

Introduction

Ross Labrie

My first encounter with Thomas Merton occurred in the late 1950s. I had been caught by the paperback cover of *The Seven Storey Mountain* and soon had adopted it as my reading on the long bus rides to and from my university, which at the time happened to be McGill. Even in those days Merton's story stood out against the raft of Penguin Classics and popular novels that filled the shelves of the many small bookstores located in the bustling centre of Montreal. Somehow, he presented a fresh option, a retreat from a world with its optimistic, ascending economy and edgy Cold War atmosphere. Lodged in his Trappist monastery in the Kentucky hills, Merton presented his readers with a possibility that reached right into the hum of my quite different urban setting. It wasn't simply that Merton beckoned one to consider the value of a monastic life but that in books to come he would suggest that a contemplative life was possible, indeed necessary, for all wherever they happened to live.

As it happened, I had become involved in an occasional way in the life of a house of hospitality that was located in the poorest section of the city. This house, which was called Benedict Labre House, was run by a man of English and Irish parents whose name was Anthony or Tony Walsh. Tony Walsh met with Merton at Merton's abbey in Kentucky in 1962, and Merton characterized him in his journal at the time as an "utterly fine and good person."¹ Tony Walsh was also one of the handpicked group that met at Merton's monastery in 1964 to discuss peacemaking and the spiritual roots of protest. Acting on the example of Dorothy Day, the New York woman who began the Catholic Worker movement, Walsh fed and housed the poor while living a marginal existence himself. He also attracted groups of college and high-school students so that they might come into contact with the poor and from there begin to discuss issues related to social justice. In a

way, although living within a teeming city, Tony Walsh emulated some features of Merton's monastic life including the regular saying of Compline at the end of the day, a practice in which all who were in the house at the time were invited to share. On the bookshelves at Labre House were volumes by Thomas Merton, who figured in such discussions in spite of his monastic isolation. One of these books, Merton's journal, *The Sign of Jonas*, Tony Walsh recommended to me. Although *The Sign of Jonas* is one of the most monastically enclosed of all of Merton's writings, it is also a book in which, no matter where one was situated, the world expanded so as to accommodate the continuing and ubiquitous presence of God. Having looked in on Merton's life in his quiet monastic surroundings, one could not quite go back to where one had been - or indeed move on in quite the same way.

In spite of the power of these early experiences and impressions, after I left Montreal to study in Toronto, Merton faded from my thoughts. Indeed, I came across him by accident one day in the early 1970s when walking through the book stacks at the University of British Columbia where I was teaching. I suddenly saw his name on the spine of a book: "Whatever became of you?" I wondered. The answer, it soon became apparent, was that Merton had died in 1968. In the ensuing months I decided to apply for a leave so that I could visit Merton's abbey and hermitage, and peruse the Merton papers at Bellarmine College (now Bellarmine University) in Louisville, Kentucky. Fortunately, I found myself in the hands of a very capable curator at Bellarmine, Robert Daggy, who helped me navigate a sea of material. Moreover, Daggy made it clear that certain of the journals were not to be opened to the public until 25 years after Merton's death and were in fact held in a bank vault in Louisville under the watchful eyes of the Merton Trust. Included in these journals were writings connected with Merton's brief, romantic relationship with a Louisville nurse who looked after him in the hospital in 1966. Both the relationship and the papers associated with it are now available to Merton readers and as one might imagine this has become a topic of keen interest. It would seem that Merton broke off the relationship not simply because of pressure applied by his abbot but, as his journals make

clear, because he felt that he belonged where he was, that is, in the monastic life.

This view of Merton might seem to clash with his extensive travel in the months before his death in which he appeared to be looking for an alternative location than the Abbey of Gethsemani where even in his hermitage he found himself pursued by visitors. Although Merton traveled to possible sites in Alaska, New Mexico, and California, it would seem that he meant to return to his abbey or at least that he had not decided to go anywhere else. Ironically, Merton's writings, which had been published across the world reaching readers who spoke many different languages, presented someone who, in spite of his physical isolation from mainstream society, enabled them to deal with the widespread alienation that for many characterized modernity. In one of his most searching poems, "The Originators," Merton in the late 1960s pictured himself as awake in the night while others slept, standing in for them, as it were, in the nocturnal silence and in the presence of the God who had created them.

Thomas Merton is now widely recognized as one of the most important spiritual writers in North America in the last hundred years. Steeped in the history of Christian theology and of monasticism, Merton saw the unexpected relevance of many of these ancient truths in what the Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor, has called a secular age. Nevertheless, in Merton's view Christianity had over the centuries become identified with certain forms of culture and society, beginning with the position of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire. He noted that the monks of the fourth century had already begun to separate themselves from a corporate Christianity that in some respects had fallen into step with the Roman Empire that had made it its official religion. These early desert fathers in Egypt and Syria, whom Merton admired, while committed to a life of asceticism, were continuously aware of the presence of God in the world and of the gift of creation itself.

Similarly, while Merton's monastic life was ascetic, his consciousness was stirred by images of the creational beauty of the world and by what seemed to him its latent goodness.

Moreover, as someone who had been strongly influenced by Greek classicism, Merton affirmed the dignity of reason even while acknowledging its limits. Thus, for Merton, intuitive understanding was not at odds with reason but complementary to it. As a Christian humanist, a term that he explicitly applied to himself, Merton affirmed an innate dignity in humanity that derived from the imprinting in human beings of something of the mind of the creator and from the increased moral wisdom that followed the entry of Christ into history.

Essentially, what the ancient, monastic practice of contemplation enabled modern human beings to do, Merton maintained, was to be temporarily released from the clamor and materialism of modern life. Contemplation empowered the underlying created self to emerge with a quite different set of needs and questions from those that preoccupied the surrounding culture. Merton recognized that even within Christianity the practice of contemplation had been marginalized, often because it seemed to have less to offer than the active life, which included not only ephemera but good works such as the building of schools, hospitals, and so on. Merton felt that without a contemplative life in which the self sought ultimate wisdom one risked spending one's energies in an arbitrary fashion. For this reason he regarded contemplation and action as mutually dependent states required for all human beings.

Furthermore, Merton maintained that there was in human beings a potentiality for peace and order that could be nourished through contemplation. In contrast to the history of Christendom, which he saw as often scarred by violence on the one hand and blinded by an aura of otherworldliness on the other, Merton argued that Christians should seek peace in part through interreligious and intercultural understanding. He regarded as fatuous attempts on the part of religious people to reject modernity out of hand. Indeed, he argued that the political and economic interdependence of the modern world had made modern peoples "to some extent responsible to others on the far side of the earth."² Modernity had already in a sense prepared the internationalism that could aid in the achievement

of peace, as human beings, now in almost universal contact with one another, could experience their minister@st-andrews-united.ca fundamental similarity to one another. If Christianity were to fulfill the work of its founder, Merton stipulated, it needed to recognize its allegiance to the whole human family, which among other things meant outgrowing the divisiveness of nationalism. The unholy alliance between nationalism and war, Merton observed, had been famously demonstrated in the First World War in which each side had asked God to destroy their adversary thereby betraying the very Christianity in whose name they had fought.

One of Merton's great gifts as a cultural analyst was his inclusiveness. Thus, he not only brought the psychological and spiritual richness of the monastic past to bear on modern culture but he showed how other past cultures had been moving in a similar direction. As Merton scholar, Lawrence Cunningham, has pointed out, Merton was attracted to so-called primitive cultures because they demonstrated a grateful awareness of the immense gift of creation. Similarly, Merton had attached himself to Romanticism because of the primitiveness in Romanticism, which had attempted to extend a spiritual view of the cosmos beyond the theological and philosophical tenets of institutional religion. Romanticism, whose influence stretched well into the twentieth century, preserved transcendentalism and thus challenged the increasingly materialistic character of twentieth-century culture. With its anchoring of itself in the self and in contemplation, Romanticism exhibited many of the features of religion that Merton had extolled.

If Merton was a lover of the ancients, he also felt strongly that he was part of the modern. This can be seen in his poetry, especially in volumes like *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire* with their modernist and postmodernist elements. Merton was also essentially hospitable towards science. For this reason he was drawn to the writing of the Jesuit paleontologist, Teilhard de Chardin, who had attempted to integrate a modern, scientific view of the world with Christian belief. Merton was particularly attracted to de Chardin's suggestion that a knowledge of geology

and biology would eventually enhance the unity of human beings by making them conscious of how majestic the development of life had been. Surpassing the dogmas of nationalism, de Chardin had in Merton's view taken a species-wide view of human beings. Moreover, Merton noted approvingly that the physicist, Werner Heisenberg, had described the technical prowess of human beings as an ineradicable part of their nature.

Nonetheless, as was true of his attitude towards de Chardin, Merton balked at the habit of some modernists, such as Marx, for thinking of human beings primarily in a collective sense. In this respect Merton drew on what he regarded as the personalist and existentialist traditions of early Christianity. Merton's approach can be seen in his writings on peace in which he called for an inclusive rather than a collective or class struggle approach to peacemaking. With such an approach, Merton believed, one sought to persuade one's adversary to become a collaborator in the quest for peace.³ Overall, Merton's attitude to culture was that religious people should pay attention to the culture(s) around them and seek to transform society following the spirit of Christ.⁴

Merton's emphasis on existential Christianity allowed him to explore the gap between conceptualized doctrine and the experience of belief. In a preface to the French edition of *The Ascent to Truth* he said that if he were to write the book again he would draw more upon Scriptural narratives and the writings of the Fathers of the Church rather than upon the abstract reasoning of medieval scholasticism, which he stated was not the "intellectual climate for a monk."⁵ Following this line of thought, Merton in a letter to J.H. Richards in 1966 argued that on the level of conceptual formulation and of doctrine there would always be the "utmost confusion" while on the level of experience there need be "little or none at all."⁶ Along with this emphasis on the existential Merton was inclusive. In the foreign prefaces to his writings, for example, he noted that by the 1960s he was more inclined to widen his approach by including more about the psychological aspects of spiritual experience including in turn some discussion about the

unconscious drives and their relation to the life of prayer.⁷

What allowed Merton to pursue an active interest in both ancient and modern cultures was partly biographical, the fact that he had been born in and educated in Europe before settling in America, the home of modernity. From America Merton drew his sense of the importance of individual freedom. Furthermore, in the spirit of modernity he came to believe that one of the most important characteristics of religion in general and of Christianity in particular was the latent dynamism of each. Over time, he argued, this dynamic quality that was to be found in the life of Christ had been set aside by the inertia brought about through an emphasis on tradition and institutionalism. Even monasticism had succumbed to some extent, he added, having identified the "fig leaf," with the "Paradise condition" by which he meant the dominance of a repressive, static Christianity.⁸

One of the difficulties with institutional inertia, Merton observed, was that it tended to justify the status quo even when the status quo was morally deficient. Such was the case with Christianity's historic imbuing of passivity in its members towards social injustices such as abysmal working conditions and war. Historically, Christians had accepted the suggestion from their leaders that people should simply offer up these hardships as part of their sacrificial imitation of Christ. Toward this aspect of the legacy of the ancient and medieval worlds Merton simply felt incensed. He regarded suffering as an evil that Christians should do everything in their power to remedy. In this way they could, in Merton's words, "give glory to God by cooperating with him in resisting it."⁹ In this way the dynamic, transformative work of Christianity could be applied to the world for which Christ had died. In affirming the divine intervention of Christ in the ancient world, Merton insisted that the religion of love that Christ had epitomized was a summons to what he called a "*permanent newness of life*."¹⁰

Increasingly through the 1960s Merton had become aware of Christendom with its roots deep in the ancient and medieval worlds as a "classical hierarchic pyramid with God at the top, man halfway

down, and prime matter at the bottom.”¹¹ In such a hierarchy all creatures had a fixed and proper place in the great chain of being. This led, Merton felt, to an exaggeration of the importance of structure and an overlooking of the dynamic aspects of Christianity. Ironically, Merton reflected, those who stressed the dynamic qualities of history and of society were often major thinkers outside of and even hostile to the church, such as Marx. Merton praised Marx’s re-focusing of the attention of human beings on social justice in the modern period, a problem that had developed, Marx argued, because of the other-worldly gaze of religion.¹² In his reflection on the eventual awakening of Western religion to a neglected aspect of its mission through the insights of Marx, Merton illustrated the dynamic interaction between Christianity and other cultures including those that were indifferent to religion. For Merton this was the very essence of Christian humanism where the truths of Christianity were set alongside those from other cultural sources and thereby tested for worthiness.

In the 1960s Merton became aware that he had a vocation to clarify the character and value of the historic religious traditions to which he felt related. These included the wisdom of Christianity, including the Orthodox and Protestant churches, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. At the same time he affirmed the distinctiveness of the compassionate, rescuing role of Christ as having a lasting value for the world. Merton’s way of incorporating religious truths outside of his Roman Catholic and monastic traditions is instructive. An example from among many was his turning quite naturally and spontaneously at times to figures like Martin Luther as if he and Luther were thinking along together about the relationship between God and humanity. In his journal in 1966 Merton accepted Luther’s important doctrine of justification centred on God’s necessary forgiveness as the basis of conversion and of the transforming of history as long as that doctrine could be added, he suggested, not disingenuously, to the Roman Catholic “idea of grace.”¹³ In addition, reflecting in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* in the 1960s on the squabbles over petty rules of observance in his monastery, Merton called for the likes of a Luther to intervene and restore a sense of the important issues that ought to prevail in the religious life.¹⁴ These passages show Merton

thinking along with Luther not in a spirit of theological argument but rather in a spirit of relaxed companionship.

For Merton, religious luminaries like Luther, Calvin, and the Dalai Lama were companions on the path to wisdom. While he affirmed modernity as the reality of the present, Merton as a monk on the edge of diverse worlds was anxious that the strength of the religious past, which supported a strong, innate view of the self, be sustained. He feared that technology, which formed the very essence of modernity, would so distract the self that its inherent spiritual dignity and innate wisdom would become invisible. To offset this tendency, Merton called on the centuries old riches of monasticism. These were especially the emphasis on solitude and contemplation, which instead of isolating the self, he never tired of insisting, paradoxically gave rise to a communal consciousness that helped to dispel the fragmentizing and de-personalizing effects of technological culture.

This volume of essays, which was initially conceived by Ron Dart, is intended to capture something of the breadth of Merton’s interests and sensibility and in particular his openness both to the ancient world and to modernity. The book includes the work of a number of scholars based in Canada who have taken to writing about Merton in the same period of time, scholars whose work is well known to one other in part through the Thomas Merton Society of Canada, publisher of these essays. I am especially grateful to my co-editor, Angus Stuart, for his fine editorial skills and judicious comments. I also thank Judith Hardcastle and Gisela Labrie for their help in proofreading.

Endnotes

1. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, ed. Victor Kramer (San Francisco: Harper, 1997), 236.
2. Thomas Merton, “Christian Humanism in the Nuclear Era,” in *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux), 153.
3. Thomas Merton, “Toward a Theology of Resistance,” in *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 12).

4. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 177.
5. Thomas Merton, *Honorable Reader*, ed. Robert Daggy (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 28.
6. Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom*, ed. William Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994), 325.
7. Merton, *Honorable Reader*, 28.
8. Thomas Merton, "Learning to Live," in *Love and Living*, 8.
9. Thomas Merton, "The Universe as Epiphany," in *Love and Living*, 181.
10. Thomas Merton, "Christian Humanism," in *Love and Living*, 140.
11. Thomas Merton, "Christian Humanism," 141.
12. Merton, "Christian Humanism," 141-142.
13. Merton, *Learning to Love*, 142.
14. Merton, *Conjectures*, 245.