

Thomas Merton and the Shakers

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In December, 1959, Thomas Merton, driving back from Lexington, stopped to visit a place he had briefly visited on another occasion. Pleasant Hill, or "Shakertown" was, as Michael Mott tells us in his biography, "desolate on a winter's afternoon...Merton walked in the large, bare rooms, the sunlight filtering in, feeling exhilarated. Everything stressed plainness - a more than Cistercian plainness, which should have been cold, which should have left him chill with a sense of "the cold and cerebral," and which had the opposite effect. Some quality of the hand-worked wood and the proportions created an atmosphere that was, at the same time, warm, human - and yet visionary, clear, sane, supernatural."(2) Perhaps he experienced the same feeling that another visitor described as: "It strikes you as a place where it is always Sunday".

Merton sensed that in the Shaker mind simplicity was the touchstone of good use; it was a virtue which, in *A Summary View of the Millennial Church* (3), produces "thoughts, words, and works which are wholly directed to the glory and honour of God. It is without ostentation, parade, or any vain show, and naturally leads to plainness in all things."

Not all, of course, could appreciate the joy of "the gift to be simple" - interior simplicity, which showed in the labour of the hands. To the Believers, simplicity was a gift, a divine call to turn away from pride and power and self to a life of spirit.

Charles Dickens, in 1842, on the last leg of his first American tour, recorded his distaste for what little Shakerism he had seen:

"we walked into a grim room, where several grim hats were hanging on grim pegs, and the time was grimly told by a grim clock, which uttered every tick with a kind of struggle, as if it broke the grim silence reluctantly, and under protest. Ranged against the wall were six or eight stiff high-backed chairs, and they partook so strongly of the general grimness, that one would much rather have sat on the floor than incurred the smallest obligation to any of them. Presently, there stalked into this apartment, a grim old Shaker, with eyes as hard, and dull, and cold, as the great round metal buttons on his coat and waistcoat; a sort of calm goblin." (4)

Merton, on the other had little but praise: "They had the gift to express much that is best in the American Spirit. They exemplified the simplicity, the practicality, the earnestness, and the hope that have been associated with the United States. They exemplified these qualities in a mode of humility and dedication which one seeks in vain today in the hubris and exasperation of our country with its enormous power!" (5)

Merton's enthusiasm led him to discuss with Shirley Burden the possibility of doing a study of the Shakers. On December 12, 1960, he wrote to Edward Denning Andrews, the foremost authority on the Shakers, asking for his assistance in doing some work on the "United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing" which is the official name of the sect. Merton, however, wanted to restrict his work to the Shaker's ethos or lifestyle rather than any exposition of their theology which he felt was "so completely out of the theological realm with which I am familiar." (6) "My part", Merton writes, "would not be precisely a study of their religion, if by that is to be understood their doctrines, but of their spirit and I might say their mysticism, in practice, as evidenced by their life and their craftsmanship." (7)

His interest continued to grow as he began to discern a kinship with the Shakers and his own Cistercian Order who, he said "originally had the same kind of ideal of honesty, simplicity, good work, for a spiritual motive." (8) "Certainly a Cistercian ought to be in a good position to understand

the Shaker spirit..." (9) They were simple, joyous, optimistic people whose joy was rooted in the fact that Christ HAD come (a realised eschatology) and that the basic Christian experience was the discovery of Christ living in us all NOW; so that the true Christian is one who lives and behaves as a "Child of the Resurrection" with his eyes open to a wholly new vision of the redeemed cosmos in which war, hatred, tyranny, and greed had no place - a cosmos of creativity and worship. This, I believe, is essentially a "monastic" view of life.

"It was evident," comments Andrews, that "by 1800 a new kind of monasticism had arisen in America...The affections of these Yankee monks and nuns were fixed on transcendental glories. Before them was the ideal of individual and communal perfection. Yet they stood firmly on the land, busily creating an earthly paradise." (10) Whether or not the Shakers were, indeed, a "new kind of monasticism" I'm certain Merton looked upon them as embracing the concept of "monkhood" as described by Raimundo Pannikar in his *Blessed Simplicity: The Monk as Universal Archetype*. (11) "In intention and lifestyle, any human person in any walk of life can realise the archetype of monkhood. Monkhood must be differentiated from monk and monastic. Organised, institutional monasticism, to which the terms "monk" and "monastic" usually refer, reflects only one way of pursuing the more general monkhood. Monkhood's uniqueness as a distinctly human archetype lies in its seeking a relationship with the transcendent through the mode of simplicity." A "monkish" person, whether officially recognised as a monk or not, rebels against too much complexity in human life. The contemplative "does not exist only within the walls of the cloister. Every man, to live a life full of significance is called simply to know the significant interior of life and to find ultimate significance in its proper inscrutable existence, in spite of himself, in spite of the world and appearances, in the Living God." (12) The "contemplative life applies wherever there is life. Wherever man and society exist; where there are hopes, ideals, aspirations for a better future; where there is love - and where there is mingled pain and happiness - there the contemplative life has a place, because life, happiness, pain, ideals, aspirations, work, art and other things have significance." (13) The monk through the ages has been seen to be one who sails against the wind propelling all things, in search of the simplicity of the source. Ann Lee once said: "We are people who turn the world upside down." Witness the song which most ably identifies the Shakers, Simple Gifts:

"Tis the Gift to be Simple, 'Tis the Gift to be Free, 'Tis the Gift to come down where we ought to be, And when we find ourselves in the place just right, 'Twill be in the valley of Love and Delight! When true Simplicity is gained To bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed. To turn, turn will be our delight, 'Till by turning, turning we come 'round right!" (14) And, Merton on Simplicity: "No matter how simple discourse may be, it is never simple enough. No matter how simple thought may be, it is never simple enough. No matter how simple love may be, it is never simple enough. The only thing left is the simplicity of the soul in God, or, better, the simplicity of God." (15)

John Dunlavy, the chief minister at Pleasant Hill, and a competent biblical scholar, once closed his defence of the communal element in the Shaker institution with a comparison between the United Society and the monastic (traditional) orders, "which he admitted had produced good fruits, though not in perfection. The monastics, he claimed, were a 'select number, professing greater sanctity than the church in general, and consequently greater than was indispensably necessary to salvation.' They were a dependent branch of the church body, supported not by their own industry but mainly by gratuities. When persons entered the cloisters they were free from 'incumberance' of wife, husband, children, not having to sacrifice family ties when they took up their holy orders. They were bound by oath or vow, not by conscience alone, to lead the celibate life. They were 'patronised by public approbation and authority,' whereas the Shakers were marked out as enemies to mankind. In brief, the road of the latter was harder, and their success a measure of a faith deeper than that of the 'Roman monks and nuns.'" (16)

Andrews had pointed out in his book *Religion in Wood*, the many parallels that exist between the *Rule of St. Benedict* and *The Millennial Laws* of the Shaker community. Both of these Rules (or Laws) regulated the temporal as well as the spiritual affairs of the community. In this sense both Benedict and Joseph Meacham, the principal architect of Shaker communitarianism, were codifiers,

of whom it could be said as it was of the latter: "To each act and step he joined a thought of its use." (17)

Compare, for instance, Chapter 57 of *The Rule of St. Benedict*, "Of the Artificers of the Monastery": "Let such craftsmen as be in the monastery ply their trade in all lowliness of mind." *The Millennial Laws* prescribe in detail not only the rights and duties of members, the order of worship, the order of the day's labour, orders concerning clothing, language, "intercourse with the world," the schooling of children, etc., but also matters such as the quality of work, the right use of property, etc. In the section, "Concerning superfluities not owned," is the injunction that "Believers may not in any case or circumstances, manufacture for sale, any article or articles, which are superfluously wrought, and which would have a tendency to feed the pride and vanity of man...Fancy articles of any kind, or articles which are superfluously finished, trimmed or ornamented, are not suitable for Believers". (18) Thus, in Shaker practice, a person could be shifted from his "handicraft" or office if there was evidence of unseemly pride. In both communities no gifts could be received without the Abbot's and in the case of the Shakers, the Elder's permission. Abbot's and Elder's were subject to the provisions of both Rules and shared the common life. "Backsliders," if received again into the community, were relegated "to the lowliest place." On journeys, Benedictine monks were to say the Divine Office wherever they are working, "kneeling in the fear of God"; similarly, the Shaker brethren, "who go out among the world, should observe...the order of kneeling, and should also kneel in prayer twice each day..." And on their return, in both cases, it was against order to "relate to another what he shall have seen or heard outside the monastery." (RB 67; cf. *Millennial Laws*, Part I, Section IV, Part II, Section XV.) Anything beyond a basic assignment of clothing was considered "superfluous" in both orders. It is not being suggested here that the Shaker ministry knew or used the Rule of Benedict, for no evidence, to my knowledge supports that claim, however, the similarities are striking.

Merton never completed his projected work on the Shakers due, in part to his untimely death in Bangkok in 1968. Another reason, perhaps is, as he wrote to Edward Andrews: "I will not rush at it [i.e., write a book on the Shakers] and I will try to profit by their example and put into practice some of their careful and honest principles. It would be a crime to treat them superficially, and without the deepest love, reverence and understanding." (19) At the time of his death there was very little in the way of primary source material available upon which to build such a work. Dr. Daggy wrote to me that his notes on the Shakers are not extensive, approximately 20-25 pages in what is called "Working Notebook #56". I suspect that they were mostly his notes for the Pleasant Hill essay which appeared in *Jubilee* and later in *Mystics and Zen Masters*. (20) In addition there is the Introduction to Andrews' book, *Religion in Wood* which Merton had written at Andrews' request, his letters to Andrews in *The Hidden Ground of Love*, and some rather isolated references in his other works. Much, therefore, of what Merton may have written about the Shakers in a larger study will have to be inferred from his writings as they pertain to the thesis he originally proposed, i.e., the kinship between the Shaker lifestyle and philosophy of the Christian experience and that of the Cistercian-Benedictine Order of which he was a part.

This paper will look briefly at two rather important elements in the thesis. Firstly, the monastic and Shaker view of their relationship with the world, and, secondly, their concept of the relationship of work and prayer.

Anyone looking at the monastic life from the outside can easily be struck - nowadays as much as in the past - by the deliberate choice to distance the monastery from the world and vice versa. This separation says something essential about the contemplative vocation. It is a concrete sign of the appeal to *fugate mundi*, the world-denying attitude rooted in Egyptian desert monasticism. There appears little choice between a heaven above and a heaven on earth. Both are intended to compensate the weak and oppressed for their present trials. The meek, who are blessed, "for they shall inherit the earth", will also sit on the right hand of God in heaven above, thus they may dream of having the best of both worlds, while slaving in the only one we know. Utopia - the human urge to remake life anew, to seek perfection, to bring heaven to earth, engendered many unorthodox doctrines and

sectarian experiments which were free to work themselves out in terms of whatever merit they possessed. The idea of plain people, touched by inspiration, found expression, over and over again, in utopian undertakings.

"The monk", Merton writes, "leaves behind the fictions and illusions of a merely human spirituality to plunge himself in the faith of Christ." (21) The monk's objective is the LIBERTY that belongs to the inner life of every Christian and growth towards the maturity of the Christian faith. In choosing, he goes on to say, "the horizon of the desert" that is, "the monastic Church...of the wilderness" over the "city of Babylon," (22) the monk engages in a mysterious confrontation, a battle that will be waged in his own heart. The contrasting images of the city and the desert - like the world and the monastery, the natural and the supernatural, and later, the scientific and the contemplative attitudes - are Merton's favourites.

To many the monk's *fugium mundi* is a mere escape from the problems of living in society. Merton makes it clear that "the meaning of the monk's flight from the world is precisely to be sought in the fact that the "world" (in the sense in which it is condemned by Christ) is the society of those who live exclusively for themselves. To leave the "world" then, is to leave oneself first of all and to begin to live for others." (23) Further, "the essence of the monastic vocation is precisely the leaving of the world and all its desires and ambitions and concern in order to live not only for God, but by Him and in Him, not for a few years but forever. The one thing that most truly makes a monk what he is is this irrevocable break with the world and all that is in it, in order to seek God in solitude." (24) The Shaker Elder Joseph Meacham had said "We are not called to labour in excell, or be like the world: but to excell them in order, union and peace, and in good works". (25) The followers of Ann Lee, it is true, were practical merchandisers. They were strict, possibly to a fault, in their dealings with the world. As separatists they had to survive. In this sense, as with their antecedents in the early stages of cenobitic life, as well as in the case of Merton who in his early years fled the world, we find that attitude and that of the later Shakers, to have changed. In Merton's case he had a false solution for his relationship with the world - "The false solution went like this: the whole world, of which the war is a characteristic expression, is evil. It has therefore to be first ridiculed, then spat upon, and at last formally rejected with a curse. Actually, I have come to the monastery to find my place in the world, and if I fail to find this place in the world I will be wasting my time in the monastery." (26) The Louisville epiphany is ample witness to his change in attitude towards the world. In his *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* he says: "I think the question of "turning to the world" is in fact a question of being patient with the unprepossessing surface of it, in order to break through to the deep goodness that is underneath. But to my way of thinking, "the world" is precisely the dehumanised surface." (27)

Reduced to simple terms, the Shakers thought the most perfect society yet attained by man - a order which they believed could be re-established in America - was that of the primitive church at Jerusalem. The spirit of that fraternity had inspired Ann Lee, and Joseph Meacham. They held that the government of the church society should be patterned on apostolic experience. It was man's duty and privilege to build on the foundations laid by Jesus and His disciples. These were specified, they insisted, in the most unequivocal language. The true believer is called out of the world to a life of self-denial, with all its trials and compensations. "There is no man," Elder Benjamin Youngs quoted, "that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake and the gospel's, but he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions; and in the world to come, eternal life." (28)

The cross separated him from the course of the world. "And whosoever doth not bear his Cross, and come after me cannot be my disciple." Such hatred was not, and this must be emphasised, a hatred of persons themselves but those selfish dispositions and corrupt earthly ties which reviled God's claim to the principle seat of man's affections. Certainly to separate oneself from the fashions of the world was a call explicit in the letters of St. Paul. Though Dunlavy reminded the Shakers that "Ye are not

of the world," in his *Manifesto*, they soon discovered that separation from the world was a more complex problem than the separation of the sexes and the maintenance of internal order. In repudiating such so-called 'fashions' as marriage and private property, politics and bearing arms, they exposed themselves to attack, and therefore to contact with the world. To spread their faith, they chose to keep their meeting houses open to the public. In education they found it expedient to form ties with neighbouring townships. The virtue of charity bade them welcome any and/or all who came for food, clothes, or lodging. Indeed, they aspired to "use the things of this world as not abusing them". (29)

Whatever we may think of the Shakers faith, their works are extraordinary, and have always been - even to this day and hour - and charity bids us think well of the tree when the fruits are salutary. We cannot ask the question which religion, theirs, or ours, is the better one - theirs is equally under the protection of the law as ours is, and there are certainly some reasons for saying that the religion of this sect of Christians bears a greater resemblance to that of the Primitive Church than many established churches today.

The difficulty faced by the Shakers, no less than that of traditional or institutionalised concepts of separation from the world was, where to draw the line between worldliness and sainthood. What is intrinsically or potentially good in the world is often appropriated for a holy cause. If certain conveniences were condoned, who could say what could be denied? In short, how was the leadership of a religious organisation to determine at just what point compromise might be made?

Here, of course, we are thinking of traditional concepts of intercourse with the world or exclusion of it. As the times have changed, in institutional monasticism as well as in the Shakers, compromises leading to a 'middle road' that advocated the retention of covenantal principles, but a plea for a broadening application of the doctrine of united interest to meet the spirit of the time, its growing intellectuality and the self-governing power of the individual have developed. Merton, in his address to a workshop at the Monastery of the Precious Blood in Alaska, talking about tradition and the Rule said: "you can't base an education purely and simply on the rule because a lot of things in the rule have become irrelevant, a lot of them accidental. I don't know what your rule says, but some of the things in our rule are now completely irrelevant. They are good and fine, but people who come in and follow the rule can't relate it to anything that is really important in their own life, even though they will do it and be very good about doing it....This is the result of eight hundred years of nonsense." (30)

For the Shakers and traditional monasticism, the conviction that man, through labour that was worship and through worship that was a labouring for a sense of God could progressively elevate himself, here and in the hereafter, to the plane of pure spirituality - was then, and now - an inspiring ideal which gave meaning to the great adventure. Many must have questioned at times the means of attainment, wondering to themselves whether character might not best be formed by direct combat with evil IN the world; whether the marital vow, honourably pledged, might not be as pure and sacred as the vow of chastity; whether man could best perfect himself by separation FROM the world. Doubts might have obscured the vision of a heaven on earth, but that there was such a vision - bright and glorious - we may be sure.

Footnotes

(1) This paper was edited and prepared for publication by Helen T. Bourke and Paul M Pearson with the permission of the author.

(2) Mott, Michael. *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*. (London. 1986.) p343.

(3) Green, Calvin. *A Summary View of the Millennial Church, or United Society of Believers, Commonly Called Shakers*. (Albany, N.Y. 1848.)

- (4) Dickens, Charles. *American Notes for General Circulation*. (Middlesex. 1972.) p257.
- (5) Merton, Thomas. "Introduction" to *Religion in Wood*. by Andrews, Edward Deming. pXI.
- (6) Merton, Thomas. *The Hidden Ground of Love*. Ed. Shannon, William H. (New York. 1985.) p35. (Abbreviated to *HGL*.)
- (7) *Ibid.* p32.
- (8) *Ibid.*
- (9) *Ibid.* p33.
- (10) Andrews, Edward Deming. *The People Called Shakers*. (New York. 1963.) p70. (Abbreviated to *PCS*.)
- (11) Pannikar, Raimundo. *Blessed Simplicity: The Monk As Universal Archetype*. (New York. 1982.)
- (12) Merton, Thomas. *Reflections on My Work*. Ed. Daggy, Robert E. (London. 1989.) p48.
- (13) *Ibid.* p47.
- (14) Ed. Whitson, Robley Edward. *The Shakers Two Centuries of Spiritual Reflection*. (London. 1983.) pp294/5.
- (15) Merton, Thomas. *The Sign of Jonas*. (London. 1953.) p212. (Abbreviated to *SJ*.)
- (16) *PCS*. pp100/1.
- (17) Andrews, Edward Deming. *Religion in Wood*. p7.
- (18) *PCS*. pp282/3.
- (19) *HGL*. p32.
- (20) Merton, Thomas. *Mystics and Zen Masters*. (New York. 1988.) pp193 - 202.
- (21) Merton, Thomas. *The Silent Life*. (London. 1961.) p9.
- (22) *Ibid.* p11.
- (23) *Ibid.* p18.
- (24) Merton, Thomas. *No Man Is An Island*. (London. 1955.) p128.
- (25) *PCS*. p115.
- (26) *SJ*. p314.
- (27) Merton, Thomas. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. (London. 1968.) p234.
- (28) *PCS*. p98.
- (29) *Ibid.* p24.
- (30) Merton, Thomas. *Thomas Merton in Alaska*. Ed. Daggy, Robert E. (New York. 1989.) pp124/5.

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