHURCH, OXFORD

**THE IMAGE** is the enemy. It's a far from unheard of view within Christianity, especially on the ascetic fringes of Mother Church. Even Thomas Merton – monk-*littérateur* and spiritual celebrity – subscribed to it. Spirituality is a bid to escape the image, to unpick the dense, rusted layers of falsehood that we accrue from early childhood, forming themselves into a hard, unfeeling carapace.

Images separate us from each other, Merton thought: they split us from our own selves. They keep the ego in, and God out. "Strip your soul of images," he wrote in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, "and let Christ form himself in you."

Photography, a lifelong passion, seemed to clash with his monastic vocation. The cloister and the camera are antonyms, if not enemies. In his later years, however – flush from his success as a spiritual writer, dissatisfied with the apolitical aridity of his order, interested in Eastern religions, Zen Buddhism above all – Merton picked up a camera once again. In the fields and forests surrounding his monastery, he looked through the lenses, and saw God.

PHOTO: © UNIVERSITY CHURCH OF ST MARY THE VIRGIN, OXFORD



Thomas Merton with camera

A new exhibition at the University Church Oxford (to 15 September) gives a taste of the work that ensued. A simple wooden wheel, orphaned and unattached, stands silhouetted against a post. Two fences intersect; one splinters and breaks, the other persisting to the very edge of our sight. Grass moves, invisibly touched by sun and wind. Silent pictures speak of movement; objects point to their unseen, photographist subject. Nature speaks of grace.

Merton, an introductory panel tells us, called his photography "serious work". The explanation is redundant beside the images: taken with evident, almost neurotic care, they're religiously precise. Indelibly religious in tone, too. Concerned with edges and limits, the centre is sometimes hard to define: superficially stiff, superficial composition conceals a deeper loneliness, a silence within silence.

Zen, with an emphasis on the cultivation of inner detachment, renewed Merton's thoughts on the image: it's an omniscient presence here. Unarranged, the non-human world – natural and artificial – opens a door to elsewhere. Image and mystery can coexist; the cloister and the photograph can work in friendship, if not in unison. In one image, a thicket of sticks and branches gives way to a blank, shadowed gap, mid-plank. It looks like it could go on forever – or that it already has.

Camerawork as contemplation, in the theological sense, is an arresting innovation on Merton's part. Unfortunately, though, the exhibit makes too much and too little of this. A small number of images are presented, oversized, with selections from Merton's writings beneath. It's left unclear where words connect with image beyond a necessarily inchoate thematisation; more is obscured than explained.

Incomplete as it is, the exhibit is intriguing for more reasons than novelty. The impersonality of the image – the way selfhood impresses itself upon art like fingerprints on wax, present as after-image, as loss – presented the youthful Merton with a problem. In maturity, it presented him with an opportunity. The lens is a mirror, showing us what we want to see, presenting finite images as authentic truth. It can also, Merton realised, be a window; taking us out of ourselves, into somewhere new, strange, beautiful. The way out is the way through.