

# Learning to Listen: Merton, Chakravarty, and the Smith College Students

William Apel

Listen carefully my child,  
to my instructions, and  
attend to them with the  
ear of the heart.

St. Benedict

**T**he very first word of the Preface to *The Rule of St. Benedict* is 'Listen'. Benedict knew centuries ago how hard it is to listen – to really learn to listen as he said 'with the ear of the heart'. Learning to listen was also very important to Thomas Merton, Amiya Chakravarty, and the students in Chakravarty's philosophy class at Smith College.

## I. It all began with a letter

On January 16, 1967, Amiya Chakravarty, professor and Buddhist scholar, sent a letter to his interfaith friend Thomas Merton alerting him to the news 'that we have decided to have a Fr. Thomas Merton Evening at Smith in February'.<sup>1</sup> He told Merton that students in his philosophy of religion course at this prestigious woman's college on its Massachusetts campus were 'most keenly enthusiastic' and that there was excitement and joy all over campus 'in anticipation of the event'.<sup>2</sup> The idea was to discuss Merton's newest books, his poems, and the Gandhi

book. Of course, added Chakravarty, 'your autobiographical book will be with us'.<sup>3</sup> Chakravarty's letter concluded by emphasizing his own excitement about having Merton's works in the hearts of so many young people 'in these crucial days'.<sup>4</sup>

In a slight interruption of our story, we need to say a few words about Amiya Chakravarty. At Chakravarty's initiative, he began a correspondence with Merton in 1966. Late that year, they met for the first time at Gethsemani. They last met in Calcutta during Merton's Asian journey. Born in West Bengal, India, in 1901, Chakravarty was Oxford educated and later taught in the United States at Boston University, Smith College, and the State University of New York. As a young man he had been literary secretary to the renowned Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore. A poet, Indian philosopher, and world scholar in his own right, he marched with Gandhi in India's struggle for independence. Later, his world

travels took him to Africa, Asia and the Middle East. In the Caribbean region he surveyed multicultural patterns of interaction and addressed problems of religious minorities. Chakravarty's humanitarian work was recognized with a lifetime award from UNESCO. But at heart, Chakravarty was a mentor and a teacher.<sup>5</sup> And now, back to our story.

On January 21, 1967, Merton responded to Chakravarty's news about the pending 'discussion at Smith' with due caution:

I feel honored – and also I am not humble enough to take these things gracefully and therefore I am also a little confused. It is perhaps not necessary to do so, but I would like to say that I hope it does not take on the aspect of a personality cult. I think the girls at Smith are wise enough to avoid that. Besides, I have always been frank about my limitations for people to be fully aware of them.<sup>6</sup>

Aside from this one reservation, Merton's overall response was quite positive. He was pleased at the prospect of a 'Merton Night' at Smith. Merton had to admit, 'I am happy with the idea, and it is to me, a way of being in contact with others like myself, with kindred interests and concerns, people who look for something more in life than plenty of food, comfort, amusement and money'.<sup>7</sup>

Merton affirmed the Smith students in their desire to move beyond the gross materialism of much of the western world. His protest over the Vietnam War and American racism had buttressed a deep desire long expressed to lay bear

God's love for all humanity and creation. Merton wrote to Chakravarty and his students at the close of his January 21 letter; 'May that love grow in all of us. It is the one thing necessary'.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps a new generation was prepared to hear this ancient truth.

The Merton Evening did occur at Smith College in March of 1967. It was considered by Chakravarty to be a tremendous success. On March 29 Chakravarty wrote to Merton:

We had the great evening. It began late in the afternoon, but the students and faculty carried on till past dinnertime. We were immersed in the silence and eloquence of your thoughts and writings...The young scholars here realized the absolute rootedness of your faith makes you free to understand others faith...Your books have the rocklike inner strength, which sustains the Abbey of Gethsemani, which can challenge violence and untruth wherever they appear.<sup>9</sup>

Merton's rootedness did, in fact, set him 'free to understand other faiths' and his open posture invited others to do likewise. His spirit of openness and inquiry did open the door for others. Merton, in the best of his monastic tradition, left no strangers at the gate. All were welcome at the table.

Chakravarty, in his March 29 letter, also described the activities of the Smith gathering. He reported to Merton that the students and faculty had been 'immersed in the Silence and Eloquence of your thoughts and writings'. He told

Merton, 'I wish you could have witnessed how intensely the large but selective audience responded to the readings from a great number of your works'.<sup>10</sup> The idea for the evening's format had been to use Merton's works to stimulate 'the memory and fresh thinking of the participants...' Time was then allotted for personal reactions and for questions and answers. Chakravarty also noted that Professor Stenson, who had known Merton at Columbia University, read several of Merton's passages that reflected on the German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer.<sup>11</sup>

The gathering itself was very much a student run affair. They entitled the evening's event, 'The Silence of Eloquence of Father Merton'. According to Chakravarty, '...the students selected the title, put it in the printed bulletin: the Faculty is not even consulted in these matters!' Then like the 'typical professor', he added, '...but they did well'.<sup>12</sup> In truth, Chakravarty hardly encouraged the independence of the young women at Smith. In his April 20 letter to Merton, Chakravarty once again praised the 'Merton Evening' and proudly spoke of his students:

...a few of them are Catholic, some from Protestant denominations, and Jewish – but no lines, of course, are drawn here to make them separate and self-conscious. The prayer life, the simple goodness of love and learning are shared by all. They gave the name 'Sharing Gives Value' on top of your poem and letter which they had printed in their weekly sheet.<sup>13</sup>

All in all, the 'Merton Evening' was a rousing success and Chakravarty had every right to be proud of his students. They were learning to listen with the 'ear of the heart'.

## 2. Learning to Listen

Merton's response to Chakravarty's news of the 'Merton Night' is recorded in his well-known letter of April 13. This is undoubtedly one of the most loving and beautiful of all his interfaith letters.<sup>14</sup> Merton confessed to the young women of Smith:

It is not easy to try and say what I know I cannot say. I do really have the feeling that you have understood and shared quite perfectly. That you have seen something that I see to be most precious and more valuable too. The reality that is present to us and in us; call it Being, call it Atman, call it Pneuma...or Silence. And the simple fact that by being attentive, by learning to listen (or recovering that natural capacity to listen which cannot be learned any more than breathing), we can find ourselves engulfed in such happiness that cannot be explained: the happiness of being at one with everything in that hidden ground of Love for which there can be no explanation.<sup>15</sup>

By learning to listen, or somehow recovering the natural capacity to listen, Merton sensed that the Smith students 'have understood and shared quite perfectly.'

Chakravarty shared similar sentiments. He told his interfaith friend that the

'enlightened' and 'spiritually sensitive' understood him better than many academics and most notably the more narrowly focused theological types.<sup>16</sup> Despite such accolades from both Merton and Chakravarty, I have often wondered how well the Smith students actually did understand Merton and his writings.

Learning to listen is indeed hard; learning to listen to the other, the stranger, is even harder. Did the Smith students truly understand? Had they learned to listen? My research shows that the answer is both 'yes' and 'no'. Yes, they would have appreciated the spirit of Merton's work. No, they probably missed much of Merton's meaning. I am convinced that Merton's voice as a marginal man, as a monk,

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as a contemplative in an age of action, was heard. The students knew how to identify with marginality. They had experienced estrangement in relation to the 'establishment'. As they read *Raids on the Unspeakable*, they surely resonated with Merton's call to 'be human in the most inhuman of ages'.<sup>17</sup>

#### 3. A Proleptic Event

It remains questionable, however, whether the students 'fully understand' Merton's ideas. I say this with some confidence because of an eyewitness student account. Diana Eck, today an international scholar of religion and director of Pluralism Project at Harvard, was in 1967 a twenty-one

year old senior at Smith College. She was one of Chakravarty's students and deeply involved in 'Merton Night'. Chakravarty had written to Merton about his student Diana Eck, 'She will go very far in her creative, scholarly, and spiritual life'.<sup>18</sup> And she did! But looking back on that evening in 1967, Eck notes that she understood very little of Merton at that time.

In her 1993 book, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Barnares*, Eck confesses that as a college student her comprehension of Merton was quite limited. She writes, 'I did not understand or "share quite perfectly" this insight [of Merton's] into the "hidden ground of Love" as a twenty-one-year-old.' But much to her credit, she adds '... I continued to read Merton's works and write to him'.<sup>19</sup> She did not give up on Merton. She knew that this 'stranger' from Gethsemani could teach her much. However, she knew she had to exercise patience. Learning to listen and understand takes time.

When I read Merton for the first time during my first year of seminary, I too understood very little. I read *The Sign of Jonas* only because I thought I should read something by Merton. Why this particular book, I do not know. All I do know is that I found it very confusing. Honestly, I did not read Merton again for well over a decade. Like many others, it took me a long time to learn how to read and to listen to Merton – to listen 'with the ear of the heart'.

There is a proleptic quality in learning to listen to someone like Merton. What begins with us in the past often has its fulfilment only in the future. It is true that sometimes we awaken to a truth

quickly and dramatically. But most often we awaken slowly. Thomas Merton at the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville certainly experienced a kairotic moment. There is such a thing as instant recognition – an epiphany. But Diana Eck on 'Merton Night' at the Smith campus experienced something different. It was a prolepsis event. Its fuller realization was somewhere in her future – it had a not-yet-quality. So it is for many of us most of the time.

Learning to listen is indeed a prolepsis. It requires time. Certainly, God can speak to us at times in a kairotic moment, but, most often, it occurs as something much more like a proleptic event. Learning to listen for God in voices like those of Amiya Chakravarty, Thomas Merton, and Diana Eck does take time and great patience. But if we 'wait upon the Lord' the spiritual insights do come. St. Benedict was right: we must learn to listen 'with the ear of the heart'. And this cannot be rushed. With God's grace, we will come to understand the 'hidden ground of Love' of which Merton spoke and wrote. Indeed, right now, today may be the opening of a prolepsis in God's providence. Whether it be at Smith College in 1967 or at Oakham school in 2008 – God is not done with us yet.

#### Notes

1. Amiya Chakravarty to Merton, January 16, 1967, archives of the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky (hereafter TMC).
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. For more about Amiya Chakravarty I would suggest the chapter entitled, 'Love:

The Merton – Chakravarty Letters', in my book *Signs of Peace: The Interfaith Letters of Thomas Merton* (Orbis Books, 2006).

6. William Shannon, ed., *The Hidden Ground of Love* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1905), p.113.
7. Ibid, p.133-144.
8. Ibid, p.114.
9. Amiya Chakravarty to Merton, March 29, 1967 (TMC).
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Amiya Chakravarty to Merton, April 20, 1967 (TMC).
14. Merton's reference here to God as 'the hidden ground of Love' has become the phrase with which many of my college students in this present time so closely identify – even as other terms for 'God' seem to fall on deaf ears.
15. Shannon, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, p.115.
16. Amiya Chakravarty to Merton, March 29, 1967 (TMC).
17. William Shannon, Christine Bochen, Patrick O'Connell, eds. *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002), p.379.
18. Amiya Chakravarty to Merton, May 21, 1967 (TMC).
19. Diana Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Barnares* (Boston: Beacon Press), p.150.

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