

Book Review

Kathleen Deignan

Seeking Paradise: The Spirit of the Shakers. Thomas Merton. Edited with an introduction by Paul Pearson. Orbis Books, 2003. 125 pp. ISBN 1-57075-501-9.

ON DECEMBER 10, 1960 Thomas Merton wrote to Shaker scholar Edward Deming Andrews expressing his interest in writing a book about the highly celebrated and enigmatic 19th century American utopian community, known as the Millennial Church and popularly called the Shakers. Sadly, Merton never realized that intention. But in *Seeking Paradise: The Spirit of the Shakers*, Paul Pearson has gathered together all of Merton's seminal thinking on the Shakers and also his photos of the Society at Pleasant Hill, Kentucky, bringing something of Merton's dream to fruition in a beautiful book that well serves Merton's original desire: "...I have discussed the possibility of a book on the Shakers. My part would not be precisely a study of their religion, if by that is to be understood their doctrines, but of their spirit, and I might say their mysticism, in practice evidenced by their life and craftsmanship."

This most successful experiment in American communitarianism was in its terminal phase by the time Thomas Merton encountered the Shakers, once a potent religious project that had begun around the time of the American Revolution and grew to over 6,000 prior to the Civil War. Formally called The

United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, the Shakers are a unique species of Christianity, rooted in the conviction that Christ had come again through the mediation of a woman, Ann Lee, and subsequently the whole Shaker Society, to inaugurate the resurrection state here on earth. All their theology, spirituality, practice, polity and culture are an elaboration of the fundamental claim that the second appearing of Christ had brought the old world to an end, and a new world to birth.

Pearson's fine introductory essay helps to parse out the variegated dimensions of Merton's appreciation of the Shaker spirit, as a prelude to Merton's own words about a tradition that clearly captivated him. Pearson's narrative style allows us to trace Merton's fascination with the Shakers from his first note on the community in *The Waters of Siloe* in 1949, through his several visits to the Pleasant Hill settlement in Kentucky, not far from the abbey, through the early 1960s. After his first trip in 1959 Merton writes: "I cannot help seeing Shakertown in a very special light, that of my own vocation. There is a lot of Shakertown in Gethsemani." Indeed Merton saw Shakerism as a radically American variety of monasticism, whose central ideal of simplicity was "a true American charism," exemplified in the practicality, optimism, earnestness, conservation and hope that were the bright spirit of America, "the most

authentic expression of the primitive American mystery or myth - the paradise myth."

From his own Cistercian formation, Merton shared with the Shakers a "paradise consciousness" that played itself out in every aspect of their highly regulated life, particularly in their commitment to the daily labour to actualize the purity and truth of paradise in the material world, in a spirit of humility. Their sense of place and the brilliant ingenuity of architecture that revered the sacrality of the natural world resonated with Merton, who also shared the joy that set them to song and dance, their signature modes of worship.

But however luminous and benign, the Shaker gospel was two-edged, and Merton admired the fierce social criticism and counterculturalism of their communitarianism, their pacifism, and the egalitarianism of genders and races within the order - a stark contrast to the shadow side of the American psyche. Merton found in the Shakers kindred spirits who shared his experiential faith, a realized eschatology, in the discovery of the living presence of the Christ Spirit within us here and now: "so that the true Christian is the ... 'Child of the Resurrection' with his eyes open to a wholly new vision of a redeemed cosmos in which war, hatred, tyranny, greed had no place - a cosmos of creativity and worship."

Merton's slender but rich corpus on Shakerism follows Pearson's skilful introduction, and here we are treated to Merton's uncanny capacity to get inside

that cosmos of creativity and worship he so admired. The first of two substantial essays is "Pleasant Hill: A Shaker Village in Kentucky," originally published in *Jubilee*, and later reproduced in his volume *Mystics and Zen Masters*. In it he offers a wonderfully comprehensive, and rather straightforward, reflection on the history and values of the order. The second essay is an introduction to *Religion in Wood: A Book of Shaker Furniture*, written by Merton's mentor on Shakerism, Edward Deming Andrews. Here, within an homage to both Andrews and the Shakers, Merton weaves an intricate meditation on Shaker aesthetics in tandem with the fourfold vision of another of his soul-kin, William Blake. This may be one of the most profound pieces of writing on the Shaker spirit and the extraordinary culture that it crafted, particularly in the Zen-like purity of their furniture. Echoing Blake, he underscores at every turn the centrality of the creative imagination as the faculty of religious insight, and ultimately of redemption itself, since, as Merton warns, if human imagination is not expressed in the kinds of aesthetic forms that service our humanization, it becomes a dangerous, destructive power funding our dehumanization.

The novelty of the book is the transcription of one of Merton's taped conferences to the novices: "Work and the Shakers." One smiles at the alteration of voice in this piece, so much more colloquial and plain in contrast to the erudition of his essays. Here Merton is a teacher, drawing a monastic lesson on the sacrality of manual labor from the witness of the

Shakers, expressed in their maxim: "Put your hands to work and your hearts to God." In conversation with St. Thomas Aquinas, he finds the Shakers worthy masters in the art of tending to the truth of the thing before us. Merton urges the young monastics to let their labour be their prayer, as Benedict instructed, and so extend the contemplative dimension of their lives to every work, every gesture.

The collection concludes with several letters to Shaker scholar Edward Deming Andrews, his wife Faith, and Shaker conservators Ralph McCallister and Mary Childs Black, thanking them for their work and indulging in some illuminating remarks on the legacy of the Shakers. Finally, Merton's photos of Pleasant Hill which grace this book allow the reader entry into the magnetic beauty of the Shaker world in the stark simplicity of its forms that opens to a kinesthetic experience of deep silence, serenity, and profound peace. In Merton's pictures we see something of the aesthetic geometry that captivated his spiritual and physical senses in his contemplative connection to this small nation of Christian craftspeople seeking paradise, with whom he felt deeply

related "in some kind of obscure communion."

As a scholar of both Merton and the Shakers I treasure this book which Paul Pearson has crafted in true Shaker style and spirit: humble elegance. Few have matched Merton's astonishing insight and eloquence about the spirit of the Shakers, and these essays, for all their brevity, surpass most of what has ever been written on this remarkable society of American mystics. Perhaps Merton offers the greatest homage to this nearly extinct species of radical Christianity when he writes: "I cannot help feeling that the Shaker movement is something of a mystery that withholds from us, still, a deep significance which may even throw some light on our present predicament in the world... I have as yet no way of substantiating this intuition." Yet his words and images elucidate the challenge and promise of seeking paradise.

Kathleen Deignan is the author of Christ Spirit: The Eschatology of Shaker Christianity (Scarecrow, 1992), and When the Trees Say Nothing: Thomas Merton's Writings on Nature (Sorin 2003).

from Merton's letter to Jim Forest

"The great thing after all is to live, not to pour out your life in the service of a myth: and we turn the best things into myths. If you can get free from the domination of causes and just serve Christ's truth, you will be able to do more and will be less crushed by the inevitable disappointments. Because I see nothing whatever in sight but much disappointment, frustration and confusion.

"The real hope, then, is not in something we think we can do but in God who is making something good out of it in some way we cannot see. If we can do His will, we will be helping in this process. But we will not necessarily know all about it beforehand."