

# Memories of Merton

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In the 1960s, when I was visiting the United States and lecturing in New York from time to time, I hardly ever told anybody about my meetings with Merton. It seemed such an impossible thing to happen! People had heard he was a Trappist monk and so didn't talk much, if at all. They knew he was an internationally famous writer and so wasn't likely to be available to meet casual visitors from abroad. In the sixties, people were already perplexed about him, since they could see from his more recent books that the circle of his interests was growing rapidly: the dialogues with other religions, notably Zen Buddhism, his growing concern with contemporary questions of public life, racial discrimination, the possibility of nuclear war, the constant threat of a sudden development of the Cold War conflict. How was all this compatible with his whole-hearted monastic commitment, his profound and powerful way of expounding the Christian tradition of contemplative life?

My introduction to Merton was in itself instructive, revealing something of his ecumenical activities which had begun already in the 1950s, before the calling of the second Vatican Council. I was introduced to him by a professor of New Testament theology in the Southern Baptist

Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky: Dr Dale Moody. Dale had been spending a sabbatical year in Oxford and got into the habit of coming most days of the week to have lunch at Pusey House, where I was then on the staff. When he learned that in 1963 I was going to take part in the big Faith and Order conference in Montreal in July he at once said that 'if you are in North America, you must come and see us in Kentucky. Come to Louisville, and while you are there I can take you out to the abbey of Gethsemani and you can meet Thomas Merton.'

So it was, that Dale Moody brought me out to the monastery early in August in 1963. We had lunch together in the guest house and Dale Moody left to go back to Louisville. I found myself sitting with Merton in his office in the Novitiate. He began by asking me what I had been doing in Kentucky. I told him how Dale Moody had driven me to all kinds of places and made me gradually aware of the very special quality of that particular state, between east and west, between north and south. 'Yesterday we visited the buildings of the old Shaker community at Pleasant Hill. I was enormously impressed by them; they seemed to have a kind of monastic quality. Do you know about them?' I asked. Merton got up, went over

to the filing cabinet on the other side of the room, pulled out a whole file of photographs of Shaker buildings, Shaker furniture and Shaker artefacts. 'Look what quality they have. I'm hoping to write a book about them.'

So we began our conversations near at home in Kentucky, from our shared enthusiasm for the Shakers, those remarkable nineteenth century communities which brought women and men together in a remarkable collaboration. We began from near at hand but soon began to venture more widely. Merton had few enough visitors from England and very few who were Anglicans. One subject we certainly

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began to explore was the seventeenth century Anglican poets. Vaughan and Traherne especially fascinated him but he was also interested in contemporary poetry from Britain. He was beginning to discover Edwin Muir—and Stevie Smith greatly attracted him. What about R.S. Thomas? He soon came over the horizon and then in the last two years, there was what for him was the great discovery of David Jones, a profoundly sacramental poet and painter, who awoke Merton's

own deep sense of a Welsh family background.

But in the end, it was the extraordinary expansion of Merton's heart and mind which was the most striking fact about him in the 1960s. Here we see his gradual discovery of all the major religious traditions of mankind, not only Zen but Tibetan Buddhism, the teaching of the Tao in China, the various schools of Hindu devotion and his constantly growing sense of importance of the Sufi tradition in Islam, beautifully conveyed in the correspondence with Abdul Aziz in Karachi, published in *The Hidden Ground of Love*, the volume of Merton's letters edited by Bill Shannon. Here is Merton for the twenty-first century, the Merton who has already got beyond September 11, 2001 and it is moving to observe that, on September 11 in 1960, Merton was meditating deeply on the life and prayer of the Staretz Sylvan (St Sylvan of Athos) on the words spoken to him by the Lord: 'keep your mind in hell and do not despair.' I, for a long time thought that was the word of the Lord for the twentieth century. I now have the feeling that is the word of the Lord for our own troubled time in which Merton's voice needs to be heard more clearly than ever.

Merton is someone who speaks directly to us today. This was evidently the case when one met him in person. I believe this is no less the case for so many people who meet him in his writings. How many readers have had the feeling that 'he is saying this directly to me.' He is a man in whom God's word and God's gift can be freely given to us. It is ours to receive.