

The Contemplative Voice of Thomas Merton

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There are so many ways in which Merton's writing resonates with contemporary thought, but underlying them all is that inner seeing, that deep interior listening to the world with a luminous clarity, which was a Merton hallmark. This contemplative consciousness, which I believe touches a universal consciousness, lives on, and is being picked up by contemporary writers who are part of a stream of awakening in our time. In the mid 1960s Merton wrote that authentic religion 'needs to ... [escape] practically all religious definition ... there has been endless definition, endless verbalising, and words have become gods. There are so many words that one cannot get to God as long as He is thought to be on the other side of words.'¹ Such sentiments would resonate with many today, and the emergence, in the past thirty or forty years of various umbrella organisations supporting Christian meditation and contemplative prayer² stand testimony to the hunger for silence that is part of the contemporary spiritual landscape. It is noteworthy that Richard Rohr, in a recent article describing what he calls "emerging Christianity," writes of the 'recovery of the older and essential contemplative tradition, starting with Thomas Merton in the 1950s, and now spreading to all denominations.'³

It does indeed seem as if Merton opened up an awareness of a contemplative tradition that had somehow gone underground. Like an unblocked spring of water, it has continued to surge forward, changing, developing, but retaining that essential link with an ancient tradition; food for hungry human souls searching for contact with their divine source. The late Benedictine monk, John Main, founder of what is now the World Community for Christian Meditation, visited Merton's hermitage in the grounds of Gethsemani in 1976, and felt from there compelled into the public teaching that subsequently spread round the globe. 'It was in the silent period spent in Thomas Merton's hermitage that the Spirit moved deeply in Main's heart and called him to the work of teaching meditation.'⁴ Main wrote of his time in the hermitage, 'My purpose in coming here was to talk to the community about prayer, but in fact I have learnt so much myself while I have been here.'⁵

I wonder if this sentence holds within it the crux of Merton's relevance for today. John Main went to talk to the community about prayer, but *learnt so much himself*. Merton was not, as such, a teacher, and despite his many writings about contemplation he wrote very little on how to do it. He did not offer a system: that was left to others, and has been ably tackled by various people in the intervening years.⁶ Merton's writing is rather a self-offering, a meeting; not only with him, but with our own deepest selves. Nowhere is this brought to life as vividly as in his writing on nature, which, as we have seen, was the closest he came to "home." 'I am part of the weather and part of the climate and part of the place,' he wrote, 'and a day in which I have not shared truly in all this is no day at all.'⁷ He was aware, in a way that few were in the 1960s, of the interconnections between humanity and nature, and of the dangers

¹ Shannon, William, & Bochen, Christine (eds) (2009), *Thomas Merton: A Life in Letters*, New York, Lion, p188.

² For instance, The World Community for Christian Meditation, www.wccm.org; Centering Prayer, www.centeringprayer.com; Julian groups, www.julianmeetings.org.

³ Rohr, Richard (2010), 'Revolution below the radar', *The Tablet*, 6th February, p14.

⁴ Harris, Paul (2001), *Frequently Asked Questions about Christian Meditation*, Ottawa, Novalis, p161.

⁵ *Ibid*, p161.

⁶ For instance, John Main, founder of what is now the World Community for Christian Meditation; Thomas Keating, founder of the Centering Prayer movement; and others in their wake.

⁷ Kramer, Victor (ed) (1996) *Turning Towards the World*, San Francisco, Harper Collins, p300.

inherent within ecological destruction: 'We are in the world and part of it and we are destroying everything because we are destroying ourselves, spiritually, morally and in every way. It is all part of the same sickness, and it all hangs together.'⁸ Contemporary theologians, of necessity, write about this interrelationship more scientifically.⁹ For Merton it was something known experientially and communicated from his heart. The central core of creation, of God, of humanity, were all united in his inner knowing; it was of the essence of that inner Wisdom:

When your mind is silent, then the forest suddenly becomes magnificently real and blazes transparently with the Reality of God. ... Creation, which first seems to reveal Him in concepts, then seems to hide Him by the same concepts, finally is revealed in Him, in the Holy Spirit. And we who are in God find ourselves united in Him with all that springs from Him.¹⁰

This is writing, I suggest, that needs to be allowed to sing in our hearts, and to awaken us to a depth of life that is all around us, waiting to be noticed, waiting to teach us from within.¹¹ Filled as it is with an abundance of *life*, and with detailed simplicity, his vibrant writing on the natural world is an urgent invitation to his readers to enter into life, to notice, and to come alive. There is a sense in which Merton's whole contemplative message might be summed up by words from one of his journals: 'Peace and silence at sunset behind the woodshed, with a wren playing quietly on a heap of logs ... bare branches of sycamore against the blue evening sky.'¹² Such observations are so simple that we might overlook them, yet they offer an invaluable gift. As a contemporary writer puts it, 'the wonder of life is incredibly visible, yet invisible to the naked or distracted eye.'¹³ Our twenty-first century eyes, our hearts, our whole beings, are so often distracted, and the degree to which Merton's contemplative message is relevant today may depend on the extent to which we are able to catch glimpses of the inner light that his writing portrays, and allow it to re-focus our vision. Merton was not a plaster-cast saint; but his authentic, alive and vulnerable humanity, shared so openly, invites us, I believe, towards ever expanding horizons of consciousness.

⁸ Ibid, p274.

⁹ See, for instance, McFague, Sallie, (2008), *A New Climate for Theology*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, p48.

¹⁰ Quoted in Weis, Monica (2003), 'Dancing with the Raven: Thomas Merton's Evolving View of Nature' in Patrick O'Connell, (ed.) *The Vision of Thomas Merton*, Notre Dame, Ave Maria Press, p145.

¹¹ Kathleen Deignan suggests that 'Merton is inviting us, as he does in so many things, to come to life in relationship to the nature which is our greater self.' Atkinson, Morgan, & Montaldo, Jonathan, (eds) (2009), *The Journey of Thomas Merton*, London, SPCK, p96.

¹² Hart, Patrick & Montaldo, Jonathan, (eds) (2002), *The Intimate Merton*, Oxford, Lion, p255.

¹³ McLaughlin, Nellie, (2004), *Out of Wonder: The Evolving Story of the Universe*, Dublin, Veritas, p17.