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## **Withdrawal and Return: Reflections on Monastic Retreat from the World**

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### Abstract

Among the central paradoxes of monasticism in the Western tradition has been the ongoing tension between the desire for marginality and freedom from the world and the sense of responsibility to take a prophetic stance before the church and society. Aspects of this paradox of withdrawal and return, flight and commitment, are investigated here through an examination of three paradigmatic monastics: Antony the First Hermit, Hildegard of Bingen, and Thomas Merton. The ideal monastic, in Jean Leclercq's terms, is someone who is both free of the world and also free for the world.

## Withdrawal and Return: Reflections on Monastic Retreat from the World<sup>1</sup>

BERNARD MCGINN

In an informal talk given in Calcutta in October 1968 Thomas Merton addressed his audience from the perspective of the monastic outsider: "In speaking for monks I am really speaking for a very strange kind of person, a marginal person, because the monk in the modern world is no longer an established person with an established place in society. . . . He is a marginal person who withdraws deliberately to the margin of society with a view to deepening fundamental human experience."<sup>2</sup> The Cistercian monk went on to claim that he was representing all marginal people, including hippies and poets. Later on the same trip that ended his life, he reflected on the differences between Marxist and monastic perspectives on social criticism, noting that while both sought radical transformation, "The difference between the monk and the Marxist view of change is fundamental insofar as the Marxist view of change is oriented to the change of substructures, economic substructures, and the monk is seeking to change man's consciousness."<sup>3</sup> While the references to hippies and Marxists date Merton's remarks, I believe we can still use his characterization of the monk (and the nun, as we would say today) as the marginal person seeking radical human transformation as the basis for some reflections on the meaning of monastic withdrawal from the world in Western history.

### WITHDRAWAL AND RETURN IN MONASTIC LIFE

Merton's observations reveal one of the essential themes of monasticism from its origins in the fourth century CE. Monks have always thought of themselves as "out of place" in the world in which they live. In another late work, also published posthumously, this is precisely how Merton defined the monk: as "(at least ideally) a man who has responded to an authentic call of God to a life of freedom and detachment, a 'desert life' outside normal social structures."<sup>4</sup> The notion of being outside, or out of place, translates the Greek *atopos*, a term used to describe the early Greek philosophers who adopted a life that involved a deliberate choice to separate from a social location as citizens of the *polis*, with all the obligations, duties, and privileges that citizenship entailed. As Pierre Hadot has shown, philosophy in antiquity was not



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