A City Is Something You Do...

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> Christianity has continually found new forms through needing to be worked out afresh in new situations; and the situations have often involved deprivation, suffering, marginalization. The shift from the province of Judaea to urban centres in the rest of the Roman Empire was the first such transition.

So writes David Ford in his essay 'Transformation', produced for the Archbishop of Canterbury's Urban Theology Group a few years ago.[1] From within the city it would appear that the general trend has been for some time a shift *away from* urban centres – or more specifically, away from the city centres and urban priority areas – towards the suburbs, coastal towns andmarket towns such as Oakham... If that perception is borne out in fact, it may partly explain the resurgence of forms of theology and spirituality which call themselves "urban."

Thomas Merton's vocational impulse took him on a trajectory away from the city too, towards the rural (medieval) context of Gethsemani Abbey. So when in one of his later essays we find him writing out of that context about the city, city-dwellers are understandably curious as to what he has to say. Does Merton offer resources for interpreting urban dynamics and shaping urban praxis?

We had to work out afresh our faith-response to a new situation which arose in the inner-city district of Hyde Park, Leeds during the summer of 1995. In the aftermath of a small but significant riot in that down-town neighbourhood in July of that year, Merton's essay, 'The Street is for Celebration', – in the posthumously-published collection, *Love and Living*[2] – seemed as good a starting-point as any. In

light of the collective shock of what had happened in our midst, it was interesting reading.

We may now take for granted that all theology is contextual, though it is less obvious whether there are theological/spiritual sources, idioms, languages specifically suited to the city. Of course we may, as individuals within the city, find nourishment for our personal faith-life in mystics and writers such as Merton. But there are occasions when we are looking for something more, something which might help us together to interpret what happens in the city, and to shape our action. What has Merton to offer? Perhaps we would, after all, do better turning to sociologists or historians, anthropologists, even architects—and we may be grateful for their professional insights. But, in the end, our quest is different: if we are to "find our place in the world" (as Merton would describe it), we generally need some working definition of where, in detail, we are—the particular world we are part of. And we need that definition all the more if we happen to experience ourselves as alienated from our environment.

So with typically broad strokes, Merton in this essay offers a basic starting-point:

A city is something you do with space

The statement in its global starkness begs deconstruction. For most of us, a city is not like an artist's empty canvas awaiting our creative construction, but rather is something that *somebody else* does with space. We have little say in the matter. Other people hold the power and make the decisions which influence the lives of many city-dwellers. One of those aforementioned sociologists had this to say:

> The crucial urban types are those who control or manipulate scarce resources and facilities such as housing managers, estate agents, local government officers, property developers, representatives of building societies and insurance companies, youth employment officers, social workers, magistrates, councillors and so on.[3]

This is a point Merton himself takes seriously later in the essay: "We did not build our own city," he writes—becoming the voice of the disenfranchised. He goes on:

> We have been thrown out into this alienated camp of rats, in which we are not wanted, in which we are constantly reminded by everything around us that we are powerless. This city is not built for celebration

> even though it calls itself 'Fun City'. Fun is for money. Fun is in buildings where you pay admission. (LL, p. 52)

Acknowledging that the city is by and large created and conducted by other people is not an abdication of responsibility for the life of the city, only a recognition of the limits of power and influence. The participation or collusion of each of us does to some degree shape our environment. However, the extent to which (or the way in which) a person may participate creatively in city life depends upon whether this "crowd of occupied spaces" are indeed "Occupied or inhabited? Filled or lived in?" (LL, p.46)

The answer to that particular question, suggests Merton, determines the character and quality of the city. And this in the end "may turn out to be a crucial question for a city, for a country, and for the world." Maybe it will. (There were, it must be said, quite a number of issues Merton considered vital at one time or another.)

The theme of 'space' is there in the work of sociologists such as Pahl – quoted previously – who a few years after Merton's essay suggests a dry but tantalising definition of the city as "A given context or configuration of reward-distributing systems *which have space as significant component*"[4] 'Space' was certainly a significant theme in Merton's own story. When Merton asks, "Can a street be an inhabited space? A space where people enjoy being? A space where people are present to themselves, with full identities, as real people, as happy people?" (LL, p.48), it is a question which resonates deep in his memory.

Merton had lived in a few cities. The evidence of his journals and other writings would suggest that he had often struggled in the city to be *present to himself, with full identity... real...happy* (as he puts it). For him the city (whether Cambridge, London, New York) had at times become "An alienated space, an uninhabited space...a space where you submit."

The city can also be dynamic, stimulating, festive, creative, fascinating—when we are at ease, when we belong, when we feel at home there. When we have little say, no role, when the city is shaped and imposed by people other than ourselves, then more intensely than any other environment, the city can impact upon our inner space, our emotional space. (Merton's reflections here are pertinent

to our current consideration of the plight of asylum seekers here in the East Midlands, for example.)

There are fascinating echoes on this kind of experience in *My Argument with the Gestapo*, a novel written during that "vital and crucial period" of Merton's life in the summer of 1941.[5] In this book, which reveals infinitely more that *The Seven Storey Mountain* of what Merton was feeling during this period, we follow a fictional Merton through the synthetic scenes of a remembered life he could not entirely leave behind. Set in wartime England and France, the novel is a last-ditch attempt (as he put it) to "define the world's predicament" and to find his place in that world.[6]

In *The Seven Storey Mountain* Merton would eventually define his monastic life as a rejection of the World, with the implication that the world (as object) is 'the problem.' But this earlier writing which appeared posthumously is more subtle in its outlook. Here, Merton is well aware of projecting his feelings onto the external world. He knows well enough that the world is perceived through the lens of emotional memory. Let's take a particularly telling passage:

> London was once one city for me, and became, at a certain definite time, another. Both cities are being bombed, and both are real, but they cannot both be real to the same person at the same time, and the city that is being bombed is the one I discovered last. It is the real one, the actual city. The other is only in the mind. It no longer exists. [7]

Merton then goes on to describe the city as *"a city of angels, of good, well-mannered children"* and as a place of quasi-pastoral tranquillity. This is how it appears until,

> suddenly, sometime, not for everybody, and never for the innocent, the masks fall off the houses, and the streets become liars and the squares become thieves and the buildings become murderers.

Both cities are "real," as he puts it—but not at the same time. The external world, the world out there, is in some sense an extension of the inner world of the beholder. The "actual city" – the dark, brooding, hurting city – remains imperceptible to the "innocent." (Here we catch echoes of William Blake, on whose work Merton was writing his MA dissertation at Columbia.) That loss of innocence is itself reflected by the world (and not least in his recollection of a world at war), which evokes an emotional reaction from one in whom such feelings are already latent. In short, the city amplifies the inner experience of *anomie*, alienation, disintegration.

By the time Merton was writing 'The Street is for Celebration', he was more astutely aware of the psychological dynamic which inspired that writing half a life-time previously. The insights nevertheless remained valid (he was still keen for the novel to be published) and articulate an experience which many urban-dwellers in particular will relate to: Quite simply, that the city *does something* with our emotional space. The city is more than a mere backdrop onto which we project our emotional world. Rather, the city generates particular reactions within us, resonating with aspects of our mood or inner experience which might otherwise remain dormant.

Merton's decision to join the Trappists was at the same time a decision not to work in the inner city. During the summer of 1941, he attended an evening lecture at St Bonaventure University where he was teaching English. A Russian emigrée, Baroness Catherine de Hueck, was speaking of life in the poorest parts of Harlem—a few blocks away from Columbia University. She was well known in Corpus Christi parish and, although Merton was expecting to see someone else on the stage that evening, he tells of how he knew instantly who she was when he walked into a room of people hanging onto her every word. He too was moved deeply and, following a brief conversation with the Baroness, soon afterwards found himself at Friendship House on 135th Street, Harlem, offering to join in the work there.

Harlem and its people left their mark on Merton: In *The Seven Storey Mountain* he writes of having "come out of Harlem with what might well have been the problem of another vocation." His poem, 'Aubade – Harlem', dedicated to Baroness Catherine de Hueck, expresses the kind of impressions which remained with him:

> Across the cages of the keyless aviaries,
> The lines and wires, the gallows of the broken kites,
> Crucify; against the fearful light,
> The ragged dresses of the little children.
> Soon, in the sterile jungles of the waterpipes and ladders,
> The bleeding sun, a bird of prey, will terrify the poor,
> Who will forget the unbelievable moon.[8]

Meanwhile, Merton returned for the autumn term to continue teaching at St Bonaventure's, and the Baroness arrived again on campus where she was leading a retreat. She asked Merton directly when he intended to come to Harlem for good. Merton agreed (after some discussion) that he would move into Friendship House in January.

Merton, of course, was unsettled. A retreat at Gethsemani Abbey during the previous Holy Week had left even deeper impressions than the streets of Harlem. He concludes the matter in a journal entry of November 27, 1941:

> Should I be going to Harlem, or to the Trappists? Why doesn't this idea of the Trappists leave me? Perhaps what I am afraid of is to write and be rejected... Perhaps I cling to my independence, to the chance to write, to go where I like in the world... Going to Harlem... is a good and reasonable way to follow Christ. But going to the Trappists is exciting, it fills me with awe and desire. I return to the idea again and again: "Give up *everything*, give up *everything!*" [9]

A "good and reasonable way to follow Christ" is what the city offered. But Merton at that time was unprepared. Only by "giving up everything" could he imagine being released from persistent struggles and unresolved issues which the world – the city – only reinforced. The city doesn't permit that kind of letting go. The city can sustain whatever distorting self-consciousness we carry. The city feeds on fictions involving roles, positions, masks, baggage, needs and values. The city presses home its own concerns, along with the needs and demands of other people. The city, by and large, will not leave us alone.

> The greatest need of our time is to clean out the enormous mass of mental rubbish that clutters our minds and makes all political and social life a mass illness. Without this house-cleaning we cannot begin to see. Unless we see we cannot think.[10]

So Merton famously followed his instinct towards an entirely new context, a sacred context, a world apart, a world whose reality was validated by his sense of emotional liberty and cognitive clarity. This sacred world of the Abbey stands in contradistinction to the secular and apparently meaningless urban world, the street which, in the end,

> may be a dump for thousands of people who aren't there. They have been dumped there, but their presence is so provisional they might as well be absent. They occupy space by being displaced in it. They are out of place in the space allotted to them by society. (LL, p.47)

Although Merton (like most urban practitioners) could never claim to be urban poor, 'underclass,' whatever, he did share in the more

common experience of alienation which a city can amplify. For this reason perhaps above all he remains a valued commentator for others engaging with the everyday experiences of urban dwellers. He too wanted to make a difference, and offered his own solutions:

> The people who are merely provisionally present, half-absent non-persons must now become really present on the street as themselves. They must be recognisable as people. Hence, they must recognise each other as people.

concludes Merton. With the poignant comment that "Business is not about to recognise them as people, only as consumers".[11]

Merton's own gradual dawning recorded and celebrated as a moment of 'enlightenment' at the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville is testimony to his own erratic movement towards this recognition of human worth and dignity. Awakening to that undergirding human solidarity, that unity, was a liberating moment for Merton—a transforming vision, if you like. Some years later, in light of that affective insight, he is able to uncover some of the factors which prevent such recognition in the first place:

> To acquire inhabitants, the street will have to be changed. Something must happen to the street. Something must be done to it. Instead of submitting to the street, [the inhabitants] must change it. Instead of being formally and impersonally put in their place by the street, they must transform the street and make it over so that it is liveable. (LL, pp. 48-9)

Such transformation involves clear perception which may require a distancing, disengaging from the distortions and confusions which the city can generate. But in the final count, seeing, thinking, and action are intertwined:

> The street can be inhabited if the people on it begin to make their life credible by changing their environment. Living is more than submission: it is creation. To live is to create one's own world as a scene of personal happiness.

But 'How do you do that?' asks Merton. And hosts of urban workers echo the question or offer their partial replies. Does Merton have an answer for us?

Yes and no. In our very specific experience back in 1995, Merton did present a guiding light, but when we came round to reading this essay in the wake of an urban uprising, some of the detail of Merton's

opinion were perhaps no more valid than the next opinion. He was too far from this particular experience.

It isn't immediately apparent what was in Merton's imagination when he spoke of those who seek to change their environment by "tearing the place apart." But he interprets that kind of social disorder – with its implications of destruction, looting, violence – as surrender:

> Violence in the street is all right as an affirmation that one does not submit, but it fails because it accepts the general myth of the street as no-man's-land, as battleground, as no place. Hence, it is another kind of submission. It takes alienation for granted. Merely to fight in the street is to protest, in desperation, that one is unable to change anything. So in the long run it is another way of giving up. (LL, p. 49ff.)

During a six-year sojourn in inner-city Leeds, our neighbourhood hosted two significant riots. Not the scale or ferocity of, say, events in Toxteth or Brixton some years earlier; nor were they really "fighting in the street", violence against the person. Each event had its own distinct character, the second perhaps the more simple—a threatening reaction by a gang from outside the area to one of their drug distributors being arrested in Hyde Park. Cars were burned, walls were rammed, people were afraid, riot police missed the point.

The first disturbance, notwithstanding the panic-stricken hysteria from the suburban press, had quite a different flavour and origin, one with which a number of us had a lot more sympathy.

I think it was the early hours of July 11 that I had a phone call to say the *Newlands* pub was ablaze. Walking down there (our church was just opposite and many of our people lived round about the pub), the stench of burning cars and the glow of a gutted building filled the senses. There was a lot of madness that night. The tension which had been developing for days had exploded. People were frightened and confused—but there was more to this than met the eye, and infinitely more than the local media could understand.

To risk gross over-simplification by cutting a long story short, a public house which had become one of the last remaining meeting points for local people of all ages, in an area of great deprivation and disintegration, had been taken over as a police surveillance point. The reason was that with its open doors it had also hosted drug dealings and the distribution of stolen property. Nothing good in that. But the perceived loss of the pub as a meeting point was the

final straw for the people who had little other community focus, and in the end the frustration exploded in the violent destruction of the pub itself. I think it was inevitable.

Of course that was further loss to the community which now had no pub to meet in either. A kind of surrender, as Merton would have it. He does concede (perhaps with tongue in cheek) that street violence does have its points:

> It is a way of reminding business, the city, the fuzz, etc., that you are there, that you are tired of being a non-person, that you are not just a passive machine for secreting indefinite amounts of submission.

That reason was a key factor for some in Hyde Park. Other approaches and appeals had been tried, and countless unfulfilled promises had been heard. So far, Merton provided a perceptive and helpful commentary. But as he continues to reflect on the disadvantages of urban uprising, Merton betrays his distance and lack of immediate experience. "The trouble with this approach", he writes, "is":

It does not make the street any more habitable. (Well, it did—the release of tension was almost tangible. People for weeks gathered on the streets to talk, to discuss, to protest, to meet...and from that time on a range of creative social projects and developments have grown)

It does not make life on this street any more credible. (Again, not true in our experience. In due course, despite or because of the hysterical media, people were galvanised, organised, articulate, expressive...)

It does not make anybody happy. (Don't you believe it!)

It does not change the kind of space the street is.

It does not change the city's negative idea of itself and of its streets. (In time, Hyde Park began to develop a confidence and sense of identity which had not been evident beforehand.)

It accepts the idea that the street is a place going someplace else. (No—this was reclamation of the street as 'our street.')

It accepts the street as a tunnel, the city as a rabbit warren. It takes for granted what business and money and the fuzz and everyone else takes for granted: that the street is an impersonal tube for 'circulation' of traffic, business, and wealth, so that consequently all the real action is someplace else. (Again, not so. They stopped the traffic...)

Merton's reflections might more accurately describe other occasions of urban uprising (I remember the panic in the United States prompted by the verdict of the Rodney King trial...) but some

of his conclusions here evidently cannot be taken as the last word. What Merton does provide is a point of reference outside the immediacy of particular urban experiences. And his concluding paragraph is a remarkable echo of some of the feelings which were being expressed during those heady days in Hyde Park:

> They with their gold have turned our lives into rubble. But we with love will set our lives on fire and turn the rubble back into gold. This time the gold will have real worth. It will not be just crap that came out of the earth. It will be the infinite value of human identity flaming up in a heart that is confident in loving. This is the beginning of power. This is the beginning of the transformation. (p.53)

"Confident in loving?" What does it take to learn that? Surely such confidence is inextricably bound up with assurance that one is love-able. And that truth was as significant in Hyde Park as it was for Merton himself. In this essay, Merton returns in imagination to the city, with a heart at last more confident in loving. He had made his own journey down that particular, arduous path. If he had been confident in loving back in 1941 perhaps he would after all have stayed in Harlem rather than arrived at the gatehouse of Gethsemani Abbey. Who knows?

Appendix

In the 'Hyde Park Churches Youth Survey' (published in 1995, shortly before the disturbances), we described the area as:

> complex and diverse, with distinct groups, cultures, outlook and experience. There are numerous small communities, mostly centred around groups of streets. People are very territorial, and there is little sense of a wider community identity. People in the area find it difficult actually to say where they live in any terms that can be recognised by outsiders. The ethnic diversity of the residents and the large shifting population of students also militate against any sense of community identity or common commitment.

This brokenness and lack of identity in the community has not always been the case (some of the recent history as recalled by local people is recorded in Nick Davies' *The Dark Heart*. Davies has a cavalier approach to fact in some instances, though his analysis is sharp). Loss of many jobs. Around the beginning of the 1990s, the situation in Hyde Park had changed dramatically. The 1991 census records a

familiar tale of high unemployment, poor housing and a high crime rate. Many young people were growing up in households where they have no experience of adults who go to work. Prospects for young people leaving school were bleak, and (for example) car-crime figures from August 1994 to January 1995 showed the area to be the worst in the city and burglary figures to be the second highest. We knew young people from the area involved in this criminal activity. Council and other housing was bought up—often by absentee landlords (locals could not afford it) then rented out at high prices to single parents or students who frequently stayed only a short time and didn't care much for the area.

Notes and References

1. *God in the City*, ed Peter Sedgwick, London: Mowbray, 1995, p.204
2. *Love and Living*, London: Sheldon Press, 1979, pp. 46-53. 'The Street is for Celebration' appeared in *The Mediator* 20 (Summer 1969), pp.2-4.
3. R. Pahl, *Whose City?* London: Penguin, 1975, p.206
4. Ibid., p.10
5. New York: Doubleday, 1969. The author's preface to the novel puts it into context and asserts its continuing significance. The comments quoted are from a private journal first quoted in Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, p.513.
6. In the Author's Preface, written in 1968, a few months before his death, Merton writes: *I wanted to enter the Trappists but had not yet managed to make up my mind about doing so. This novel is a kind of sardonic meditation on the world in which I then found myself: my attempt to define its predicament, and my own place in it.*
7. Ibid., pp.33f
8. From *A Man in the Divided Sea*, New York: New Directions, 1946
9. *The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1959, p.269.
10. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. New York: Doubleday & Co., 1965. Second ed 1977, Sheldon Press, London, p.74
11. LL, p.49. The first essay in *Love and Living*, namely *Learning to Live*, dovetails with much that is said in 'The Street is for Celebration', not least in discussion of the meaning of real presence.