

# THE MERTON JOURNAL

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More than any other single individual, it was Merton who shaped my understanding of priesthood.

Kenneth Leech (1939-2015)

# Contents

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Editorial Gary Hall	1
Ken Leech - Contemplative Priest, Prophet and Friend Terry Drummond	3
Thomas Merton - Theologian of Resistance Kenneth Leech	5
A Vision of Hope and Joy Patricia Higgins	18
Silence and Prayer Kenneth Leech	20
Poem: 'The Paradox of Silence' Tony McClelland	24
Theology and the Back Streets Kenneth Leech	25
Spiritual Formation & 'Progress in Prayer' in the Merton-Gullick Letters Bonnie Bowman Thurston	31
Silence and Ministry Kenneth Leech	43
Poem: 'Discoveries' Tony McClelland	47
Hermann Hesse & Thomas Merton: Countercultural Affinities Ron Dart	48
Silence and Conflict Kenneth Leech	62
Poem: 'Climate Change' Tony McClelland	65
Book Review Anne Tomlinson	66

The cover image of Kenneth Leech was supplied by Terry Drummond (photographer unknown).

The quotation on the cover is taken from Kenneth Leech, *The Eye of the Storm – Spiritual Resources for the Pursuit of Justice* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 1992), p. 175. See article on pp.25-30.

The quotations from Merton's Journal for Easter Day 1968 on page 19 and at the end of the editorial are taken from *The Other Side of the Mountain – The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume Seven: 1967–1968*, ed. Patrick Hart OCSO (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), pp. 80-81.

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# Editorial

In December 1993, the inaugural Thomas Merton conference gathered in Winchester, where David Scott was priest and poet. The former director of the Merton Center, Robert Daggy, accompanied by Paul Pearson, the current director, was with us, tracing echoes of St. Augustine's Confessions in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, and speaking of Owen Merton's work and family. Monica Furlong was there too, considering the impact on the student Merton of the alienation of black people in nearby Harlem, as he made his way towards solitude, sustaining attention to a deep human loneliness. Esther de Waal spoke of reading lovingly, with a tenderness which does not invade the spiritual secrecy of an author, and Jim Forest told of the unhurried and silently evangelical activity of the iconographer. There were others. Pdraig Daly and Selima Hill brought us poetry of the heart; and on 10<sup>th</sup> December, the twenty-fifth anniversary of Merton's death, Ken Leech was warning against a sanitisation of Merton, reminding us of his undergirding theology of resistance and of the sustained monastic protest against dehumanising cultures and an assimilated church.

Ken Leech, priest and theologian, died in September 2015 at the age of 76. We pay tribute in what follows to a priest whose ministry with vulnerable people in London was an urban translation of Merton's prophetic counter-narrative. Included here is a personal reflection on his life and ministry by his lifelong friend and co-worker Terry Drummond, and a version of an essay by Ken published as a pamphlet shortly before he addressed the Merton conference in Winchester. We have also included three short reflections on Silence by Ken, originally given at a Quiet Day in 1986. We have paired each one with a poem by Tony McClelland. Also included is an extract from *The Eye of the Storm*, published in 1992 in which Ken wrote more directly about how Merton

accompanied his work in Aldgate and in Soho. (It was at St. Anne's Church in Soho that Ruth Jenkins and Owen Merton, parents of Tom and John-Paul, married in 1914.)

Other connections emerge as Bonnie Thurston tells of the friendship between Merton and Etta Gullick, in an essay which complements her contribution to the Advent 2017 edition of this journal. Like Merton, Etta Gullick was a teacher helping to prepare men for priesthood, at St. Stephen's House, Oxford, where Ken Leech trained. Bonnie highlights the discussion between Gullick and Merton about prayer and its nurture, with a focus on the attendant difficulties of distraction on the one hand, and heightened self-consciousness on the other.

Where Leech and Thurston demonstrate in different ways the resonances between Merton and his readers, Ron Dart's essay picks up affinities between Merton and someone he was reading. On 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1968, Merton was flying out of Anchorage, reading Hermann Hesse's *Journey to the East* (1932). On 15<sup>th</sup> October he was flying towards Tokyo and reading Hesse's *Siddhartha* (1922). Ron Dart identifies and explores common themes in the countercultural positions of the two authors, both of whom were renowned for their prolific correspondence, their reaching out through writing.

Writing can establish and nurture relationship, as these essays illustrate in contrasting ways. Other people's writing can also give voice to intuition or emotion, to realities we had not yet found a way to communicate. As Tony McClelland puts it in his poem, 'Discoveries', included in the following pages:

In another's words:  
something we have known together,  
but could not name alone.

Perhaps we return time and again to Merton because in his words we discover what we have sensed yet struggled to name: the Ace of Freedoms, the Risen One, the Christ whom Ken Leech hails as 'challenger and disturber of human illusion'.

Let us take to heart this Eastertide the words that Merton recorded in his journal on his final Easter Day:

It is *Easter!* The Alleluias are back.

Gary Hall

# Ken Leech - Contemplative Priest, Prophet and Friend

Terry Drummond

In reflecting on the life of Ken Leech it is important to recognise that he was a priest, a theologian and a prophet. His ministry was rooted in an understanding of the incarnation at the heart of which was his belief in the word made flesh. Jesus, ministering to the communities through which he travelled on his journey to Jerusalem, needed time out in the wilderness and places of quiet in which he could pray and reflect on his calling. So too with Ken. His ministry and prophetic activity in the wider community were rooted in his periods of prayer and reflection, which in turn led to many important books, and numerous essays and papers.

The influence of Thomas Merton on his journey of faith was profound – an understanding of the importance of a monastic tradition that was rooted in the world whilst offering a space in which to reflect in prayerful silence on what the Christian message can offer to a world that prefers to turn its back on God.

In Ken's book *True God*, there are fifteen references to Thomas Merton, a sign of his importance to Ken's spiritual life, his call to service and to speaking truth to power. Many are called to this very important task, but the powerful in the church prefer to be deaf to any message that challenges their pre-conceived assumptions.

Whilst Ken was not a monastic (though when he moved to Whitechapel in the early 1990's his flat was as near to a monastic cell as one could make it), and lived out his ministry in the communities in which he found himself, his daily pattern of life was based on the Offices of the Church, in the cycle of Daily Prayer and the Eucharist. Thus grounded he could speak with authority both on spiritual and political issues, able to bring the two together in a manner that is sadly lacking in today's church.

The City was Ken's place of ministry, his special affection being for the community around the Whitechapel Road and the wider East End of London. It was where he could walk the streets and feel at home, whilst aware that for some people it was a wilderness in which the search for truth was just over the horizon. It was here that he could be both contemplative and activist, appreciating the fact that he was living in a community rooted in history and which was the home to people of many nationalities. But it is important not to lose sight that he was, like all of us, sharing in the ups and downs of life – he could write from personal experience about the darkness that on occasion will come to all Christians.

Like Thomas Merton, Ken lived on the edge, on the fringe of society. He was at home with the outcast and those who society all too often rejects, whilst he was also able to relate to those of us who have a more stable place in society. Ken's gift, like that of the Jesus he followed, was to be open and available to all who came into his life.

An important element of his ministry was that he sat lightly to formal structures. He was a theologian of the streets who could speak to the academy on its own terms. The call to follow in the way of Jesus, and the demands of that call, were far more important than being tied to a restricting management structure.

In reflecting on his life, it strikes me that, as with Merton, both were rooted in the call to be prophets, who from the depths of their spirituality were able to challenge what they believed to be the structural sources of sin.

In *True God*, Ken writes of Merton:

A central idea in Merton's writings towards the end of his life was the theme of *marginality*. He saw the monk as 'a very strange kind of person, a marginal person'. The monk is one who deliberately withdraws to the margins of human society, and in so doing, finds a certain solidarity with marginal people, some of whom have been effectively marginalized by social and political forces.<sup>1</sup>

In these words, Ken is describing Merton, at the same time coming close to offering a self-definition. He could write in this way because he was drawing on the rich stream of his own experience.

It is a sad truth that in the Church of today all too often the understanding of marginalisation and prophetic ministry is lost to the call of managerialism. To counter this the message of both Merton and Leech remains both relevant and challenging.

## Notes

1. Kenneth Leech, *True God* (London: SPCK, 1985), p.147.

**Terry Drummond** was commissioned as a Church Army Evangelist in 1972 spending his ministry up to 2005 in urban communities, with a particular commitment to theological reflection on urban and public policy. He was a member of the Jubilee Group from 1975 and of Ken Leech's Support and Advisory Group at St. Botolph's Aldgate, Bishop of Southwark's Chaplain 2005 -10 and the Bishop's Advisor on Urban and Public Policy 2011 - 2015. In December 2016 he was ordained as a Distinctive Deacon in the Church of England. He was a close friend of Kenneth Leech for over forty years.

# Thomas Merton - Theologian of Resistance

## Kenneth Leech

'The men of the 25<sup>th</sup> and 50<sup>th</sup> centuries', wrote one commentator, 'when they read the spiritual literature of the 20th century, will judge the age by Merton.'<sup>1</sup> It is a statement with which many would concur. Jean Leclercq called Merton the man whom Christianity needed in a time of transition,<sup>2</sup> while David Tracy called him the most significant Christian figure in twentieth-century America.<sup>3</sup> Many similar claims have been made about this man. As we approach the twenty-fifth anniversary of his death, no doubt more such claims will be made.

I have two areas of doubt in relation to any proposed celebration of Merton. One is the danger of a Merton cult. Already that danger is a reality in some circles. For years now, various publishing houses have been competing with each other in the production of Mertoniana, much of it from the early period. Yet, as Daniel Berrigan once remarked, to judge Merton by *The Seven Storey Mountain* would be like judging Aquinas by the graffiti on his playpen.<sup>4</sup> Merton himself openly disowned, and dissociated himself from, much of this early material. My second area of doubt is that a celebration of Merton would be a peculiarly religious activity. This would be particularly ironic and damaging. Above all else, Merton was a transitional and marginal figure: transitional in relation to the shift from one phase of Catholic Christian culture to another; marginal to the Christian culture as a whole; influential and significant way beyond the confines of institutional Christianity.

Merton died on the same day as Karl Barth. In many respects, theologically, they were poles apart. Barth listed mysticism along with

atheism as one of the ideologies alien to the gospel. Yet it was Barth who wrote of early monasticism that it was 'a highly responsible and effective protest and opposition to the world, and not least to a worldly church, a new and specific way of combating it, and therefore a direct address to it.'<sup>5</sup> Barth and Merton in fact had a good deal in common. Both were theologians of resistance. Merton played a similar role in 1960s America, the America of Vietnam, of racial conflict, of the nuclear threat, to that played by Barth in the Hitler period. Merton himself saw similarities between the two periods. And as Barth inspired Niemöller, so Merton inspired the Berrigans. Both Barth and Merton wrote of the transcendence, of the darkness, of the hidden God.

In other ways they were very different. Barth represented the end of an era of arid evangelicalism in which God was wholly other, and in which both mysticism and social analysis were highly suspect. Merton represented the beginning of an era of integration, in which mysticism and the social gospel were seen to stand or fall together.

I want, then, to consider Merton as a theologian of resistance, one who helped to nourish the ground for a tradition of Christian resistance to the principalities and powers, a tradition which is in need of much further nourishment today. Merton was a social critic rather than a social activist, and his social criticism had developed over the years. It was not always so. *The Sign of Jonas* (1952) is widely seen as a major turning-point in his thinking about society, as is *Seeds of Destruction* (1964). From about 1958 onwards, according to F. J. Kelly, we can discern in Merton 'a vastly expanded social consciousness'.<sup>6</sup> The period from 1963 until his death in 1968 was the crucial period for the development of his social thought. By 1966, when *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* was published, the transition from the other-worldly, pre-Second Vatican Council Merton to the post-Second Vatican Council social theologian was almost complete.

The influences on Merton's social thinking were complex. It is important to note the date of his death, December 1968, in relation to the changes which were occurring within world Christianity. 1968 was the year of the student uprisings in France, the peak year of the New Left, the year of the shift from the psychedelic drug culture towards oriental mysticism. It was the year of Martin Luther King's murder, the year of uprisings in the black ghettos of the USA. In Britain it was the year of Enoch Powell's



'rivers of blood' speech, and of the second Race Relations Act. Theologically, 1968 was the year in which the term 'theology of liberation' was first used by Gustavo Gutierrez, though it was some years before it became widely known. Merton was greatly affected by the black rebellions and by the growth of the counter-culture. He was deeply influenced by Martin Luther King; but he died before the growth of liberation theology in both Latin America and the USA. It was not until 1972 that Rosemary Radford Ruether, with whom he had some important correspondence, published her *Liberation Theology*, in which she attempted to relate the liberation movements to the emerging feminist theological tradition. Merton died before all that had got under way, and he died before the charismatic renewal had really taken root.

We therefore need to look for theological influences in an earlier period of Catholic radicalism. I think the key figure is that of Dorothy Day and the *Catholic Worker*, the Catholic anarchist newspaper founded on May Day 1933 and still selling at 1 cent. 'The faithful persistence of Dorothy Day and the *Catholic Worker* is bearing much fruit', wrote Jim Wallis, founder of *Sojourners*, in 1985.<sup>7</sup> Merton was influenced by, and himself influenced, the thinking of these early Catholic radicals. It was an article which Merton wrote for the *Catholic Worker* in 1961 which led to his being silenced on issues of war and peace. This is part of what he wrote:

The present war crisis is something we have made entirely for and by ourselves. There is in reality not the slightest logical reason for war, and yet the whole world is plunging headlong into frightful destruction, and doing so *with the purpose of avoiding war and preserving peace!* This is true war-madness, an illness of the mind and spirit that is spreading with a furious and subtle contagion all over the world. Of all the countries that are sick, America is perhaps the most grievously afflicted. On all sides we have people building bomb shelters where, in case of nuclear war, they will simply bake slowly instead of burning quickly or being blown out of existence in a flash. And they are prepared to sit in these shelters with machine guns with which to prevent their neighbour from entering. This in a nation that claims to be fighting for religious truth along with freedom and other

values of the spirit. Truly we have entered the 'post Christian era' with a vengeance. Whether we are destroyed or whether we survive, the future is awful to contemplate.<sup>8</sup>

In his turn, Merton was a key figure in influencing a new generation of radical Christians. In 1964 he led a retreat on the spiritual roots of protest which was attended by some of the key figures who were to influence the Christian conscience of the 1960s and 1970s: the Berrigans, A. J. Muste, John Howard Yoder, and others. He was a major influence on Ernesto Cardenal, Joan Baez and Eldridge Cleaver. According to Henri Nouwen, who is often seen as his successor, he influenced an entire generation of American Catholics, while his effect on the evangelical radicals of the Sojourners generation, as well as on Anglican radicals such as William Stringfellow, is clear. Merton enabled these people to develop a theology of resistance. For he stressed: 'Theology does not exist merely to appease the already too untroubled conscience of the powerful and the established. A theology of love may also conceivably turn out to be a theology of revolution.'<sup>9</sup> The section of his book *Faith and Violence* entitled 'Towards a Theology of Resistance' is of major and abiding importance.<sup>10</sup>

However, in examining the influences on Merton, there is one major influence which is missing, and its 'missingness' is illustrated by one quotation in which Merton describes the relationship between spirituality and social change. 'For the world to be changed, man himself must begin to change it, and he must take the initiative. He must step forth to make a new kind of history. The change begins within himself.'<sup>11</sup> That quotation may ring bells, and remind readers of some other passages. For the missing influence is, of course, Karl Marx. Consider two quotations from Marx alongside the Merton quote:

The materialistic doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing ... forgets that circumstances are changed precisely by men and that the educator must himself be educated.<sup>12</sup>

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please: they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.<sup>13</sup>

In these two passages Marx is, first, repudiating the mechanistic doctrine (often mistaken for Marxism itself) and asserting the crucial role of human beings in shaping history and effecting social change; but, secondly, stressing that new history is made out of the old. Those truths need to be allowed to stand alongside, and to modify, Merton's rather simplified view of how change occurs. Yet I can see no evidence that Merton ever read Marx, though he had certainly read Fromm on Marx, and it is inevitable that, as a sensitive, intelligent 1960s American, he had read Marcuse.<sup>14</sup> But Marcuse's Marxism was a very gentrified, very elitist, very Bohemian kind of Marxism. Indeed to call it Marxist at all is perhaps to speak ill of the dead.<sup>15</sup>

Merton's relationship to Marxism is interesting. He uses a number of concepts which are also used by Marx and by writers within the Marxist tradition: false consciousness, unmasking of illusion, alienation, and so on. In his oft-quoted letter to Jean Leclercq, he made the observation that 'the role of the monk in the modern world, especially Marxist, is not survival but prophecy.'<sup>16</sup> His last talk, printed in *The Asian Journal*, was on monastic and Marxist perspectives. He was clearly fascinated by Marxism. Yet there is no evidence of any serious attempt to grapple with the issues raised by the Marxist tradition: issues such as class, profit, and the economic roots of conflict. Yet I suspect that Merton realized that the Christian/Marxist dialogue needed to move into a new phase, possibly moving beyond the conceptual and cultural limitations of both traditions.

At heart, Thomas Merton was a personalist. He was deeply concerned with the dehumanizing influence of technology, which he saw as 'an expensive and complicated way of cultural disintegration'.<sup>17</sup> This is linked with his understanding of the human person as essentially theomorphic and essentially contemplative. His critique of modern technocratic society was based upon its effect on the human person. Theologically, Merton's stress on the divine image, and on the ordinariness of contemplation, are very important. He agreed with Julian of Norwich that there is a part of our nature which never consents to sin. He wrote of a point at the centre of our being which was untouched by sin, a point of pure truth.<sup>18</sup> With Michael Ramsey, he held that contemplation was part of the normal equipment of Christian sanctity.<sup>19</sup> But modern society had made contemplation unnatural. He saw here a central task for Christian

theology:

Our duty to preserve the human person in his integrity, his freedom and his individuality, and to arm him spiritually against the peril of totalitarianism, is not just something it would be nice for us to discuss and perhaps to study. It is an urgent task which demands insistently to be carried out. ... It is the most important task of the Catholic intellectual.<sup>20</sup>

For this task a social theology was a necessary prerequisite. However, Western Christianity, and American Christianity in particular, Catholic and Protestant, had for years been dominated by individualism. Merton loathed individualism, and held it to be extremely dangerous.

Individualism is nothing but the social atomism that has led to our present inertia, passivism and spiritual decay, yet it is individualism which has really been the apparent ideal of our western society for the past two or three hundred years. This individualism, primarily an economic concept with a pseudo-spiritual and moral façade, is in fact mere irresponsibility.<sup>21</sup>

However, the movement away from Christian individualism towards some kind of political theology does not automatically or necessarily lead to a theology of resistance or liberation. The very term 'political theology' was first used by Carl Schmitt, who helped prepare the way for the Nazi State. Merton saw clearly the dangers of the growth of the Christian Right with its pathological anti-Communism. In an article in *Peace News* in 1964 he wrote:

The mystique of American Christian rightism, a mystique of violence, of apocalyptic threats of hatred, and of judgment, is perhaps only a more exaggerated and most irrational manifestation of a rather universal attitude common to Christians in many countries: the conviction that the great evil in the world today can be identified in Communism and that to be a Christian is simply to be anti-Communist. Communism is the antichrist. Communism is the source of all other problems, all conflicts. All the evils in the world can be traced to the machinations of Communists.<sup>22</sup>

Twenty years later, in 1984, President Reagan was to identify in Soviet Communism the 'focus of evil in the modern world'.

It is worth noting in passing that Merton held that 'a man cannot be a perfect Christian — that is a saint — unless he is also a Communist', though he rejected what he termed the 'spurious Communism of the Marxists'.<sup>23</sup>

Central to Merton's critique of the Christian Right was his belief that the Constantinian era, the era of a Church/State alliance, in which theology served to reinforce and provide ideological support for the dominant social system, was now over. 'The time has come for judgment to be passed on this history. I can rejoice in this fact, believing that the judgment will be a liberation of the Christian faith from servitude to and involvement in the structures of the secular world.'<sup>24</sup> This is, of course, highly relevant to the present debate about the relationship of the Church of England to the State. The case against establishment is not simply that it does not work, though that is true, or that it perpetuates the falsehood of a national religion (the present Archbishop of York being a leading exponent of this position); the case is that there is something intrinsically alien to the gospel in a Church which is so entangled, so compromised with the secular order that it is incapable of passing judgment upon it.

Modern establishment religion which allies itself to an unjust, and therefore violent, social order clings to the Constantinian age and seeks to preserve it as 'Christian civilization', seeks to preserve it if necessary by nuclear destruction. Merton's concern with political oppression, racial violence and nuclear war was part and parcel of his understanding of theology as resistance and critique rather than as part of the ideological apparatus of a dying order. His comments on violence, written in 1968, speak to us in Britain in the aftermath of the Scarman Report and the urban uprisings of recent years. 'The problem of violence then is not the problem of a few rioters and rebels but the problem of a whole social structure which is outwardly ordered and respectable and inwardly ridden by psychopathic obsessions and delusions.'<sup>25</sup> The practice of nonviolence within such a society is not simply a tactic, but a witness to a radically different way of life, a different understanding of reality, and is therefore essentially subversive.

Merton was extremely critical of those who attacked the violence of rioters or vandals and ignored the structural violence of the State. For the State

simply legalises the use of force by big criminals against little criminals — whose small scale criminality is largely *caused* by the large scale injustice under which they live.<sup>26</sup>

Modern technological mass murder ... is abstract, corporate, businesslike, cool, free of guilt feelings and therefore a thousand times more deadly and effective than the eruption of violence out of individual hate.<sup>27</sup>

The responsibility of the Christian, and of the monk as a kind of walking sacrament of all Christians, is to witness and to struggle against the violence of the State whose sacrament is the bomb. And so I turn to Merton's approach to nuclear weapons.

In *Faith and Violence* Merton referred to the condemnation in the Vatican document *Gaudium et Spes* of acts of indiscriminate war and of blind obedience. He wrote of it: 'In the language of most American Catholics today this rates as an incitement to treason.'<sup>28</sup> In his own open letter to the American bishops in 1963, in preparation for the Second Vatican Council, he called for a total renunciation of nuclear weapons. 'The common man, the poor man, the man who has no hope but in God, everywhere looks to the church as the last hope of protection against the unprincipled machinations of militarists and power politicians.'<sup>29</sup> The bomb, Merton held, was more than a destructive instrument. It symbolized and manifested a society based on 'a true war madness, an illness of the mind and spirit that is spreading with a subtle and dangerous contagion all over the world.'<sup>30</sup> Merton's thinking on the bomb is expressed with contemporary impact in his article 'Red or Dead: The Anatomy of a Cliché':

Those in this country who are now seriously thinking that it would be worthwhile to risk the destruction of the whole world rather than allow it to become Communist are not only defeatists who have lost their grasp of the democratic ideal, they are thinking like Hitler. They have a Nazi mentality. And

unfortunately they have much more powerful weapons of destruction than the Nazis ever knew. Their so-called 'thought', their puerile aberrations, are no small matter. In so far as they are prepared seriously to implement their thinking by destructive action, these men are already war criminals. And those who follow them in their line of thought are in danger of becoming criminals themselves.<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, in his writings on racism, Merton pointed to the dilemma of the white liberal in wanting to support the black civil rights struggle without recognizing that the critique of racism is a critique of the *entire* social and economic order. Merton opposed white participation in the march on Washington in 1963 on the grounds that it would obscure the black claim that society must change if blacks are to enter it as equals. In 1963 he warned that if white society was not able to change, then violence would follow. 'He [the Negro] is telling us that unless we can enter into a vital and Christian relationship with him, there will be hate, violence and civil war indeed; and from this violence perhaps none of us will emerge whole.'<sup>32</sup>

The Chicago theologian Martin Marty attacked Merton as irresponsible, but later apologized. Merton himself followed up his earlier comments with his 'Letter to a White Liberal' of 1967. In this he wrote of the reactions of American blacks:

Though he knows you will not support all his demands, he is well aware that you will be forced to support some of them in order to maintain your image of yourself as a liberal. He also knows, however, that your material comforts, your security, and your congenial relations with the establishment are much more important to you than your rather volatile idealism, and that when the game gets rough you will be quick to see your own interests menaced by his demands. And you will sell him down the river for the five hundredth time in order to protect yourself. For this reason, as well as to support your self-esteem, you are very anxious to have a position of leadership and control in the Negro's fight for rights, in order to be able to apply the brakes when you feel it is necessary.<sup>33</sup>

Merton recognized the reality of structural institutional racism, a term first popularized by Stokely Carmichael in 1967, before most Americans did. He saw that racism was not a matter of personal awareness, a disfiguring personal disease, but was an integral part of the structures of an unjust order. He saw that no progress can be made, in Church, political parties or wherever, in eliminating racism unless it is first recognized. He saw that much white liberal rhetoric was rooted in a paternalistic contempt of black people.

Finally, the role of the monk as a subversive. Merton saw the monastic vocation as one of continual interrogation, uninterrupted critique, *diakrisis*, discernment of the signs of the times. He wrote of monasticism as a statement, a protest. The monk is concerned with the recovery of authentic language. 'When speech is in danger of perishing or being perverted in the amplified noise of beasts, perhaps it becomes obligatory for a monk to speak.'<sup>34</sup> The monk plunges into the heart of the world in order to 'listen more intently to the deepest and most neglected voices that proceed from its inner depths.'<sup>35</sup> The monk is a marginal figure in the world.

At the heart of Merton's social criticism was his concern to inspire doubt and radical questioning. Berrigan's famous claim that the time would soon come when the pursuit of contemplation would be a strictly subversive activity was a claim rooted in Merton's thought.<sup>36</sup> A central part of the contemplative role is the cultivation of that seed of holy discontent, that refusal to be at ease in Zion, that relentless unmasking of illusion and falsehood. For such a task, clarity of perception is vital, and this involves both a contemplative listening to God in silence and also a listening to what Sheila Rowbotham has called 'the language of silence' in the world.<sup>37</sup> Merton saw that one of the greatest dangers in the modern world lay in the absence, or suppression, of this spirit of doubt and questioning. His approach to this issue comes out dearly in his 'Devout Meditation on the Death of Adolf Eichmann'. Eichmann, he says, was entirely sane — too sane. He had a profound respect for law, he was obedient to authority, he served his government well. He seems to have suffered no guilt, no stress, no psychosomatic illness. He dutifully, and uncritically, obeyed his orders, which happened to involve the extermination of thousands of people. Merton goes on:



The sanity of Eichmann is disturbing. We equate sanity with a sense of justice, with humaneness, with prudence, with the capacity to love and understand other people. We rely on the sane people of the world to preserve it from barbarism, madness, destruction. And now it begins to dawn on us that it is precisely the sane people who are the most dangerous.<sup>38</sup>

Were Merton alive today he would have seen no need to alter his words.

## Notes

1. Clifford Stevens in *American Benedictine Review*, March 1969, p.7.
2. Thomas Merton, preface to *Contemplation in a World of Action* (New York: Image, 1973), p.12.
3. Cited in Gerald Twomey in *Thomas Merton: Prophet in the Belly of a Paradox* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), p.1.
4. Daniel Berrigan, *No Bars to Manhood* (New York: Mentor, 1970), p.139.
5. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 4.2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), p.13.
6. F. J. Kelly, *Man before God: Thomas Merton on Social Responsibility* (New York: Doubleday, 1974), p.xix.
7. Jim Wallis in *Sojourners*, January 1985. On Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement see Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981); William D. Miller, *Dorothy Day: A Biography* (New York: Harper & Row 1981); Mel Piehl, *Breaking Bread: The Catholic Worker and the Origins of Catholic Radicalism in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982); and Nancy L. Roberts, *Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1984).
8. Reprinted in *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1966), pp. 112 ff. See also James H. Forest, *Thomas Merton's Struggle with Peacemaking* (Erie, PA: Benet Press, 1984).
9. Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p.9.
10. *Faith and Violence*, pp.3-13.
11. Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960), p.65.
12. Karl Marx, *Third Thesis on Feuerbach*.
13. Karl Marx, *The 18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.
14. According to William Shannon, who edited Merton's letters, he was well read in both Fromm and Marcuse. The influence of Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man* is clear from the text of Merton's final talk, 'Marxism and Monastic perspectives'. See Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal* (London, Sheldon

- Press, 1974), pp. 334-6. See also Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (London: Sheldon Press, 1986), pp. 527, 563.
15. On Marcuse see Alasdair MacIntyre, *Marcuse* (London: Fontana 1970).
  16. Letter to Jean Leclercq cited in Monica Furlong, *Merton: A Biography* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), p. 320.
  17. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Image, 1968), p. 73.
  18. *Conjectures*, p. 142. For Merton's assessment of Julian see his *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Delta, 1967), pp. 128-53.
  19. See Thomas Merton, *What is Contemplation?* (Burns & Oates 1948), for an early statement of this position. Cf. also his 'Is Mysticism Normal?' in *Commonweal* (1949-50), p. 95. For Ramsey's view see Michael Ramsey, *Sacred and Secular* (London: Longman, 1965), p. 45.
  20. 'Christianity and Mass Movements' in *Cross Currents*, 9.3 (1969), p. 211. [The article is included in Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions*, as 'Christianity and Totalitarianism'.]
  21. *Disputed Questions*, p. x.
  22. *Peace News*, 18 September 1964, p. 6.
  23. Cited in George Woodcock, *Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet: A Critical Study* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1978), p. 96. [The original quotation comes from Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, chapter 24: 'He who is not with me is against me.']
  24. Preface to the Japanese edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1966) cited in Forest, op. cit., p. 22. [The preface is included in Thomas Merton, *Reflections on my work* (Glasgow: Collins, 191989), pp. 69-76.]
  25. *Faith and Violence*, p. 3.
  26. *Faith and Violence*, p. 4.
  27. *Faith and Violence*, p. 7.
  28. *Faith and Violence*, p. 41.
  29. The Open Letter was printed in *Vox Regis* (Christ the King Seminary, Bonaventure, New York, December 1965) and reprinted in *National Catholic Reporter*, 29 April 1983. [The letter is included in Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom – Letters in times of crisis*, with the title 'Open letter to the American hierarchy' (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994), pp. 88-94.]
  30. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1966), pp. 122-3.
  31. This article, originally written for *Fellowship*, is published in Britain by Pax Christi (St Francis of Assisi, Pottery Lane, London W1 14NQ) and the Fellowship of Reconciliation (9 Coombe Road, New Maiden, Surrey) as a 10p leaflet.'
  32. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy,

- 1964), pp.53-4.
33. *Seeds of Destruction*, pp.33-4.
  34. *Seeds of Destruction*, pp.170-1.
  35. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1973), p.25.
  36. Daniel Berrigan, *America is Hard to Find* (London: SPCK, 1973), p.77.
  37. Sheila Rowbotham, *Dreams and Dilemmas* (London: Virago, 1983), p.8.
  38. *Thomas Merton on Peace* (New York: McCall's, 1971), pp.160-5. [The excerpt is from Merton's essay, 'A devout meditation in memory of Adolf Eichmann', which is included in Thomas Merton, *Raids on the unspeakable* (Tunbridge Wells, Kent: Burns & Oates, 1977), pp.29-33.]

At the time that this article was first published John Habgood was the Archbishop of York. The Scarman Report was commissioned by the UK Government following the 1981 riots in Brixton, an area of London with high unemployment, high crime rates, poor housing, no amenities and with a predominantly African-Caribbean population.

The article was first given at a conference at the Church of Christ the King, Gordon Square, London, on 2nd May 1987, and was then published by SPCK in the journal *Theology* in November 1988. It was reprinted by The Jubilee group in 1993 with some revisions (as part of a small pamphlet which also included a chronology of Merton's life and a select bibliography) to commemorate the 25th anniversary of Merton's death on 10th December 1968. The pamphlet also included the following details about The Jubilee Group, a loose network of socialist Christians, mainly in the Anglican Catholic tradition:

Since the Jubilee Group began in 1974, a major emphasis in all our work has been the interaction of contemplation and action, and the need for all Christian action to be rooted in a deep life of prayer. Merton has been an important influence on many of us. We hope that this short pamphlet will introduce many others to the thinking of this truly prophetic figure.

*The article is reproduced by permission of Terry Drummond, literary trustee of The Jubilee Group.*

## A Vision of Hope and Joy – Patricia Higgins

*Report on the Reflective Day for Advent led by Fr Dan Horan OFM, held in London in conjunction with the WCCM, on Saturday 2 December 2017*

For me the defining element of the day was the words of Merton, quoted by Dan at the start: 'Our task is to seek and find Christ in our world as it is, not as it might be. Our Advent is the celebration of this hope.' His talk was a powerful reminder of the need for hope and trust in this period of waiting and anticipation.

The room was full to capacity. There was a palpable sense of excitement and interest. It was noted by regular members of the meditation centre that there were many more men than usual in the audience, both young and old. It is usually only regular speakers who attract this number of people. It felt very encouraging that an unknown speaker talking about Thomas Merton had generated this level of interest.

As is the practice at the centre the day started with a period of meditation before the presentation began. Then Fr Dan brought Merton alive in a way that highlighted his humanity, the combination of his generosity and selfishness, his humility and arrogance, the saint and the sinner, his rootedness in the earth with his recognition that we all share in an original unity. He quoted from Merton's 'Fourth and Walnut Epiphany': 'I suddenly realised I loved all of these people and none of them were or ever could be totally alien to me.'

Fr Dan stressed that each of us is created by God to be who we are, and honouring that call is the journey of a lifetime. It requires dedication, commitment, patience and attention. This journey is not easy but one which yields rewards in ways beyond our imagination.

He pointed out how God's love and mercy played a central role in Merton's Cosmic Christology, that original sin, put another way, is but original forgetfulness – we constantly forget who we are and whose we are.

In the Q & A session some of the questions expressed some anxiety, a need to be reassured that what Merton was saying was firmly grounded in the Scriptures. Fr Dan was able each time to demonstrate that this was the case. The way in which he replied to the questions was most impressive.

The lunch was a bring and share. There was some anxiety that the food would not be sufficient, but indeed it was, generous and plentiful in the spirit of Merton and monastic hospitality.

In the afternoon session Fr. Dan addressed Merton's move towards social and political action. He reminded us that many of his followers were scandalised by this. His response to the issues of racism and civil rights, war and violence, poverty and injustice are as relevant today as they were then. He used the present situation in the USA to highlight the persistent issues of racism and injustice, citing amongst recent events the 'Black Lives Matter' movement as clear evidence that the issues have not gone away.

It was a wonderful day sharing food, fellowship, ideas, and Thomas Merton's powerful vision of hope and joy for Advent. All thanks to everyone involved and to Father Dan for delivering this vision in such a lively, inspirational way.

**Note:**

The quotes in the first paragraph are from Merton's essay, 'Advent: Hope or Delusion?', written in 1963. It is included in *Seasons of Celebration*.

**Patricia Higgins** is a retired teacher who lives in London. She has served on the TMS committee since 2014. She has become increasingly interested in the nature of the relationship between mysticism and resistance. She is a member of the W.C.C.M. (World Community of Christian Meditation) and is actively involved in issues around the cause of the Palestinians and that of the environment.

*from Merton's journal entry for Easter Day, 1968:*

The last three days of Holy Week were beautiful, brilliant days. The finest of all the spring. My redbuds are in bloom and the apple trees are in full bloom down by the monastery beehives. It was wonderful today walking under their great dim clouds full of blooming bees.

.....

As I was coming back to the hermitage from the monastery after dinner, a deer, a big doe, flew down the field in the bottoms, heads up, white-flag of a tail erect, passing in front of me barely fifty yards away.

.....

It is a delight to be in the Easter O ce again — almost unbelievable, the first day or two, each year. It is Easter! The Alleluias are back, the short lesson from Hosea, etc.

## Silence and Prayer – Kenneth Leech

One of the most popular comedy shows in Britain in the 1950s was ‘The Goon Show’. I recall one incident in the series which involved a telephone call: the Goon who answered said, ‘Who is speaking? Who is that? Who is it? Who is that speaking? Who is speaking?’ Eventually a voice answered, ‘You are speaking.’

Much of our life and prayer is such continual talk-talk, but not necessarily conversation, not necessarily dialogue. For real conversation involves listening and, conversely, authentic listening can only occur in the midst of a conversation. Without conversation ‘listening’ comes too late, and, whether in prayer or in life as a whole, such listening becomes emptiness.

Fr Austin Smith, a Passionist priest living in the Toxteth area of Liverpool, the scene of the 1981 uprisings, wrote in an article of 1985:<sup>1</sup>

When the smoke has cleared and the sun has set over the debris and the last siren screamed its way into the night, they usually arrive. Important people they are. If they are not from the very top of the pyramid, though they too sometimes come, they are certainly from around the top of the middle half. Document cases under their arms, looking very serious and intent, engaging from time to time in snatched bits of conversation with attentive underlings, they tour the streets, stop from time to time for a few words with a bewildered resident, simultaneously reject and invite the press and the TV cameras, and make for the 5.50 back to the centre of power. I do not doubt their sincerity, at least some of them, for they have been known to weep. ...

There is a piece of language which always fascinated me. When an argument explodes during one of the many consultations, it is usually silenced by the chief amongst the ‘theys’ with the words, ‘Look, we have really come to listen.’

This listening is detached from conversation, however, so it is *deaf listening*. Listening and conversation must go together. There is a necessary dialectic of word and silence in all human conversation, in Christian liturgy, in our brooding on Scripture, and in our own interior dialogue of the heart.

But in prayer and in life, silence is often experienced as threatening –

or at least, difficult and embarrassing. And some silence is embarrassing. There is a silence which is the result of awkwardness, of uncertainty, of a sense of our rootlessness. There is an angry silence. There is a silence of coldness, of fermenting resentment and cruelty. And it is to protect ourselves from such disturbing silences that we get into the habit of surrounding ourselves with external noise. But then, when this external noise is taken away, as in a retreat or in the atmosphere of enforced solitary confinement, in sickness or in prison, we are confronted with our own internal clamour. The real threat to authentic inner silence is thus revealed: it is not external noise, but the noises in our heads. When, after living on main roads since 1939, I moved in 1971 to Canterbury where my only immediate neighbours were the dead Saxon kings, I realized that the real obstacle to silence and prayer was the noise within me. I understood how at times the internal clamour becomes so unbearable that we 'go to pieces'.

A major element in the preparation for a prayerful life is learning how to respond to our internal clamour, to the confusion of images and ideas, the turmoil of concern, the brooding anger and bitterness, the sexual fantasies which distress religious people, the multiplicity of thoughts: and, most subtle and most deflecting of all, the thoughts *about* God which detract from the encounter *with* God. But the time spent on this process is not wasted time. Archbishop Michael Ramsey, when asked on one occasion how much time he spent each day in prayer, replied, 'Two minutes—but I spend an hour preparing.'

Most spiritual guides within the classic tradition warn against wasting our energy combating these noises. Instead of engaging in a direct warfare, they advise, in the words of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, that the distracting thoughts are placed beneath a 'cloud of forgetting', combined with an oblique method of attack: piercing through the distractions with short, directed prayers. 'Short prayer pierces heaven.' A major part of our prayer time must be devoted to this process of reducing the range of activity, the range of images within our heads. The value of the Jesus Prayer, of visual images, of the use of phrases of Scripture, lies here.

Some writers, such as Robert Llewelyn and the Ulanovs, suggest that instead of responding negatively to our inner noise, we approach all distractions, fantasies and fragmented thoughts with a more positive response.<sup>2</sup> They say we need to experience those parts of ourselves which surface in prayer, to accept them as integral elements of the person who prays, and yet to move beyond them. Only by accepting these distractions as a part of us can we escape from captivity to them.

Nevertheless, this process of integration cannot be begun or develop without opportunities for sustained, reflective, penetrating silence. It is in silence that we make progress in the inward journey.

Silence, then, is a vital dimension of our lives, of our self-knowledge. Without it we are only partly alive, living on the surface of consciousness. The mystics tell us that self-knowledge is akin to God-knowledge. Thus Julian of Norwich tells us that it is easier to know God than to know ourselves, for God is the ground in which we stand.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, St Augustine speaks of the 'return to the heart', of the need to seek God within, at our own true centre:

Crying to God is not done with the physical voice, but with the heart: many are noisy with their mouths, but with their hearts averted, are able to obtain nothing. If then you cry to God, cry out inwardly where he hears you.<sup>4</sup>

There are many pastoral tasks for which the segregated atmosphere of the theological college or seminary is highly inappropriate. But using this experience for the cultivation of inwardness, of real inner prayerfulness, of interior silence, seems sensible to me. This is a good use of time, and one which will be of permanent value in our future ministry. I suspect the only real purpose of the residential seminary in the church of the future lies in the area of cultivation of silence, of contemplation, and of theological reflection in stillness and attention.

In a society and in a church which neglects silence, we are going to need solid chunks of silence and solitude if we are to recover a balance. Hence the importance of retreat in which we maintain an external silence and seek an internal silence. The external silence is not difficult. The difficulty lies in effecting a transition from the concentrated period of external silence to an interiorized silence during the other days. It calls for what the Eastern ascetical tradition calls the 'binding of the mind', in order that the heart, the total personality, may be liberated. Silence and solitude are necessary ingredients in the process of liberation, and as I suggested earlier, they are the preparation for our ability to listen, they are the preparation for dialogue.

A society, or a church, which has ceased to listen to the neglected voices within its own boundaries, a society in which lines of communication between the poor and the powerful, between women and men, between city and suburb, have broken down, will not find it easy to listen to the word of God. Communication, inward and outward, is



indivisible. As we seek to grow in silence, in communion, in solidarity with one another, with our brothers and sisters whom we have seen, may we grow also in communion with God whom we have not seen.

### **Notes**

1. Austin Smith CP, in *The Bishops and the Economy*, ed. Kenneth Leech, Jubilee Group, 1985, p.38.
2. Robert Llewelyn, *The Positive Role of Distraction in Prayer*, Oxford, SLG Press, Fairacres Publication 65, 1977; Ann and Barry Ulanov, *Primary Speech: A Psychology of Prayer*, Atlanta, John Knox Press, 1982.
3. Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, Ch. 63.
4. Thomas A. Hand, *Augustine on Prayer*, Westminster, Newman Press, 1963, p.70.

This reflection is the first of three reflections with the overall title, *Silence and Ministry*. The other two are 'Silence and Conflict' and 'Silence and Ministry', both included in this journal. They were given originally at Seabury Western Theological Seminary, Evanston, Illinois, during a Quiet Day at Eastertide 1986 and subsequently published by SLG Press, Oxford (Fairacres Publication 102) in 1987. Reprinted by permission. ©The Sisters of the Love of God 1987

# **Alive to the Splendour**

## **A Weekend with Thomas Merton**

**Friday 22 — Sunday 24 June 2018**

*held at*

*The Cathedral of the Isles, Isle of Cumbrae*

The Isle of Cumbrae is a 10 minute ferry ride across the Clyde estuary from Largs, 35 miles west of Glasgow

with **Stephen Dunhill, Revd Canon John McLuckie & Revd Canon Dr Anne Tomlinson.**

For further details see:

**<http://cathedraloftheisles.org/college/retreats/>**

# The Paradox of Silence

Tony McClelland

Let the words fall  
as seeds from the sower's open hand,  
into the soil of silence.

There let them,  
hidden from sight,  
and in their own good time,  
bear fruit.

Let silence hold the words,  
and in some unexpected morning,  
they will greet the sky.

Thus the paradox of silence:  
without this soil words find no root,  
but to be fruitful,  
it must, from time to time,  
make way for words.

**Tony McClelland** is a minister in the Birmingham Circuit of the Methodist Church. A few years ago he had to retire from active work because his health is often poor. That enforced stillness has opened up a space in which words sometimes emerge. Amazingly he has found that sometimes these words express what others too are experiencing.

# Theology and the Back Streets

## Kenneth Leech

Today my work base is located at St Botolph's Crypt in Aldgate, at the point where the City of London ends and the East End begins. I am employed here, on the staff of this inner city parish, as a theologian. The Crypt has, for thirty years, been the main centre for homeless people in the area. My task, in communion with my comrades and co-workers, is to try and make creative and redemptive sense of the turmoil and upheaval which characterizes this part of London, and through it try to discern the will of God and the working out of God's activity.

In this attempt to work out a theology in the midst of social struggle, many people, living and dead, have been of literally crucial importance to me. I chose here eight people, all dead, whose work, writings, and influence, and in two cases, personal friendship, have helped to give shape and direction, vision and inspiration, to my work. I believe that such reliance on, and communion with, other human beings is a necessary part of what it means to be part of the 'communion of saints' and indeed what it means to be human at all.

### **Sentinel on the world's frontier:**

#### **The contemplative spirituality of Thomas Merton**

'The men of the twenty-fifth and fiftieth centuries', wrote one commentator, 'when they read the spiritual literature of the twentieth Century, will judge the age by Merton.'<sup>1</sup> In spite of all the exaggerated claims, and the growth of a cult around his memory, there is no doubt that Thomas Merton (1915-68) was one of the most significant figures in the history of modern Christianity. One of the most prolific authors of his day, Merton was, for most of his life, an enclosed Trappist monk. He once wrote of his vocation:

Night is our diocese and silence is our ministry.  
Poverty our charity and helplessness our tongue-tied sermon.  
Beyond the scope of sight and sound we dwell upon the air  
Seeking the world's gain in an unthinkable experience.  
We are exiles in the far end of solitude, living as listeners  
With hearts attending to the skies we cannot understand:  
Waiting upon the first far drums of Christ the Conqueror,  
Planted like sentinels on the world's frontier.<sup>2</sup>

Two images dominate this poem: watching and listening. They are the key elements in contemplative prayer: vision and attention, the ministry of eyes and ears. There is another image: that of helplessness, marginality and bafflement. Together they represent the life of Thomas Merton, and, in a most powerful way, the situation of Christians in the present age, the situation which he embodied and symbolised.

Merton's life was a struggle with illusion, a struggle for humanity. In all his writing he laid great emphasis on the importance of 'accepting ourselves as we are in our confusion, infidelity, disruption, ferment and even desperation'.<sup>3</sup> He had seen many examples of people who were never themselves and who wore out their minds and bodies in trying to have other people's experiences.<sup>4</sup> So Merton was concerned with the attainment of solitude, of interior harmony and peace. His writings were taken up with such themes as the desert, conflict, and contemplation in the midst of action. In his view, contemplation was not a way of escape, an avoidance of action. It was an advance into the reality of solitude and the desert, into the confrontation with poverty and the void. Only through this process could any wholeness be achieved.

I discovered Merton in the midst of a very active ministry in Soho. He was a wise guide to me in a number of ways. He saw the danger of 'do-gooders' who rushed into the work of helping others, but did not deepen their own self-understanding and integrity. They could only communicate to others the contagion of their own obsessions, delusions, and prejudices.<sup>5</sup> Merton was a prophetic sign and warning to me as I slogged away at the problems of Soho, but he was also an illuminating symbol, a light for my path. For he spoke to me of the work of the solitary explorer, the monk who searched the existential depths of faith. The monk in Merton's vision was a marginal, restless person. The monk withdrew from 'the world' in order to 'deepen fundamental human experience'.<sup>6</sup> The monk confronted humanity at the point of darkness and despair. I

came to see that what Merton said about the monk was actually true of all Christians in the modern world. 'The monk is essentially someone who takes up a critical attitude towards the contemporary world and its structures.'<sup>7</sup> But Merton went further than this: he held that the marginal position of the monk brought him into a solidarity with other marginal people and groups.

What drew me to Merton most of all was his sense of the holiness of the common, the immense dignity and value of ordinary life. For here was a mystic of the streets, one who saw glory in the midst of the common life. So, in a well-known account of one incident in his life, Merton wrote:

In Louisville, at the corner of 4th and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs. That we could not be alien to one another, even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness.<sup>8</sup>

The sense of holiness of the world, and of the dignity and God-shaped character of human beings, which comes through so strongly in these words, was central to Merton's mysticism. It was through the common that one encountered the holy, through human beings in their ordinariness and common life that one encountered the divine. Merton's spirituality was utterly incarnational and worldly. For it was into this world that Christ had come, and it was here, and only here, that he could be discovered, known, served and loved.

Into this world, this demented inn, in which there is absolutely no room for Him at all, Christ has come uninvited. But because He cannot be at home in it, because He is out of place in it, and yet He must be in it, His place is with those others for whom there is no room. His place is with those who do not belong, who are rejected by power because they are regarded as weak, those who are discredited, who are denied the status of persons, tortured, exterminated. With those for whom there is no room, Christ is present in this world.<sup>9</sup>

Merton helped me to see that all of what is called 'social ministry' is in

fact a discovery of Christ, a revelation and epiphany of God's presence, a working out of the truth of the incarnation in terms of human relationships.

But Merton was a social critic as well as a servant. Or rather his servanthood was not to the false values of the world but to the prophetic Christ, the challenger and disturber of human illusion. He spoke words of truth to a world which existed in 'the womb of collective illusion'.<sup>10</sup> Much of Merton's later writing was of a prophetic kind, an expression of his disturbing ministry of interrogation directed towards conventional notions of reality and sanity. Merton saw real dangers in sanity, dangers which are brought out most clearly in his 'Devout Meditation on the Death of Adolf Eichmann'. Eichmann had been pronounced perfectly sane by a psychiatrist at his trial. How much easier it would have been for us all had he, and other key figures within the Nazi terror, been treated as psychotic, deeply deranged, mad. Yet he was quite sane, without doubt or inner turmoil. Merton sees his sanity as the central problem because, while we equate sanity with justice, humanity, prudence and the capacity to love, and rely on the sane people to preserve the world from barbarism, in fact it is the sane people who are the most dangerous. In a world where spiritual values have no meaning, the whole concept of sanity has become meaningless.<sup>11</sup> Merton believed that the 1960s in the United States were comparable to the 1930s in Nazi Germany, and it was symbolic that he died on the same day as Karl Barth.<sup>12</sup> Both of them had been theologians of resistance, spiritual figures of great power in confrontation with evil.

Because of his knowledge of the Christian resistance to Nazism, and because of his deep perception into the contemporary religious climate in North America, Merton saw the danger of false spirituality, specifically of that turning in on the self which led to narcissism and self-absorption.<sup>13</sup> There could be no abiding support for the life of prayer in a false supernaturalism which was not rooted in real life. So a major part of Merton's writing was devoted to the attack on unreality in religious life. In Henri Nouwen's words, 'Merton understood that the unmasking of illusion belonged to the essence of the contemplative life.'<sup>14</sup> Yet Merton remained hopeful about human potential and about the power of grace. Like Julian of Norwich, he believed in the reality of the image of God in humankind. That image was indestructible. It had been disfigured, but it could never be destroyed. Like Julian, Merton believed that there was a point within every person which was untouched by sin.<sup>15</sup>

Merton embodied in himself the trends, crises, spiritual currents and

polarisations of his age in a unique way. While his early writing was addressed to the world of pre-Vatican II Roman Catholicism, his later work reflected, and helped to develop, a new age: the age of the counter-culture, of Vatican II, of the east-west dialogue, of the struggle for racial justice, of the recovery of the contemplative spirit, of resistance to nuclear weapons, of post-Constantinian Christianity. His book *The Sign of Jonas* (1952) was a significant turning point in his work, and by 1958 we were seeing 'a vastly expanded social consciousness'.<sup>16</sup> His writings from 1963 until his death in 1968 were the most important and most influential writings of his life. In these writings there was the concern to unite contemplation and action, the mystical and the prophetic, the revolution of the spirit and political revolution. These are among the key issues which will determine the shape of the Christianity of the future. They were the key issues of Merton's spiritual quest.

More than any other single individual, it was Merton who shaped my understanding of priesthood. I recall very vividly, at the height of struggles about drug policy in London in 1968, arriving back at St Anne's Chapel in the early hours, and reading, with renewed meaning, some words from *The Sign of Jonas*:

You just lie there, inert, helpless, alone, in the dark, and let yourself be crushed by the inscrutable tyranny of time. The plank bed becomes an altar and you lie there without trying to understand any longer in what sense you can be called a sacrifice. Outside in the world, where it is night, perhaps there is someone who suddenly sees that something he has done is terrible. He is most unexpectedly sorry and finds himself able to pray.<sup>17</sup>

More than any other words at that time, they helped me to see what I was up to.

## Notes

1. Clifford Stevens, 'Thomas Merton 1968: a profile in memoriam', *American Benedictine Review*, March 1969, p.7.
2. Thomas Merton, cited in George Woodcock, *Thomas Merton Monk and Poet* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1978), pp.41—2. [The lines are from the poem 'The Quickening of St John the Baptist'. See Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (London: Sheldon Press, 1978), pp.199-202.]
3. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday, 1968), p.71.
4. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre

- Dame Press, 1949), p.65.
5. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1980), p.164.
  6. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (London: Sheldon Press, 1974), p.305. From Appendix 3: 'Thomas Merton's View of monasticism – Informal talk delivered at Calcutta, October 1968'.
  7. *The Asian Journal*, p.329. From Appendix 7: 'Marxism and Monastic perspectives – Talk delivered at Bangkok on December 10, 1968'.
  8. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p.156.
  9. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (London: Burns and Oates, 1977), pp.51—2. From the section: 'The Time of the End Is the Time of No Room.'
  10. *Raids on the Unspeakable*, p.14.
  11. *Raids on the Unspeakable*, pp.29-33.
  12. See David W Gieve, *The Social Thought of Thomas Merton* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983), p.12.
  13. This is a recurring theme in Merton's writing. See especially Thomas Merton, *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* (Spencer, MA: Cistercian Publications, 1969).
  14. Henri Nouwen, *Pray to Live* (South Bend, IN: Fides, 1972), p.54.
  15. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p.142.
  16. F J Kelly, *Man Before God. Thomas Merton on Social Responsibility* (New York: Doubleday, 1974), p.xix.
  17. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (London: Burns and Oates, 1953), p.41.

*The text is taken from The Eye of the Storm—Spiritual Resources for the Pursuit of Justice by Kenneth Leech, published and copyright 1992 by Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, London, and reprinted here by permission of the publishers.*

The passage from *The Eye of the Storm* is taken from chapter 4: 'The Desert in the City – Contemplation and the Back Streets'. The author follows the section titled, 'Theology and the back streets: some inspirational figures from the past', with a short section on each of eight people, and highlights the way that they have shaped his ministry. They are: Julian of Norwich; St John of the Cross; Stewart Headlam (1847-1924) – the rebellious Anglican curate of Bethnal Green and considered by some to be the first true socialist in the Church of England; Thomas Merton; Dorothy Day; Saul Alinsky (1909-72) – American radical activist whose influence lies behind such movements as Citizens UK; Stanley Evans (1912-65) – Anglican radical and parish priest in Hackney, where he saw the role of the Church to reach out to people on the fringes; Ruth Glass (1912-90) – Academic and unwavering Marxist whose entire life and work was dominated by a passionate concern for the downtrodden and the oppressed. This article comprises the section on Merton which covers some of the same ground as his essay 'Thomas Merton – Theologian of Resistance', but testifies to the central importance of Merton in shaping the author's understanding of priesthood.



# Spiritual Formation & 'Progress in Prayer' in the Merton-Gullick Letters

Bonnie Bowman Thurston

## Introduction

An editor of Merton's letters, William Shannon noted that Merton's correspondence with Etta Gullick was 'the most charming set of all'.<sup>1</sup> Those who enjoy the historical and literary voyeurism of reading 'other people's mail' (albeit published) will find it an interesting example of epistolary friendship. It is also a significant and under-represented source in the secondary literature of Merton studies, especially valuable for his thinking about prayer and its nurture. In what follows I shall remind readers of Gullick's biography and the genesis of her correspondence with Merton,<sup>2</sup> then, as one example of the riches in this correspondence, briefly explore their discussion of 'progress in prayer', especially contemplative prayer with its attendant difficulties of self-consciousness and distractions.

## Etta Gullick and the Merton Correspondence

Etta Gullick was born in St. Andrews, Scotland in 1916. In 1935 she went up to Oxford, earning a B.A. (Hons.) in theology in 1938. In the same year she married C.F. W.R. (Rowley) Gullick, University Lecturer in Economic Geography and, from 1950, fellow of St. Edmund's Hall.<sup>3</sup> In WWII she worked in naval intelligence. After the war, the Gullicks returned to Oxford where they raised their son (Charles, b. 1944), and she wrote articles for *Chamber's Encyclopedia*. In the 1960s, Mrs. Gullick began to assist with the training and spiritual formation of Anglican ordinands at St. Stephen's House and was, by all accounts, wonderfully hospitable to those students and to her husband's. (His obituary mentions 'their kindness and hospitality' and 'Etta Gullick's powerful but deceptively mild-tasting punch'.<sup>4</sup>) Her letter to Merton of June 26, 1962 describes

social life in Oxford and includes this reflection about undergraduates, 'Contact with them gives one life. ... It's no use writing of mysticism separated from people.'

About 1958 Gullick's spiritual director, Dom Christopher Butler of Downside Abbey, suggested she prepare an English edition of 'The Rule of Perfection' by Benet of Canfield, a 16<sup>th</sup> C. Capuchin. In 1960 she wrote to Merton hoping he would write a preface for the book which, as it transpired, was never published,<sup>5</sup> although she provided scholarly articles on Canfield for *Collectanea Franciscana* and *Laurentianum*. Gullick was what we would now call 'an independent scholar'. She provided the original index for J.N.D. Kelly's classic study *Early Christian Creeds* (1958). She published serious articles in journals like *Sobornost*, *Clergy Review*, and *Theology* (published by SPCK), and, with the Roman Catholic Priest (and sometime Catholic Chaplain at Oxford) Fr. Michael Hollings,<sup>6</sup> edited in the 1970s several collections of prayers and books on prayer, including *The Shade of His Hand*, *The One Who Listens*, *You Must be Joking Lord*, *It's Me O Lord!* and *as was his custom*.<sup>7</sup> Later she wrote *Getting to Know You*, a book on prayer. Files at the Merton Studies Center in Kentucky and the archives of the Sisters of St. Joseph in Rochester, New York indicate that she provided extensive scholarly glosses for Shannon's edition of Merton's letters to her in *The Hidden Ground of Love*.<sup>8</sup>

The 'scholarly' correspondence between Merton and Gullick blossomed into an epistolary friendship. In addition to sharing her prayer life, she sent him entertaining accounts of Oxford and of her family's travels, quipping in a letter of April 27, 1967, 'You like chatty letters about things.' The Gullicks visited Merton at Gethsemani in April, 1967. The correspondence with Merton continued until his death in 1968; her last letter to him was February 13, 1968, his to her, April 26, 1968. In 1972 Gullick and her husband retired to the Isle of Man, where in 1973 she became a Lay Reader in the Church of England (and at his request, conducted her husband's funeral service). She died in 1986 after a short illness.

Merton's correspondence with Etta Gullick was more than a conduit from the England of his youth and a way to maintain contact with Europe.<sup>9</sup> Gullick was an intelligent and charming interlocutor, a well educated, and well read woman with an occasionally acerbic tongue and with whom he shared not only a lively interest in the classical spiritual writers of the Western Church (references to whom fill their letters), but in Eastern Christianity.<sup>10</sup> And they were engaged in similar work. Both were training young men for the priesthood, and, in Merton's case, for

monastic life. Merton's assignments as Master of Scholastics (1951-55) and Master of Novices (1955-65) paralleled to some degree Gullick's work at St. Stephen's House. Before turning to their discussion of 'progress in prayer', a brief section on their respective responsibilities will set the context for their correspondence.

After a decision that the monks in simple profession needed a more organized formation program, Merton became the first Master of Scholastics at Gethsemani (1951) and taught courses on Scripture, liturgy, and monastic history to the novices and young professed.<sup>11</sup> On January 10, 1952 there is a long entry in Merton's journal reflecting on this work and his own desire for solitude. He notes, 'They [his 'students'] refresh me with their simplicity.'<sup>12</sup> In October 1955 Merton became Master of Novices, 'taking responsibility for the formation of the young men just beginning their monastic life'.<sup>13</sup> His conferences followed the two year cycle of the novitiate and were primarily on monastic history and practice. According to Patrick O'Connell they were 'predominantly practical rather than academic',<sup>14</sup> to which, in the mid-1960's Merton added lectures on other subjects, including Sufism and modern literature. On November 27, 1961 Merton's journal reflects on the goodness of the novices, 'the wonder of each individual person among them, ... to have loved them and been loved by them with such simplicity and sincerity. ... From this kind of love necessarily springs hope.'<sup>15</sup>

In an autobiographical note for William Shannon, Gullick writes: 'About 1965 I started teaching on prayer at St. Stephen's House (an Anglican Theological College) and later lectured on great spiritual writers.'<sup>16</sup> St. Stephen's House, a High Church Anglo-Catholic theological college, was an affiliate institution of Oxford University, and which trained a series of subsequently distinguished Anglican priests. Those at St. Stephen's House (popularly known as 'Staggers') were studying for General Ordination Exams. All were preparing for the ministry, most for parish work. To say the least, they had very different lives from Merton's young monks. In a letter to Merton on July 1, 1961 Gullick explains that 'the men I teach are practical types with comparatively simple minds.'

In the late 1960's her weekly lectures at Pusey House, a mainstay of Anglo-Catholicism, were part of the theological faculty's provision. She also had Thursday sessions with the ordinands in addition to informal contact at chapel and in her home. As noted, her teaching focused on the works of 'great spiritual writers' (one student remembered lectures on the Flemish and Rhineland mystics, who were also of interest to Merton) and on the practice of prayer. Two of her former students with whom I

spoke remembered a quip: 'Pray bettah with Etta.' Another admitted that 'we weren't terribly cooperative.'

A student of Gullick's in the late 1960s kindly provided me with texts of two of her presentations, one in September 1968 and the other in February 1970. I may be mistaken, but if these are characteristic of her lectures, having taught American graduate seminarians for 7 years myself, I suspect her young men had not yet had enough experience in prayer to recognize much of what she was talking about. However, on June 4, 1965 Gullick wrote to Merton of 'a great wave of silence coming into the prayer of devout Anglicans'. 'It is a gift of God to this age,' she noted, and thought silent prayer was critical for her ordinands, 'critical for parish ministry'.

How one prepares others for monastic life or for ministry, or if, indeed, prayer can be 'taught' at all, are matters for debate (and subjects that appear in the correspondence). They form part of the backdrop for the following epistolary discussion of 'progress in prayer' which exemplifies the energetic give and take in the Merton-Gullick correspondence.

### **Progress in Prayer**

The subject of contemplative prayer entered their correspondence about six months after it began with a caveat from Merton who wrote on September 9, 1961:

I do not think strictly that contemplation should be the goal of 'all devout souls'. ... In reality I think a lot of them should be very good and forget themselves in virtuous action and love and let contemplation come in the window unheeded. ... They will be contemplatives without ever really knowing it. I feel that in the monastery here those who are too keen on being contemplatives ... make of contemplation an 'object' from which they are eternally separated.<sup>17</sup>

Having returned from a meeting in Istanbul with the Ecumenical Patriarch, Gullick's long reply (8 hand written pages) of October 8, 1961 concurs. 'I am sure you are right about letting contemplation come in through the window unheeded. If one looks for it one becomes self-conscious which is surely always fatal.' She responds to Merton's assertion that solitude is 'unavoidable and imperative'<sup>18</sup> by agreeing that "'Solitude" seems to come on one. I think it is hard to escape from. ... It is

less of a possession than most God given gifts.' She closes the letter by confessing, 'I am overcome with distractions which no doubt must be accepted with abandon — this is easier in theory than in practice.'

Interestingly, accepting distraction 'with abandon' is exactly Merton's advice in one of the conferences he gave in Alaska in 1968. 'What do you do with distractions?' he asked. 'You either simply let them pass by and ignore them, or you let them pass by and be perfectly content to have them. If you don't pay any attention to them, the distractions don't remain.'<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Gullick wrote in a 1966 article on prayer in *The Clergy Review*: 'Distractions may make us think that we are separated from God but provided they are not followed this will not be so. We must simply and humbly throw ourselves on God's mercy, and ... not attempt to fight them.'<sup>20</sup>

Early on the Merton-Gullick correspondence raised perhaps the two most important practical difficulties in contemplative prayer: self-consciousness and distraction. Distractions are the thoughts that intrude when one attempts to pray, and they are inevitable. On June 26, 1962 Gullick wrote a long letter that included material on mysticism and 'inturning', what she termed 'introversion in prayer', noting that it is strange to 'have a kind of union with God, and a flowing into Him and of being God', and yet so quickly 'become concerned with self in most foolish ways'. Merton thought that distraction in prayer has its tap root precisely in self-consciousness. In another of the Alaskan conferences in which he criticizes the use of the term 'mystic', Merton warns against 'reflecting upon one's self as an object. ... The whole essence of contemplative prayer is that the division between subject and object disappears.'<sup>21</sup> Here one hears the echo of Merton's studies of Buddhism.

Self-consciousness is a particularly insidious distraction, especially self-consciously worrying about making progress in prayer. Writing to Gullick on October 29, 1962 Merton noted:

There is too much conscious 'spiritual life' floating around us, and we are too aware that we are supposed to get somewhere. Well, where? If you reflect, the answer turns out to be a word that is never very close to any kind of manageable reality. If that is the case, perhaps we are already in that where. ... We should let go our hold upon our self and our will, and be in the Will in which we are.<sup>22</sup>

For Merton, as for Gullick, worrying about whether one is making

progress in prayer makes one self-conscious, which deflects from the truth of the Presence in the present, God's ubiquitousness.

Perhaps with her students' rudimentary grasp of prayer in mind, in her letter of November 2, 1962 Gullick notes: 'I've got rather a large number of pupils this term. They are a most interesting lot.' She goes on to remind Merton that 'when one is in the position of having no spiritual life as it is all life, it is hard to write about stages in the spiritual life.' Merton responds on January 18, 1963: 'What I object to about "the Spiritual Life" is the fact that it is a part, a section, set off as if it were a whole. It is an aberration to set off our "prayer" etc. from the rest of our existence as if we were sometimes spiritual, sometimes not. ... It is an aberration, it causes an enormous amount of useless suffering.... Our "life in the Spirit" is all-embracing, or should be. ... There is no spiritual life, only God and His word and my total response.'<sup>23</sup> One remembers Merton's dictum in *Thoughts in Solitude*: 'If you want to have a spiritual life you must unify your life. A life is either all spiritual or not spiritual at all.'<sup>24</sup> Even one who agrees with Merton might reflect on how differently that assertion would sound in the ears of monastic novices and of secular priests in training.

For several years the subject of progress in prayer seems to go underground in favor of discussions of classical and contemporary spiritual writers, current affairs, Gullick's and Merton's respective work, and his move to the hermitage. It reappears in Merton's letter of August 1, 1966, a response to her 'letter from St. Andrews [which is not in the Bellarmine file] and ... the others too'. Merton reiterates his earlier position, writing that

the chief obstacle to progress is too much self-awareness and to talk about 'how to make progress' is a good way to make people too aware of themselves. In the long run I think progress in prayer comes from the Cross and humiliation and whatever makes us really experience our total poverty and nothingness, and also gets our minds off ourselves.<sup>25</sup>

Gullick replied to Merton on August 8, 1966, 'I agree with you about loss of self', and called it one of her themes. Her agreement was existential as well as theoretical. In her early, October 8, 1961 letter to Merton, Gullick had noted that becoming self-conscious 'is surely always fatal'. She had written to Merton on January 22, 1962 of her own growth in contemplative prayer that when she lost feelings of self-consciousness,

God consciousness took its place. In the January, 1966 article 'Short Prayers' in *Clergy Review* she wrote, 'The soul and its prayer somehow, and seemingly naturally, get lost in God.'<sup>26</sup> In a January, 1967 article, 'Intercession', in the same journal she writes: 'We have to cease being self-centered ... and become God-centered. This is what losing our life to find it seems to mean, for we live more fully when we cease to be worried and concerned with ourselves.'<sup>27</sup> In the text of a lecture in September, 1968, Gullick wrote, 'I do not think that the really great writers of prayer laid down fixed schemes of progress, for they always drew attention to the fact that it is the Holy Spirit that leads us in the way He thinks best.' Later in the same essay she said, 'Self ... has to be forgotten so that God can be known. ... Prayer should be an act of self-surrender to God in love.'<sup>28</sup>

Clearly, diminishment of self-consciousness *was* one of her themes. Of the matter of progress in prayer, in the August 8, 1966 letter Gullick explained that, after having heard at Wycliffe Hall a lecture by Fr. Michael Hollings, her students

wanted books on progress ... chiefly, I suppose, because it would be unlikely that young moderate evangelicals would know anything about it. They would not know that there was such a thing as progress. This they should know because even if *they* didn't progress some of their flock might and they would not have a clue. Perhaps evangelicals ... are not introspective. ... Romans and High Church are much more so. ... It is hard to write about progress when one has reached a position when progress does not matter.

Gullick clearly has in view the future responsibilities of her ordinands, and gently, obliquely reminds Merton that not everyone's day to day life can be totally directed toward prayer as, at least in theory, life is in a monastery. She summarizes the letter, 'The spiritual life is wonderful – the way one is at peace in the middle of chaos.'

Because of her work with ordinands Gullick raised the question of 'progress in prayer' with Merton. They both were wary of rigid systems of prayer and of 'progress' calculated with spiritual bench marks. Her September, 1968 lecture notes record that 'each of us will have his own approach to God as each of us is unique.' Later in the lecture she says, 'It is ... perhaps daring to refer to progress in prayer – there is only progress in loving God.' The material stresses the point that 'Methods of prayer vary with individuals' and speaks of 'losing of methods'. The

collection of prayers and readings edited with Michael Hollings, *as was his custom*, includes in the introduction a suggested pattern for prayer which ends: 'Only use what is useful. ... Discard it as soon as you have grown out of it.'<sup>29</sup>

Merton objected to the notion of progress in prayer because he understood prayer as a gift which, consequently, can't be taught. He wrote in *Contemplative Prayer* that it 'is not a psychological trick but a theological grace. It can come to us *only* as a gift, and not as a result of our own clever use of spiritual techniques.'<sup>30</sup> Each person must find his or her own way or 'method' to pray. Writing to Gullick on June 15, 1964 Merton said, 'I do not think contemplation can be taught, but certainly an aptitude for it can be awakened. ... It is a question of showing ... in a mysterious way by example how to proceed. Not by the example of doing, but the example of being.'<sup>31</sup> Merton had answered in advance Gullick's question of September 9, 1964: 'How do you teach your young men to pray?' His implicit answer was 'you don't teach prayer.' One of Merton's Alaskan conferences opened: 'Sometimes I don't think we realize that we have the choice of many approaches to prayer. It isn't a question of there being one right way to pray, or one right answer to the question of prayer, and we should be perfectly free to explore all sorts of avenues and ways of prayer.'<sup>32</sup>

For Merton, contemplative prayer was a disposition of attentiveness to God's presence, not mastering a technique of prayer or of 'making progress in prayer' according to some excellent traditional or arbitrarily devised system. In another of the Alaskan conferences he said:

What you have to do is have this deeper consciousness of here I am and here is God and here are all these things which all belong to God. He and I and they are all involved in one love and everything manifests his goodness. Everything that I experience really reaches him in some way or other. Nothing is an obstacle. [God] is in everything.<sup>33</sup>

I think Mrs. Gullick might well have agreed. Her lecture notes of September, 1968 stress 'Methods of prayer vary with individuals.' In her 1966 article, 'Short Prayer', she wrote of each person finding 'the words which suit him best', and how 'The stillness and quietness which ... prayer brings to the soul can continue throughout the day, like a kind of gentle background music which assures us of God's continual presence. ... Even in the midst of activity we are not separated from [God]. This



conscious sense of peace and union is a gift which God gives.'<sup>34</sup>

### **Closing Reflections**

The last regular exchange of letters between Merton and Gullick was in the autumn of 1967. They were still sharing articles. Merton was planning to send her tapes of talks. Between October 10, 1967 and February 13, 1968 when Gullick wrote with concern about Merton's silence, there are no extant letters. Merton wrote once more on April 26, 1968 explaining that 'it is just impossible for me to keep up with mail', and commending her 'piece on mortification which I thought was really very sensible and good'.<sup>35</sup> Merton's last recorded word to Gullick seems eerily relevant: 'To accept non-consolation is to mysteriously help others who have more than they can bear.'<sup>36</sup> Merton died in Bangkok in December, 1968.

However, his ideas continued to influence Gullick and her work with Oxford ordinands, one of whom kindly gave me a copy of a February, 1970 handout from Gullick entitled 'Prayer, Thomas Merton's Last Message'. Reading it, I recognized that much of it depended heavily upon material from Br. David Steindl-Rast's 'Recollections of Thomas Merton's Last Days in the West' published first in *Monastic Studies* 1969 (and reprinted as 'Man of Prayer' in *Thomas Merton, Monk: A Monastic Tribute* edited by Merton's secretary and con-frère, Br. Patrick Hart, OCSO).<sup>37</sup> Her notes close with a verbatim citation of a quotation from Merton in Steindl-Rast's article. Gullick was keeping up with the initial offerings of what is now sometimes called 'the Merton industry'.

The Merton-Gullick letters are a detailed, informed, and literate Roman Catholic-Anglican ecumenical dialogue (rather like the Merton-Aziz letters are an inter-religious dialogue). In common with the monastic inter-religious dialogue, the Merton-Gullick conversation engages primarily at the level of practice. Perhaps the medium of the letter made it easier for a Scotswoman and a boy raised in England, both educated persons to 'open up', to be remarkably candid about that most intimate of subjects, one's private life of prayer. In any case, the theme of 'progress in prayer' is only one of many that could be traced through these letters. It would, for example, be fascinating to explore the references to Eastern Christianity and coordinate that material with Merton's letters to, and studies of, Orthodox theologians. There is a revealing thesis to be written about the interplay of ideas between Merton, Allchin, Gullick and the Orthodox Centre in Oxford. So far as I know, Gullick's work on Benet of Canfield (itself quite fascinating), the apparent entirety of which she sent to Merton, languishes at the Merton Studies Center at Bellarmine

University in fifteen files transferred there by the Abbey of Gethsemani.

In the final analysis, the Merton-Gullick letters are a ‘testament of friendship’ between two (perhaps unlikely) people, two generous souls, both of whom whole heartedly sought God, and, therefore, were serious about the life of prayer and sharing access to its great gifts and graces with others – some of whom perhaps were not always ready for or interested in that gift. A remark in Gullick’s letter of February 3, 1964 to Merton perhaps best summarizes their exchange: ‘The gifts of God pass belief.’ Surely that is a universal truth.

## Notes

1. Letter of William Shannon to Etta Gullick, February 24, 1984. I am grateful to the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester, New York and their archivist, Kathy Urbanic, for access to the Shannon collection in their archives, the source for references to Shannon’s letters to Gullick and to Gullick’s letters and autobiographical notes.
2. For fuller treatment see Bonnie Bowman Thurston, ‘almost as if I had a sister’ – Introducing the Merton-Gullick Correspondence, *The Merton Journal* 24:2 (Advent, 2017), pp.16-25.
3. A full and affectionate introduction to Rowley Gullick is found in his obituary in *St Edmund Hall Magazine* 1980-81, pp.2-6.
4. Rowley Gullick obituary, p.3
5. At the Thomas Merton Studies Center at Bellarmine University there are 15 files of her work on Canfield, including a typescript with Merton’s notes, a further 8 pages of Merton’s handwritten notes, her footnotes, and relevant letters. I am grateful to Paul Pearson and Mark Meade at the Merton Studies Center for their hospitality, patience, and welcome help in my exploration of the Merton-Gullick correspondence. References to her letters to Merton are from those in the Bellarmine collection.
6. For more on Hollings see his obituary by Peter Standford in *The Independent*, February 22, 1997.
7. Having read several of these books, I found them very much of their time. Although less autobiographical, they reminded me of early writings of the American Episcopal Priest, Malcolm Boyd, *Are You Running with me, Jesus? or Book of Days*.
8. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985).
9. The file at the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University contains 129 items and runs to 326 pages.
10. This interest was also shared with their mutual friend, Fr. Donald Allchin. Gullick and Allchin were both active at the Orthodox Center in Oxford and with its journal *Sobornos*. Gullick wrote to Shannon: ‘From 1958 onwards was much involved with the creating & running of the House of St. Gregory &

- St. Macrina (an Orthodox-Anglican centre & Hostel) & during the various negotiations with the Orthodox visited the Ecumenical Patriarch in Istanbul.
11. There were six volumes of notes from the conferences, some of which were circulated to other houses. Merton's conferences are currently being edited by Merton scholar, Patrick O'Connell, and published by Liturgical Press in the USA.
  12. Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: The Journals of Thomas Merton, Vol. 2 1941-1952*, Jonathan Montaldo, ed., (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p.466.
  13. Patrick O, Connell, 'Master of Novices' in *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*, Shannon, Bochen and O'Connell, eds. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), p. 288. Material here on Master of Scholastics and Novices is largely taken from those entries in this collection, pp.288-290.
  14. *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*, p.289.
  15. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Journals of Thomas Merton, Vol. 4 1960-1963*, Victor A. Kramer, ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p.183.
  16. In 2017 and 2018 I was fortunate to consult in person and by correspondence several ordinands who knew or attended lectures by Mrs. Gullick. In separate interviews, Canon David Knight and Canon Robert Wright generously shared recollections that were immensely helpful and corrected some errors in the first draft of this essay. Canon Knight provided me with examples of Gullick's notes , hand outs, and books. I am most grateful to them. Any mistakes or misinterpretations herein are my own.
  17. *The Hidden Ground of Love*, pp.345-346.
  18. *The Hidden Ground of Love*, p.346.
  19. Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska* (New York: New Directions, 1988), p.138.
  20. Etta Gullick, 'Short Prayers', *The Clergy Review* 52 (Jan. 1966), pp.38-39.
  21. *Thomas Merton in Alaska*, p.144.
  22. *The Hidden Ground of Love*, p.355.
  23. *The Hidden Ground of Love*, p.357. Due to the vagaries of trans-Atlantic post, and their respective schedules, gaps of several months are not uncommon in the correspondence.
  24. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux , 1956, 1958), p.56.
  25. *The Hidden Ground of Love*, p.376. Readers of Merton will recognize this as a major theme in his writing on contemplative prayer especially in *Contemplative Prayer* (1969) and *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* (1969). Liturgical Press is currently bringing out a new edition of the latter.
  26. Gullick, 'Short Prayers', p.38. Although the article was published in January, 1966, in a letter to Gullick on July 16, 1965 Merton wrote: 'Your "Short Prayers" ... is very good and I have posted it for the novices to read. There

- has been favorable comment.' (*The Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 371.) Gullick must have sent Merton drafts of her articles before they were published.
27. Etta Gullick, 'Intercession', *The Clergy Review* 52 (January, 1967), p.36. Again, Gullick must have sent her article to Merton before it was published, because in a March 8, 1966 letter Merton wrote: 'Did I ever tell you how much I liked you piece on intercession? I thought you handled it very well.' (*The Hidden Ground of Love*, p.375.)
  28. Pages 6, 8, and 13 of a September, 1968 manuscript by Gullick kindly provided to me by Canon David Knight of Oxford, an ordinand at St. Stephen's during Gullick's teaching there.
  29. Michael Hollings & Etta Gullick, *as was his custom* (Great Wakering: Mayhew-McCrimmon, 1979) p.6.
  30. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Doubleday / Image Books, 1971), p.92.
  31. *The Hidden Ground of Love*, p.367.
  32. *Thomas Merton in Alaska*, p.81.
  33. *Thomas Merton in Alaska*, p.140.
  34. Gullick, 'Short Prayers' pp.37-38.
  35. *The Hidden Ground of Love*, p.379.
  36. *The Hidden Ground of Love*, pp.379-380
  37. David Steindl-Rast, 'Recollections of Thomas Merton's Last Days in the West', *Monastic Studies* 7 (1969), pp.1-10, and Br. Patrick Hart, *Thomas Merton, Monk: A Monastic Tribute* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1974).

*This article is the second of two by Bonnie Thurston about Merton and Gullick. The first, "almost as if I had a sister"—Introducing the Merton-Gullick Correspondence', was included in The Merton Journal 24:2, (Advent 2017).*

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## Silence and Ministry – Kenneth Leech

St Gregory Nazianzen tells us that the madman is one who is *breathless*, and the theologian, he says, stands in contradiction to such mad breathlessness.<sup>1</sup> I want to suggest that interior silence and the contemplative perspective are vital to a truly pastoral ministry, and I want to point to three aspects of this reality: the nature of theology itself; the need for listening within pastoral ministry; and the need for an interior silence and solitude as part of the very nature of priesthood.

The word 'theology' has, in the West, come to be identified with academic, abstract thinking about religion; thinking which is often seen as a preparation for some other form of activity such as pastoral work. Theology is thus something we study in order to do something else better. Or, in common secular usage, theology is a synonym for theoretical irrelevance, archaic dogma — in this sense, of course, there is a lot of theology about in Britain and the USA.

But the original sense of *theologia* was quite different. It was seen and is still seen within the Eastern tradition, as a spiritual discipline, a quest for purity of heart and for union with God. According to this tradition, no one can be a theologian who has not undergone a *metanoia*, a real inner transformation.<sup>2</sup> Theology is inseparable from personal holiness and inner prayerfulness. A theologian is one whose prayer is true. Hence, says St Gregory Nazianzen, the enemy of theology is breathlessness, and I note with interest that Leonardo Boff has also written that theology which is not rooted in spirituality is no more than 'religious breathlessness'.<sup>3</sup> For it is the spirit which gives life and breath. So if we are to carry the theological task, the task of discerning the activity of God in the world, into our communities, we will need to be people of interior reflection, people of silence, people whose lives are not swept off course by breathlessness or by every wind of doctrine.

There is a second aspect to the place of silence in theology. In Eastern thought, and in Western understandings until Aquinas and Bonaventure, theology is not a closed speculative system, but moves towards the silence of the vision of God. Josef Pieper, in his small and neglected study, *The Silence of St Thomas*, points out that the last words of St Thomas — 'All that I have written seems to me nothing but straw ... compared to what I have seen and what has been revealed to me.' — emphasized the centrality of silence and of the unknowable:

The last word of St Thomas is not communication but silence. And it is not death which takes the pen out of his hand. His tongue is stilled by the superabundance of life in the mystery of God. He is silent, not because he has nothing further to say; he is silent because he has been allowed a glimpse into the inexpressible depths of that mystery which is not reached by any human thought or speech.<sup>4</sup>

Theology, then, moves towards silence, towards the *via negativa*, the way of ignorance.

It is out of such interior theological reflection that we will find ourselves moving away from models of pastoral ministry which are rooted in concepts of skill, technique and know-how, towards a vision which is rooted in the old, but recently revived, idea of *character*. And the character of the pastor involves, at its centre, the posture of attention, of waiting both upon God and upon the voices of the people whom we seek to serve. Pastoral care, in other words, begins in silent contemplation.

When I worked in the parish of St Anne, Soho, there was a famous character called Harry Trinder. He was involved in running a number of all-night clubs in the Berwick Street area. Most of the day, and a large part of the night, you could find Trinder leaning on a bollard at the corner of Berwick and D'Arbly streets. It became known as 'The Leaning Bollard of Trinder'. If you ever asked him what he did, he said, 'I'm a borough surveyor.' And that was exactly what he did! He surveyed the borough, watched what was going on with great precision. Nothing passed him by. Trinder was a godsend in pastoral work because he knew everything that was going on, where everybody was, and he missed nothing. Pastoral ministry has to begin at this level of watching and listening to the hidden voices of the streets.

In the understanding of the total place of listening within, and as an aid to, activity and struggle, I have been much helped by the writings of the English feminist Sheila Rowbotham. In one of her books she speaks of the negative, powerless aspect of silence. Among oppressed and neglected communities silence normally indicates a sense of hopelessness. But it is often misinterpreted to indicate contentment, hence the need to 'listen carefully to the language of silence'.<sup>5</sup> Rowbotham's description of her experience of many political activists sounds like a description of much Christian pastoral activity:

They had all those certainties, as if everything was known, the whole world and its history was sewn up and neatly categorised.<sup>6</sup>

Any genuine pastoral practice has to begin with attention to the inarticulate, to the ignored and suppressed voices from the back streets. And this involves cultivating a capacity for listening carefully to the language of silence.

Pastors who have acquired skills but who lack the capacity to listen are capable of doing great harm to those who are the victims of their craft. I have suggested that listening to God in prayer, and listening to the voices of the world, depend upon the cultivation and nourishing of the capacity for silence and attention. I want to conclude by suggesting that this requirement of interior silence is also basic to the understanding of the nature of priesthood.

Fundamentally, the priestly office is the office which inwardly, ritually and ascetically shares the dying and rising of Christ.<sup>7</sup> The priest is a 'walking sacrament' of the Paschal mystery itself. What the priest *does* is therefore of far less importance than what the priest *is*. At the heart of priestly identity is the inner identification with Christ's sacrifice. In this, sacramental priesthood is no more than a symbolic concentration of what is true of every Christian: we all bear in our bodies the marks of the Lord Jesus, we are all icons of Christ. And this identification with the Word made flesh involves an ever deepening inwardness, constantly nourished and renewed by silence and solitude.

Our society is filled with functionaries. And the church has conformed to, and colluded with, the managerial, secular models, so that priests and ministers come to be seen as religious functionaries. On this model, prayer, silence, fasting, and the study of theology are valued, if they are valued at all, only as aids to a more efficient pastoral functioning. But priesthood is not a function: it is an identity, a solidarity with Christ crucified and risen. The only kind of priests who can be of true Christ-centred service in the world are those whose priesthood is interiorized, integrated into their humanity, and constantly strengthened by prayer.

Many years ago Jung said that the main work of the priest was to teach people the art of seeing. The quest for clarity of vision, for discernment of the signs of the times, is central to the priestly task. It is also deeply prophetic, for it is out of vision that prophecy arises, and without vision the people perish. But vision depends on contemplation,

on silence, on solitude, on inward struggle. It is more important to see clearly than to behave well: vision determines ethics.

If you forget everything else, remember that any authentic priesthood must derive from an inner core of silence, a life hid with Christ in God. It is of this interiorized priesthood that Ulrich Simon writes in *A Theology of Auschwitz*. In the context of the concentration camp, where ceremonies and outward trimmings are out of the question. the priesthood is mediated only, but supremely, through its essence:

The priestly ideal uses and converts the nothingness which the world of Auschwitz offers. Here the priest's sacerdotal dedication encounters the vacuum with self-sacrifice. ... The priest at the camp counts because he has no desires of self-importance and gives life because he stands already beyond extermination. ... The hour of darkness cannot take him by surprise since he has practised silence in darkness.<sup>8</sup>

Only those who are at home with silence and darkness will be able to survive in, and minister to, the perplexity and confusion of the modern world. Let us seek that dark silence out of which an authentic ministry and a renewed theology can grow and flourish.

## Notes

1. *Theological Orations*, in E.R. Hardy, ed., *Christology of the Later Fathers*, Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1954, p.136.
2. Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, James Clark, 1957, p.39.
3. Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, *Salvation and Liberation*, Maryknoll, Orbis, 1979, p.2.
4. Joseph Pieper, *The Silence of St Thomas*, London, Faber and Faber, 1957, p.45.
5. Sheila Rowbotham, *Dreams and Dilemmas: Collected Writings*, Virago, 1983, p.8.
6. Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal and Hilary Wainwright, *Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism*, Merlin Press, 1979, p.23.
7. Ulrich Simon, *A Theology of Auschwitz*, Gollancz, 1967, p.124.
8. *A Theology of Auschwitz*, p.127.



# Discoveries

Tony McClelland

In the night:

a word of comfort  
and a way through fear.

In the morning:

day that comes as gift,  
a world opening into possibility.

In frailty:

the slow wisdom of the body,  
the unexpected strength  
to stay with this, to wait.

In loneliness:

a surprising solidarity,  
a community of separatedness.

In the tears:

a freedom of honesty,  
a path to compassion.

In the silence:

a space where love grows,  
unhurried awareness of depths.

In another's words:

something we have known together,  
but could not name alone.

# Hermann Hesse & Thomas Merton: Countercultural Affinities

## Ron Dart

But the longing to get on the other side of everything already settled, this makes me, and everybody like me, a road sign to the future.

Hermann Hesse — *Wandering: Farmhouse*

There is another side of Kanchengunga and of every mountain — the side that has never been photographed and turned into postcards. That is the only side worth seeing.

Thomas Merton — 19 November 1968

Apart from two articles in which John Collins reflects on Merton's readings of Hesse's *Journey to the East*, *Steppenwolf* and *Siddhartha*, there is nothing of substance and significance that examines the countercultural affinities between Hesse and Merton.<sup>1</sup> It is rather surprising, given the fact that Hermann Hesse and Thomas Merton are two of the pre-eminent countercultural ikons of the latter half of the 20th century. Hesse was a generation older than Merton, being born in 1877 and Merton in 1915. Both men were acutely sensitive to the pressing issues of western culture and many of the dominant dangers that threatened to undermine and negate the deeper longings that make for a more meaningful life journey.

I have, since the 1970s, read most of Merton's books and written a few books and articles on Merton, whilst Hesse has been a fellow pilgrim of sorts for many a decade. I have spent time at Hesse's home on the upper rock knoll in Montagnola in Switzerland, imbibing the landscape,

air, site and scenery that so held Hesse and from which most of his writings were birthed. This essay is my way of repaying both writers for all they have taught me and passed my way.

Theodore Ziolkowski (a fine Hesse scholar) in 'Saint Hesse among the Hippies'<sup>2</sup>, and James Black in '*Hesse and the Hippies: The Sociology of a Literary Phenomenon*'<sup>3</sup>, made abundantly clear that Hesse was one of the primary portals for many counterculture types in the 1960s-1970s into a vision of faith and life that could not be co-opted either by a scientific, secular or technological notion of the human journey or by the literary gatekeepers of the time. There were many writers and activists that shaped, formed and inspired the counterculture, but Hesse's writings and paintings served as a rite of passage for many into the counterculture. Many of the hippies of the 1960s-1970s seriously misread Hesse and reduced him to a shallow plaything of their notion of a counterculture (which led, subsequently, to his virtual disappearance from view); whilst for those who read Hesse aright, he was a counterculture alternative to the establishment ethos of the 1960s-1970s, even though he died in 1962. One thing Hesse had anticipated, through his soul searching and layered political commentaries such as *If the War Goes On...* was a close relationship between the contemplative and the political.<sup>4</sup>

William Shannon, in his compact and succinct book, *Something of a Rebel: Thomas Merton: His Life and Works: An Introduction*, rightly suggests that Merton has been read in two ways: 'one, ascetic, conservative, traditional and monastic; the other, radical, independent and somewhat akin to beats and hippies and poets.'<sup>5</sup> It is the Merton that is 'akin to beats and hippies and poets' who has much affinity with Hesse among the hippies. Many of Merton's writings in the 1960s did have many an affinity with the counterculture, as I showed in my recently edited, *Thomas Merton and the Counterculture: A Golden String* (2016) and my earlier *Thomas Merton and the Beats of the North Cascades* (2006). Both Hesse and Merton were at the forefront of the Christian and Interfaith counterculture of the 1960s-1970s; but what were the affinities that I am saying have been ignored? There are five areas I will mention, each of which placed Hesse and Merton in a countercultural position in relation to the prevailing and dominant cultural ethos of their time: 1) pioneering a 20<sup>th</sup> century contemplative renaissance; 2) west meets east; 3) contemplation and the arts; 4) contemplation and correspondence; and 5) contemplation and prophetic vision.

## 1 - Pioneers of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Contemplative Renaissance

The West has been significantly dominated since the 16<sup>th</sup> century by a reversal of the *vita contemplativa* by the *vita activa*. The Western classical tradition once held high the *vita contemplativa* as a way of knowing and being from which the *vita activa* emerged in a wise and just manner. The rise of the protestant work ethic (and its secularization) has meant the *vita activa* has come to define and shape much of what is understood as identity, soul and society in the west. Even though the language of liberty is pervasive, many people seem to be victims of their drive and ambition, hence not truly free. Hesse and Merton realized, all too clearly, how and why the contemplative way had been marginalized and banished, and saw the consequences of such a cultural and spiritual reality. Both also realized that for a civilization to be truly free, fit and healthy, the contemplative way had to be retrieved and recalled. This would mean, though, digging deep into the divided and conflicted souls of those who had too substantively internalized the *vita activa*.

Hesse was, of course, much more the novelist than Merton, and in most of his novels he examines and explores the complex nature of the human soul, desires gone askew, temperaments off balance and the longing for recovery, unity and inner equilibrium. Novels such as *Demian*, *Narcissus and Goldmund* and *Steppenwolf* illuminate, in graphic depth and detail, the tensions and clashes that emerge when the inner quest is not properly ordered. The resolution emerges in an initial way in *Siddharta*, and in a more mature manner in *Journey to the East* and *The Glass Bead Game*, Hesse's final and most mature novel. In these novels Hesse highlights and clarifies the meaning of the contemplative, *The Glass Bead Game* being Hesse's summa on the issue and one of the reasons he won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1946.

It would be impossible to read Merton without becoming aware of his passion to delve ever deeper into the contemplative journey. From the Epilogue of *The Seven Storey Mountain* which touches on 'Active and Contemplative Orders', through *Seeds of Contemplation* (then the more mature revision *New Seeds of Contemplation*) to most of his writings in the 1950s, Merton dealt with the deepening contemplative journey. He saw all too clearly that the West had become addicted to the *vita activa*, and such an addiction had become an oppressive bondage. It is significant that of the eight themes that Shannon sees as defining Merton's journey, the contemplative is a core one: 'Prayer: The Journey Toward Interiority: Contemplative Spirituality'.<sup>6</sup>

Hesse and Merton, like the perennial canaries in the mine shaft, felt the toxins of the modern *vita activa* and, in their different ways, questioned such a way of knowing and being. Hesse was not a monk like Merton, but his life at Montagnola in southern Switzerland certainly embodied a contemplative dimension. Merton the monk was frequently frustrated by the way the monastic life (which was, in principle, meant to be contemplative) had become excessively busy and active.

## 2 - West Meets East

There has been an unhealthy but understandable tendency by many raised in the West to assume that the West is about science, industry, secularism and a hyper-activism, but lacking in wisdom and the contemplative. This has meant that many of the more astute and sensitive westerners have pitted the knowledge-driven activist West against a more wisdom-oriented and contemplative East. Such a simplistic dualism distorts both the Occident and Orient. The West and East, in such a scenario, are either seen as complementary or, worse, one is demonized and the other idealized. How did Hesse and Merton each approach the realities of Western and Eastern civilizations?

Hesse grew up in a prominent German pietistic family with many connections, via missionary and educational work, to India. He came in time to question substantive aspects of the Swabian pietism of his family, but he also had a deep respect for such a heritage. This is clearly spelled out in his essay 'The Fourth Life' which did not make it into *The Glass Bead Game*. The first and longer version of 'The Fourth Life' walks the reader along the nuanced pathway of Hesse's early years, and his realization that his German pietistic upbringing tended to distort the sheer breadth and depth of Christianity. Hence his ongoing attraction to the contemplative depths of the Roman Catholic tradition evident in *The Glass Bead Game*, with Father Jacobus and the Benedictines being tutors and teachers to Joseph Knecht (Magister Ludi). The 'Father Confessor' in *The Glass Bead Game* walks the attentive reader into the wisdom and contemplative dimensions of patristic and desert spirituality that so attracted Merton.<sup>7</sup> Hesse judiciously weighed, again and again, the riches offered by the West, but he also realized that the East had much to offer that had been lost by the West. In the earlier novel, *Siddharta*, (translated into English in 1951 and published by New Directions who also published Merton), the protagonist is not the enlightened Buddha but rather a man

in search of meaning in a world that often demeans, distorts or offers multiple distractions and diversions from meaning. Indian thought, Hinduism and Buddhism loom large in this primer of the 1920s; but it was in *The Journey to the East* and *The Glass Bead Game* that Hesse probes more deeply into the Orient-Occident relationship.

Hesse's earliest book, *Peter Camenzind* (1904) is a type of running commentary on east-west spirituality and the wisdom offered by the best of both traditions; just as his earlier short story, *Friends* (1907-1908), highlights the literary fact that genuine friends will be guided in their quest for deeper contemplative insight by mining the wisdom of both west and east. Much of Hesse's mid- and later life writings return again and again to the need to draw from the best of the wisdom traditions of the world while also critically reflecting on their questionable elements.

Whilst *The Seven Storey Mountain* lacked any substantive sense of Merton engaging with the East-West issue, it does feature the young Merton meeting the guru Brahmachari, who suggested that Merton delve into his own tradition before he wandered afield into the Orient. Most of Merton's journey in the 1940s-1950s followed the advice of the Hindu sage. But, by the late 1950s Merton was very much on the same page as Hesse had been decades earlier. Zen Buddhism was in vogue at the time, and Merton's dialogues with D.T. Suzuki are well known and noted.<sup>8</sup> Merton explored others aspects of Buddhism with the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh and Buddhist monks so well recorded in *The Asian Journal* (which also contains Merton's Preface to the Indian classic *The Bhagavad Gita*).<sup>9</sup> The influence of other Eastern traditions such as the Chinese Taoist heritage are evident in such books as *Mystics and Zen Masters*<sup>10</sup> and *The Way of Chuang Tzu*.<sup>11</sup> A good overview of Merton's commitment to understanding the Occident on its terms while being deeply grounded in the contemplative vision of Christianity is offered by George Woodcock in his *Thomas Merton: Thoughts on the East*.<sup>12</sup>

Merton and Hesse, in their commitment to the contemplative way, turned to the Orient and Occident for guidance and wisdom. In neither was there any idealizing of the East or denigrating of the West in their more mature reflections. Both men, for different reasons, can be seen as committed Christians with a high view of common grace or natural theology. This deeper catholic notion has often led to their being misunderstood by those with a more dogmatic and rational approach to the contemplative way and interfaith dialogue.

### **3 - Contemplation and the Arts**

A certain form of empiricism and science has come to dominate philosophical methodology. Reason is then seen as a faculty or organ that brings objective knowledge to the fore via inductive, deductive or sense driven empirical research. Philosophy, rather than a longing for or love of wisdom, is reduced to defining terms, language games and logic. This approach to philosophy has tended to undermine a classical understanding of philosophy as a contemplative journey into insight, wisdom and transformation.

Where philosophy has been, to some degree, co-opted by positivism, those committed to the deeper and older meaning of philosophy have often turned to the arts as a means of knowing and being. Both Hesse and Merton expressed their contemplative journey much more through artistic means than a narrow philosophic process, which is one of the reasons their appeal has been so far-reaching in the twentieth century and beyond.

Jacob Burckhardt was, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, a creative cultural historian who articulated, in a way few were doing at the time, alternate ways to interpret the Italian Renaissance and classical Greek thought. Burckhardt lived for most of his most fruitful years in Basel, where Hesse, as a young artist, spent time. Jacob Burkhardt had an unusual impact on the life and writings of both Nietzsche and Hesse. Burkhardt, for good or ill, tended to be suspicious of those who took an uncritical attitude towards the state and church, and of their uneasy union. Burkhardt held culture, at its purist and best, as a countervailing and necessary antidote to the failings and pretensions of state and church, politics and religion. There is a sense in which Nietzsche (on whom Hesse wrote an article) and Hesse were indebted to Burkhardt's high view of culture as more substantive than religion and politics; although Hesse, unlike Nietzsche, did recognize that there are worrisome tendencies when the more aesthetic aspects of culture become ends in themselves. Hesse certainly held a higher commitment to the faith journey than did Burkhardt or Nietzsche, and he lived the tension between religion and culture whilst sharing the suspicion of Burkhardt and Nietzsche about politics and holding too high a view of state authority. Needless to say, Hesse saw the outworking of such an uncritical notion of the state in Germany throughout much of the first half of the twentieth century.

In his late teens Hesse to some extent turned away from the German

pietism of his family and immersed himself in a broader German and European cultural ethos, much to the chagrin of some of his family. Hesse's earliest publications, *Romantic Songs* (1896), *One Hour After Midnight* (1898) and *Posthumous Writings and Poems of Herman Lauscher* (1901) reflect a turn to the romantic way of seeing and the surreal and dreamlike aestheticism of some literary culture, as a rebuke of sorts to an unfeeling and crass world of politics, religion and the captains of industry.

The further that Hesse journeyed on his pilgrimage, the more that poetry and prose are balanced by the classical works of music (which work themselves, again and again, into Hesse's writings) and painting. In fact, painting comes to play a substantive role in Hesse's life, and there is a definite contemplative quality in his hundreds of paintings. In *The Glass Bead Game*, music is the genre by which harmony and unity is brought forth from fragmentation and discrete academic disciplines amongst the Castalians. Most commentators on Hesse have tended to focus on his writings, and miss the central role that art played in Hesse's life after the First World War.

Like Hesse, literature was Merton's way of doing philosophy, and the broader artistic ethos shaped him. Merton had, as a mentor and model of sorts, his father and mother, who were both artists. Owen and Ruth Merton stood within the French impressionistic school, and both studied with the much-respected Canadian artist, Percyval Tudor-Hart. The relationship between Tudor-Hart and Owen Merton was so close that in the biography of Tudor-Hart by Alasdair Alpin MacGregor a full chapter (IV) is dedicated to Owen Merton.<sup>13</sup> Thomas Merton, unlike Hesse, grew up in an artistic and bohemian context before the untimely deaths of his mother and father.

Although Merton was certainly not the gifted novelist that Hesse was, both men were fine and probing poets. Merton's earliest published books of poetry when in the monastery, *Thirty Poems* (1944)<sup>14</sup>, *Man in the Divided Sea* (1946)<sup>15</sup>, *Figures for an Apocalypse* (1948)<sup>16</sup> and *Tears of the Blind Lions* (1949)<sup>17</sup> are, in many ways, more informative and insightful pathways into Merton's spiritual and literary journey than are his initial autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, his biography-hagiography of Mother M. Berchmans (which he thought one of his worst books alongside *What are these Wounds?*<sup>18</sup>) or his first version of *Seeds of Contemplation*.<sup>19</sup> But, it is in the essay included as an appendix to *Figures for an Apocalypse* that we get a fuller sense of Merton's thoughts on the



relationship between poetry and contemplation. 'Poetry and the Contemplative Life: An Essay' makes the needful yet obvious case that the arts, and poetry to be specific, are a finer and fitter way to live into and from a contemplative vision than a narrow way of doing philosophy that reduces the mind to logic and language chess games of the calculating mind.

There was much more to Merton's artistic journey. He took to Zen sketches, photography, pop, jazz, folk music and various types of icons as guides and inspiration on the contemplative pathway. Merton the monk was, more than Hesse, grounded and rooted in a disciplined religious life, but both were keenly alert to the role of culture and the arts as a suggestive way to the contemplative core and centre of our all too human journey. For Hesse, though no monk, the contemplative monastic way features in his many novels, novellas and short stories. There was, in short, something deeply catholic about Hesse, which brings him close to Merton in terms both of culture and religious life.

For both Hesse and Merton as romantics, Culture and Nature had much in common. Hesse was acutely aware that Nature, when understood aright, had much to teach the soul and society, as development accelerated and cities became more dehumanizing. In this, Merton was no different than Hesse. Both were ecological pioneers. Monasteries, by their nature, are experiments in sustainable living, usually located far from cities. Monica Weis, for example, has astutely seen how Merton and the monastic life embody a view of ecological consciousness. *Thomas Merton's Gethsemani: Landscapes of Paradise* is a visual and textual delight that places Merton's understanding of the monastic way within a historic environmental vision.<sup>20</sup> Both Hesse and Merton had unique ways, as high romantics, of threading together Culture and Nature in their writings and life, and both can still inspire and challenge those alert to the pertinent issues of our ethos and age.

#### **4 - Contemplation and Correspondence**

Hesse and Merton, for different reasons, through their confessional style of writing, won the hearts and minds of many in the twentieth century. The sheer honesty and vulnerability in their poetry, novels and life attracted many readers, who sensed a rare gift and ability to speak to each person on their pilgrimage through time. The fact that both men needed solitude and silence to go deeper into places of insight and revelation was missed by those who, without invitation, arrived at their

homes expecting a generous welcome. Many were the moments when both Hesse and Merton responded with legitimate frustration when religious tourists trespassed on the silence of their sacred seasons of contemplative silence. This did not mean that Hesse and Merton had no sense of responsibility to those who contacted them.

The deeper Hesse and Merton plumbed the depths, the more they recognized and realized their unity with others and the vast chasm between human longings and the lived reality of fragmentation and alienation.

Many were the letters that arrived at Gethsemani and Hesse's home in Montagnola. Extremely generous were the often-gracious letters sent in reply. The volumes of letters now collected in multiple tomes speak much about the ways that Hesse and Merton linked together their contemplative journeys and the implication of such pilgrimages in responding to the needs and questions of others.

The publication of *Soul of the Age: Selected Letters of Hermann Hesse: 1891-1962* (1991) made clear that a significant element of Hesse's literary life was correspondence. It has been estimated that there are more than 30,000 letters in the Hesse archives and Hesse kept more than 40,000 letters that had been sent his way. Some have suggested that almost one third of Hesse's working hours were devoted to responding by letter. There were, of course, Hesse's letters with the literati of his time such as Thomas Mann<sup>21</sup>, but for an overview of Hesse's vast correspondence, the essay 'Hermann Hesse: Writer, guru, searcher' by Gabriele Ochsenbein fills in many details.<sup>22</sup> Those who linger too long only on Hesse the writer, painter and musician miss, at an equally important level, Hesse the correspondent. Hesse was seen by many as reclusive, and yet his many letters make it clear he was nevertheless giving of his time and energy.

There are those who have compared Merton's *Seven Storey Mountain* with John Henry Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*; and it was Newman who, in a letter to his sister Jemima, wrote: 'A man's life is in his letters.' William Shannon has suggested that

letters are a way of building and sustaining friendships. In the Merton letters you get to meet his many friends throughout the world. Letters give an insight into a person's humanness and concerns in ways that may not appear in books written for a general public. And, above all, Thomas Merton was a superb letter writer.<sup>23</sup>

There are five published packed volumes of letters written by Merton to diverse correspondents, based around the themes of religious experience and social concerns<sup>24</sup>, letters to new and old friends<sup>25</sup>, religious renewal and spiritual direction<sup>26</sup>, letters to writers<sup>27</sup>, and letters in times of crises<sup>28</sup>, each of which reveals a Merton who took careful time and attention to address a wide range of timely and timeless topics. Through the letters we meet a man who was totally committed to his vocation yet who knew how to laugh at himself when he took ideas and issues far too seriously. Hesse and Merton realized the essential role that correspondence played in their engagement with the world. They have much to teach us about the role of correspondence in accompanying the human journey.

## 5 - Contemplation and Prophetic Vision

There has been an unhealthy and unhelpful tendency to use meditative, contemplative and mystical ways to ignore or hold at a distance the threatening and complex demands of such issues as war and peace, crime and punishment, poverty and wealth, ecology and economics, or technology and craftsmanship as a way of knowing and being. Some think that Merton slipped into such a way of thinking in his early monastic phase, then grew out of it by the mid to late 1950s. The fact that Hesse lived in Europe throughout some of the most turbulent decades of European history meant that he had to think seriously and substantively about the relationship between thought and action, contemplation and politics, literature and life and the challenging tension of ultimate and penultimate issues.

Hesse began *A Pictorial Biography* this way: 'I was born toward the end of the modern times, shortly before the return of the Middle Ages, with the sign of the Archer on the ascendant and Jupiter in favourable aspect.'<sup>29</sup> Merton began *The Seven Storey Mountain* in a similar way: 'On the last day of January 1915, under the sign of the Water Bearer, in a year of great war, and down in the shadow of some French mountains on the borders of Spain, I came into the World.'<sup>30</sup> Hesse certainly witnessed what the Archer and Jupiter could and did do. Merton was born when the Archer and Jupiter dominated. Neither could retreat from the stubborn reality of war, and the clash between war and peace was ever before them.

Hesse, when younger, co-edited the liberal weekly, *Marz*, which was founded in 1907 to critique the aggressive tendencies of Kaiser Wilhelm

II. It was also at this period of time that Hesse met Theodore Heuss (1884-1963) who was at the forefront in literary and political life in Germany. Heuss became President of the Federal Republic of Germany from 1949 to 1959, and was a warm supporter of Hesse throughout the turbulent years of Hesse's political opposition to German political life. Conrad Haussmann (1857-1922), a regular contributor to *Marz*, and a member of the Reichstag, was friends with Hesse from 1908 until his death in 1922.

Hesse's friendship with political leaders such as Heuss and Haussmann and his involvement with a variety of literary and political journals and publications meant that Hesse was keenly alert and alive to the issues of his time and how he might respond to them. The publication of many of Hesse's political writings in *If the War goes on...* covers, in thoughtful essay form, almost thirty articles from 1914-1948 that deal with the hawkish nature of the German political ethos, and more peaceful ways Germany might have gone.<sup>31</sup> The essays include such classics as 'Zarathustra's Return', 'War and Peace', 'Thou Shalt Not Kill', 'A Letter to Germany', 'Message to the Nobel Prize Banquet', and 'On Romain Rolland' with whom Hesse had a long friendship. Hesse had a tendency to examine the inner life at a spiritual and psychological level in a way that few did, but this did not deflect him from addressing the larger political issues of the time in a poignant and prophetic manner. The fact that he was given the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1946 speaks much about the quality of his life and writings and their impact on European literary, cultural and political life.

Merton, on the other hand, came into the world 'in a year of great war', and war shadowed him for much of his life. He entered the monastery about the same time that Pearl Harbour was bombed. He understood the impact of war, his brother being a direct victim of it. When entering the monastery, for a few short years Merton did retreat from the public and political fray, but he remained aware of and responsive to the larger world issues beyond its the enclosure. Needless to say, he was often opposed when he dared to raise the larger and troubling issues of his time such as civil rights, nuclear war, Vietnam, war and peace, ecological concerns, aboriginal rights and reform within the church. Like Hesse, he faced opposition.<sup>32</sup> There is a historical consistency in Hesse's writings on the larger issues of war and peace that is lacking in Merton, but there is an intensity in Merton lacking in Hesse. Both men took seriously the need to integrate the spiritual and psychological dimensions of the journey with the larger political and

public aspects of life. Both men, in the way they approached the inner and outer realities and sought to integrate them, were decidedly countercultural.

### **Hesse and Merton: Countercultural Affinities**

There are other historical connections between Hesse and Merton. Hesse went to school for a time at the former Cistercian monastery in Maulbronn. It was Henry Miller who, in the 1950s when living in Big Sur, encouraged the translation and publication by New Directions of Hesse's *Siddharta*, which Merton read and found most valuable in the final leg of his journey in Asia. There is a fine correspondence between Miller and Merton (initiated by Miller) which I track and discuss in 'Thomas Merton and Henry Miller: Our Faces'.<sup>33</sup> Hesse was just emerging as significant in North America in the late 1950s, as Merton was coming to the peak of his journey. Hesse was more decidedly European in his life and writings, but Merton spanned the Euro-American ethos in a way Hesse never did. The fact that Hesse died in 1962 (and was waning before that) meant that he never addressed many of the pressing issues of the 1960s in the way Merton could and did. Hesse died on 9<sup>th</sup> August 1962 with a copy of Augustine's *Confessions* on his chest. Merton died on 10<sup>th</sup> December 1968 after giving a controversial lecture on Marxism and Monasticism.

### **Conclusion**

Hesse and Merton both turned to the contemplative as a corrective to an over indulgent *vita activa*. Their subtle dialogue between West and East, their vision of the relationship between contemplation and arts and culture, their notion of Culture and Nature as companions, their generous and gracious commitment to letter writing, and their sense of their role and responsibility to the larger public and political issues of their age and ethos are strong countercultural affinities. Hopefully, in time, others will recognize this, and more will come to be written on the affinities between Hesse and Merton.

### **Notes**

1. John Collins, "Where Are We Really Going? Always Home": Thomas Merton and Hermann Hesse' in *Religion and the Arts, Volume 16, Issues 1-2* (2012), pp.78-99.
2. Theodore Ziolkowski, 'Saint Hesse Among the Hippies', *American-German Review* (V. 35, no. 2, 1969) pp.19-23. There has been a tendency to view Hesse as a period writer who waxed in the 1950s and waned by the late

- 1970s. The superb article by Jefford Vahlbusch, 'Toward the Legend of Hermann Hesse in the USA', articulates the issue in a more nuanced way and manner — see *Hermann Hesse Today* (edited by Ingo Cornils and Osman Durrani (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), pp.133-146.
3. James Black, 'Hesse and the Hippies: The Sociology of a Literary Phenomenon' (Unpublished Honors Theses: 1990, Paper 232). Southern Illinois University Carbondale, University Honors Program.
  4. Hermann Hesse, *If the War Goes On....* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1970).
  5. William Shannon, *Something of a Rebel: Thomas Merton: His Life and Works: An Introduction* (Cincinnati, Ohio: St. Anthony Press, 1997), p.127.
  6. William Shannon, *Something of Rebel: Thomas Merton: His Life and Works: An Introduction* (Cincinnati, Ohio: St. Anthony Press, 1997), pp.72-81.
  7. See in particular: Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century* (New York: New Directions, 1960).
  8. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: A New Directions Book, 1968), pp.59-66.
  9. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: A New Directions Book, 1973), pp.348-353.
  10. Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: A Delta Book, 1961).
  11. Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (New York: New Directions, 1965).
  12. George Woodcock (Introduction), *Thomas Merton: Thoughts on the East* (New York: New Directions Books, 1995).
  13. Alasdair Alpin MacGregor, *Percyval Tudor-Hart: 1873-1954: Portrait of an Artist* (London: P.R. MacMillan Limited, 1961), pp.100-104.
  14. Thomas Merton, *Thirty Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1944).
  15. Thomas Merton, *A Man in the Divided Sea* (New York: New Directions, New York, 1946).
  16. Thomas Merton, *Figures for an Apocalypse* (New York: New Directions, 1948).
  17. Thomas Merton, *The Tears of the Blind Lions* (New York: New Directions, 1949).
  18. Thomas Merton, *What are these Wounds? The Life of a Cistercian Mystic - Saint Lutgarde of Aywières* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1950). The same company also published Merton's *Exile Ends in Glory: The life of a Trappistine, Mother M. Berchemans OCSO* in 1948.
  19. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1949).
  20. Monica Weis, *Thomas Merton's Gethsemani: Landscapes of Paradise* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2005).
  21. Anni Carlsson & Volker Michels (edited), *The Hesse/Mann Letters: The Correspondence of Hermann Hesse and Thomas Mann 1910-1955* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1975).
  22. Gabriele Ochsenbein, 'Hermann Hesse: Writer, guru, searcher', Swiss

- Archives, swissinfo.ch: (9 August 2012).
23. William Shannon, *Something of a Rebel: Thomas Merton: His Life and Works: An Introduction* (Cincinnati, Ohio: St. Anthony Press, 1997), p.169.
  24. Thomas Merton (selected and edited by William Shannon), *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985).
  25. Thomas Merton (edited by Robert E. Daggy), *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989).
  26. Thomas Merton (edited by Brother Patrick Hart), *The School of Charity: The Letters on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990).
  27. Thomas Merton (edited by Christine M. Bochen), *The Courage for Truth: The Letters of Thomas Merton to Writers* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1993).
  28. Thomas Merton (edited by William Shannon), *Witness to Freedom: Letters of Thomas Merton in Crises* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994).
  29. Hermann Hesse (edited by Volker Michels), *Hermann Hesse: A Pictorial Biography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), p.7.
  30. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Inc. 1990), p.3.
  31. Hermann Hesse, *If the War Goes On...* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970). Some of Hesse's reflections on war and peace can also be found in significant number of his Fairy Tales such as 'A Dream about the Gods' (1914), 'Strange News from Another Planet' (1915), 'If the War Continues' (1917), 'The European' (1918) and 'The Empire' (1918) — see *The Fairy Tales of Hermann Hesse: Translated and with an Introduction by Jack Zipes*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1995).
  32. For an outline of Merton's position see: Ron Dart, 'Peacemaker', *Thomas Merton: Monk on the Edge*: edited by Ross Labrie and Angus Stuart, (Abbotsford, British Columbia: Fresh Wind Press, 2012), pp.101-115.
  33. Ron Dart, 'Thomas Merton and Henry Miller: Our Faces', *Thomas Merton and the Counterculture: A Golden String*: edited by Ron Dart (Abbotsford, British Columbia: St. Macrina Press, 2016), pp.117-123.

**Ron Dart** has taught in the department of Political Science, Philosophy & Religious Studies at the University of the Fraser Valley (Abbotsford, British Columbia) since 1990. He has published more than 35 books, the most recent being, *George Grant: Athena's Aviary* (2018), *Erasmus: Wild Bird* (2017) and *The North American High Tory Tradition* (2016). He has published four books on Merton and a variety of articles on Merton in the *Merton Annual*, *Merton Seasonal* and *Merton Journal*, and is presently working on a book on Hesse and Merton. He is also on the executive of the Thomas Merton Society of Canada (TMSC).

## **Silence and Conflict – Kenneth Leech**

*There was silence in heaven for about half an hour (Rev. 8:1).*

According to the Talmud, the angels are silent by day so that the prayers of those on earth might be heard in heaven. But according to Revelation 4:8, the angels sing night and day. And so, according to many commentators, the half hour silence is to enable the prayers of the saints to be heard! However, Adela Collins rightly points out that there is no reference to the prayers of the saints being *heard*: they rise with the incense, and incense is not heard. Incense is pre-eminently the symbol of silent worship.<sup>1</sup> Other commentators, though, see the silence as a dramatic interlude before the End, perhaps a catastrophe delayed because of the prayer. Some stress the silence of awe before judgement. Thus Albert Barnes wrote in 1858, 'Silence – solemn and awful silence – is the natural state of the mind under such conditions.'<sup>2</sup> And only one commentator observes a silence in the face of silence: R.H. Charles, writing in 1913, comments, 'Into the significance of this silence ... we are not yet in a position to penetrate.'<sup>3</sup> But by 1920, even he had given in and opted for the prayer of the saints explanation!<sup>4</sup>

I would like to approach the question of the silence in heaven rather differently. The Book of Revelation is a study in warfare, in struggle, in the tribulation of a community under stress, confronted by the demonic power and structures of injustice. It is also a study in worship and prayer and praise. And throughout the drama, silence and struggle are intermingled. Note, for example, how in Chapter 18 (the celebration of the collapse of the oppressive power of Babylon), there is a dialectic of silence, weeping and rejoicing. The once noisy city is reduced to silence. The sound of harpers and minstrels, flute players and trumpeters, is heard no more (18:22). Instead, there is the silence of death. And over such silence, the former supporters of the regime, those who propped up the Babylonian establishment, weep and wail at the collapse of the commercial system, the loss of dainties and luxury goods, the silencing of the millstones. Even the transport system is thrown into confusion. And at the sight of all this the saints rejoice! It is hardly our modern picture of Christianity.

I suggest that in our present society the church is placed in a situation which is not far removed from what is described here: a situation in which a minority, seeking to be faithful to the gospel, to the demands of justice and mercy, and to the values of the Kingdom, is confronted by a cruel and oppressive social and political system which, like Babylon, traffics in human souls (18:13). The difference is that in our day Babylon



has entered the church and uses a Christian vocabulary, even invoking the word of God to disguise its corruption. In the midst of the inevitable and increasing conflict between biblical faith and establishment religion, the need for silence and critical reflection is very great. A church which has lost its capacity for silence and critical reflection can quickly become a church conformed to the dominant ideology.

Bonhoeffer saw this clearly in the Nazi period. He claimed that for the foreseeable future, the role of the church would be restricted to two things: prayer and the pursuit of justice. These essentially silent ministries would be the seedbed out of which all subsequent Christian action would spring. For Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church, confronted by the evil of fascism, the *disciplina arcana*, the hidden life of prayer, of Eucharist, and of reflection on the Scriptures, was literally of critical importance. A church which neglected silent contemplation and discernment would be incapable of resistance to evil. The vision of God was central to the struggle and the future of the church. During 1932 the text on which Bonhoeffer preached most frequently was 'We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you' (2 Chr. 20: 12).<sup>5</sup>

For Bonhoeffer the great danger was, that faced with Nazi oppression, the church would succumb to a very different kind of silence: the silence of compromise, the silence of acquiescence, the silence of safety and conformity. André Neher, in his study *The Exile of the Word*, contrasts the evils of Hiroshima, Dresden and Coventry — bombings accompanied by tumult — with the evil of Auschwitz. At Auschwitz, everything unfolded, was fulfilled and accomplished over weeks, months and years in absolute silence and away from the mainstream of history.<sup>6</sup> That silence, born not of the contemplation of the holy God but of the fear of worldly power, would in the end render the church impotent and, as Bonhoeffer feared, unserviceable. He wrote:

We have been the silent witnesses of evil deeds. Many storms have gone over our heads. We have learnt the art of deception and of equivocal speech. Experience has made us suspicious of others and prevented us from being open and frank. Bitter conflicts have made us weary and even cynical. Are we still serviceable? It is not the genius that we shall need, not the cynic, not the misanthropist, not the adroit tactician, but honest straightforward men. Will our spiritual resources prove adequate and our candour with ourselves remorseless enough to enable us to find our way back again to simplicity and straightforwardness?<sup>7</sup>

Those are questions which need to be faced by the church in any age.

In the conflict with evil, in the Christian witness in the new Dark Ages which are now upon us, the discipline of the faithful community is of critical importance, and central to this discipline is the offering of the Eucharist. The silence on earth for half an hour, in which the only words spoken are the word of God and the words of praise and prayer, must be maintained by a church set within a society which has become structurally deaf both to spiritual values and to human need. The Eucharist is not an escapist rite, a withdrawal from the world into a disconnected sacramental world: it is a foretaste of a new and coming age, and a stirrup cup to battle. In a society based upon anti-eucharistic principles, the Eucharist, which both witnesses to and creates a community of equality and sharing, is a deeply subversive activity. So also, in a noise-dominated world, a world alien to the contemplative spirit, is silence.

'There was silence in heaven' is paralleled four chapters later by 'There was war in heaven' (12:7). If the life of earthly societies is to be a reflection of the heavenly society, should we not expect to find the same dialectic of silence and war, contemplation and conflict, in our own lives? The call to wrestle effectively with principalities and powers depends on inner silence and on the inner and continual struggle with our own demons. External struggle and interior silence go hand in hand.

The silence in heaven is followed immediately by the rising of the incense, the prayers of the saints. In the old Roman rite, the blessing of incense at the Offertory of the Mass involved the invocation of the Archangel Michael, thus linking the silence of Revelation 8 with the warfare of Revelation 12, Let us then offer ourselves as incense and as instruments, in silence and in struggle, to adore and to serve the Lamb who was slain that we might live in justice, freedom and peace.

## Notes

1. Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Apocalypse*, Wilmington, Del., Michael Glazier, 1979, p.54.
2. Albert Barnes, *Notes Explanatory and Practical on The Book of Revelation*, New York, Harper, 1858, p.217.
3. R.H.Charles, *Studies in the Apocalypse*, T. and T. Clark, 1913, p.145.
4. R.H.Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St John*, ICC, 2 vols., T. and T. Clark, 1920, I. pp.223-4.
5. James H. Bustness, *Shaping the Future: The Ethics of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1984, p.17.
6. André Neher, *The Exile of the Word: From the Silence of the Bible to the Silence of Auschwitz*, Philadelphia, Jewish Publishing Society of America, 1981, p.142.
7. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Prisoner for God: Letters and Papers from Prison*, New York, Macmillan, 1958, p.27.

# Climate Change

Tony McClelland

It was our words —  
the very things that first  
brought us together,  
gave us light, kept us warm.  
But with every spoken word  
a breath, a little thing,  
rose into the air,  
became the atmosphere,  
trapped the truth  
and turned it back on ourselves,  
slowly driving climate change.

It seemed benign at first —  
a thaw in ancient ice,  
the calving of new floes,  
fresh currents, unfamiliar winds.  
But the melting ice uncovered  
forgotten fissures,  
and the seas began to  
shift, rise,  
alter the outlines of our maps.  
Then we began to name the whirlwind,  
personify its power,  
imagine it as rage  
directed at our shores.

This is our world, now —  
a place of deepening storms,  
where some are deluged  
With meanings dropped like bombs,  
while others thirst for truth  
in a terrible drought.

If it was words,  
whether wise or wild,  
that brought the world to this,  
then words cannot heal here.  
What hope there is  
must be found in silence.

# Book Review

## **Spirituality in Photography: Taking pictures with deeper vision**

Philip Richter

Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 2017

ISBN 978-0-2325-3293-7 (pbk) 120 pages

£9.99

In an interview in the *Church Times* in July 2017, Philip Richter was asked with whom he would like to spend time in a locked church. 'I'd choose Thomas Merton,' he replied. 'He discovered a passion for photography late in his tragically short life and used his camera as a tool for contemplation. His images reveal an eye for simplicity and wholeness.'<sup>1</sup>

That liking for the attitude and oeuvre of Merton-the-photographer shines through in *Spirituality in Photography*, not simply in the dedication – Richter quotes Merton's famous imperative, '*stop looking and ... begin seeing!*'<sup>2</sup> – but also in Richter's desire and determination to help people 'slow down' and 'pay attention' with the aid of a camera to what is Real within the real. This is a book which sets out to do just what it says in the title – to enable people to take pictures with 'deeper vision', thus developing both their photographic skills and their spiritual lives – a book which, moreover, lives up to that promise.

Richter is an amateur photographer – in the sense of being someone 'in love' with their craft - who started taking photographs as a child with a Box Brownie. Like Merton with his Canon FX, he revelled in the black and white images which emerged from that Zen-like instrument. Continuation with this fascination, however, at first proved incompatible with income – Richter is a Methodist minister, currently serving as a Ministry Development Officer in the British Connexional Team – given the cost of photographic equipment and developing in those days. The more recent advent of digital photography and mobile phone cameras, however, enabled Richter to pick up his hobby once again, as it did for countless others; in the author's own words, it 'democratised the

medium'. Richter gradually built up his skills by means of courses, reading, camera clubs and practice, the resultant expertise being generously shared in each chapter in such a way as to encourage even unconfident novices (like the reviewer) to experiment.

Each chapter highlights a different aspect of photography, offering practical hints and tips, while at the same time drawing out potential connections with spirituality: 'perspective', 'framing', 'rules/Rule of Life', 'the ordinary and the everyday' and so on. Each also suggests 'a challenge' to be addressed over the course of a month: photographic and spiritual steps to attempt, in each case relating to the topic under consideration. Thus, in the chapter entitled 'From snaps to slow photography', the photographic task is to 'make your photos more slowly; limit yourself to a maximum of 36 a day', while the parallel personal challenge is: 'Consciously slow down your life. Refuse to be rushed. Discover the single thing that matters.' Following that, a double-page spread is provided in which readers may jot down notes about these developments - 'new discoveries about my photography; new discoveries about myself and my spirituality; things to explore more; what I will try differently in future' - and insert 'the photo that best expresses my journey of discovery in this chapter'.

As the foregoing demonstrates, Richter has provided a primer for those starting out on a journey of discovery about heaven in ordinary. He writes in an encouraging vein, commending photography as a way into the joys and disciplines of the spiritual life for those who, as he puts it, 'don't do religion' but are nevertheless interested in spiritual questions. The book operates well at that level; it is immensely accessible and down to earth, connecting with 'where people are'.

But such intentional directness and simplicity is neither slick nor superficial; Richter's practical guidance is founded upon the depths of his own methodical journey of spirituality and discipleship, in particular his sharing of Merton's appreciation of the holiness of all created things, not simply the typically beautiful but also the ordinary and quotidian. That sense, as Merton wrote to Sister A., of stopping to look at '*some real created thing and feel and appreciate its reality*', of letting '*the reality of what is real sink into you ... for through real things we can reach Him Who is infinitely real*'.<sup>3</sup> Richter would concur with Merton's observation that '*as we go about the world, everything we meet and everything we see and hear and touch, far from defiling, purifies us and plants in us something more of contemplation and of heaven*'.<sup>4</sup> Like Merton, Richter uses the camera as a tool for 'natural contemplation' (*theoria physike*), '*the intuition of divine*

*things in and through the reflection of God in nature and in the symbols of revelation*<sup>5</sup> – and he urges his readers to do likewise.

One clear instance of this similarity in approach is evident in Richter's use of the word 'make', quoted above: '*Make your photos more slowly.*' Richter is at pains not to objectify or appropriate that which is being photographed; he is never imperial or colonizing towards it – never 'predatory' is the way he puts it – as the more usual words 'take', 'shoot' or 'capture' imply. Rather, like Merton, he allows the thing to be itself, going out to the object and giving himself to it, '*allowing it to communicate its essence, allowing it to say what it will, reveal what it will, rather than trying to bring it into the confines of self, altering and changing it by the possession of it.*'<sup>6</sup>

If the wisdom of this deceptively slight volume is absorbed slowly, and its advice acted upon – note that there are twelve chapters, the contents of each being commended for 'perhaps up to a month's exploration' – it has the potential to enable readers to slow down their lives, reframe their gaze and begin to be fully present '*to reality, to see the value and the beauty in ordinary things, to come alive to the splendour that is all around us in the creatures of God*'.<sup>7</sup> Thus it may help them, via the craft of photography, to embark upon the interior life, and inspire others to do likewise – just as Merton did in his photography.

## Notes

1. Philip Richter interviewed by Terence Handley MacMath, *Church Times*, 14 July 2017.
2. Ron Seitz, *Song For Nobody: A Memory Vision of Thomas Merton* (Liguori, MO: Triumph Books, 1995), p.133.
3. Thomas Merton, 'Letter to Sister A', 21 May 1953, in *The School of Charity – The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, Brother Patrick Hart, ed. (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1990), p. 61.
4. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (Wheathampstead, Hertfordshire: Anthony Clarke Books, 1972), p.20.
5. Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation*, William H. Shannon ed. (London: SPCK, 2003), p.67.
6. John Howard Griffin, *A Hidden Wholeness – The Visual World of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1979), p.50.
7. Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island* (London: Burns and Oates, 1955), p.28.

**Anne Tomlinson** is Principal of the Scottish Episcopal Institute, the training agency for ordinands and Reader candidates in the Scottish Episcopal Church. Merton's photographs have fed her for over 20 years.

*Events commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Merton's death*

## **Merton & Barth – A Shared Legacy**

*A study day held at St Michael's Priory, Milton Keynes*

**Saturday 24 November 2018**

The Catholic monk and writer Thomas Merton and the Protestant theologian Karl Barth both died on December 10<sup>th</sup>, 1968. From their differing backgrounds both have since emerged as extremely influential figures, shaping both twentieth-century Christian thought and yet remaining increasingly relevant to our present times.

*with* **Gary Hall & Ashley Cocksworth**

## **The Spiritual Roots of Protest & Merton's Enduring Legacy**

*A study day held at The Episcopal Cathedral, Edinburgh*

**Saturday 8 December 2018**

*led by* **Jim Forest**

**Jim Forest** has been a tireless worker for peace since the early 1960s. He was a co-founder of the Catholic Peace Fellowship in the 1960s while serving alongside Dorothy Day as managing editor of *The Catholic Worker*. He is one of the few people still living who knew Merton as a friend and co-worker.

The other participants are **James Cronin & Hugh Foy** and (provisionally) **Leah Robinson & Jeffrey Smith**

*These events are in an advanced stage of planning. Full details will be circulated to members when finalised, and will be included on the Society's website:*

**<http://www.thomasmertonsociety.org.uk/>**

# IN THIS ISSUE:

## **Editorial**

Gary Hall

## **Ken Leech - Contemplative Priest, Prophet and Friend**

Terry Drummond

## **Thomas Merton - Theologian of Resistance**

Kenneth Leech

## **A Vision of Hope and Joy**

Patricia Higgins

## **3 Reflections on Silence**

Kenneth Leech

## **Theology and the Back Streets**

Kenneth Leech

## **Spiritual Formation & 'Progress in Prayer' in the Merton-Gullick Letters**

Bonnie Bowman Thurston

## **Hermann Hesse & Thomas Merton: Countercultural Affinities**

Ron Dart

## **Book Review**

Anne Tomlinson

## **Poems**

Tony McClelland

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