

Thomas Merton and Renewal

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The twentieth century saw a number of renewal movements within Christianity, as well as beyond. Each sought in different ways to bring fresh life to traditions that seemed to be losing their meaning and on their way out. Renewal treasures the past and yet seeks to connect it with the changed present in new ways. The work of the Holy Spirit is often associated with such renewal movements, notably the Pentecostal and charismatic movements but also others. Thomas Merton has been seen in terms of the

way his life and work brought about monastic renewal, as articulated well by John Bamberger.¹ There is still creative work to be done in exploring how Merton's approach to renewal resonates with and differs from other approaches that were happening around the same time. In starting such an exploration this work seeks simply to sketch an understanding of Merton's approach to renewal, to set the scene for further research. Focusing on Merton's understanding of the term renewal and its roots in the work of the Holy

Spirit I seek to articulate a framework that can then be explored in greater depth alongside other approaches to renewal.

I first became aware of Merton's impact on monastic renewal when visiting the Cistercian monastery of Mount St Bernard Abbey in Leicestershire. A monk in the bookshop was reminiscing about the 1950s when a huge influx of new monks arrived largely due to the influence of Merton's writing. It was the same in many monasteries across the US and UK, although there were other influences apart from Merton. I want to suggest that key to understanding Merton is the growth of a 'prophetic and reforming mission' that developed out of his experience at Gethsemani.² He saw that the monastery was not serving the needs of the new monks in that it was too centralised and uniform in its approach, hindering individual growth. There was a need for a renewal of focus on the 'monastic spirit,' on 'union with God,' and this required monasteries to experiment with new ways of being.³ Some of these concerns developed from Merton's time as Master of Novices which came with significant training responsibilities and opportunities for experimentation. Merton later rooted such renewal in an understanding of the church as a 'kind of Pentecost in miniature' which implies new life and change.⁴ There is a need for a Pentecost renewal of the institution and of the Cistercian tradition. This takes the best inten-

tions and practices of the past and reworks them in ways that bring life to people today. Although some of his writing may be taken as a rejection of monastic life, overall Merton sought a renewal rather than an ending to monastic life. In many ways Merton's desire to renew monasticism and hence the church worked in parallel with the *ressourcement* movement in Roman Catholic theology that sought renewal through a return to the sources.⁵ These two streams both paved the way for the radical work of Vatican II which Merton saw as having the 'stamp of the Holy Spirit on it.'⁶ In Merton we can see a desire for the spiritual renewal of the church through a fresh appreciation of tradition and engagement with the realities of contemporary life.

This approach to renewal naturally centered, for Merton, around the practice of contemplation and the re-establishment of the hermit tradition. Contemplation was a theme Merton kept returning to as he sought fresh ways to present its understanding and practice to the people of his time. It is this aspect of Merton's spirituality that remains attractive to many beyond monastic communities. The link he makes between contemplation and life is perhaps at the heart of his continuing relevance. Merton describes contemplation as 'life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for

life, for awareness and for being.'⁷ It is an intimacy with God that recognises the gift of God in each moment and responds to this.⁸ In other words, contemplation involves ordinary lives lived in response to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.⁹ Such renewed lives are characterised by a vocation of freedom, the freedom to respond to God without restraint.¹⁰ Here is an approach to renewing spirituality that is accessible to all who desire life in all its fullness.

There is a personal focus to this and for Merton the real task of the Christian is 'the renewal of the self, the "new creation" in Christ.'¹¹ This is a renewal in the way of freedom that requires detachment, conflict and transformation under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Here Merton often talks about the challenge to put off the illusions of the 'false self' and be renewed in the reality of the 'true self' that is at the heart of human identity.¹² There is no escape from the painstaking reality of our sinfulness and Merton often lays open his own faults for others to see and criticises his earlier writing in the light of later insights. The sanctifying fire of the Holy Spirit is

needed for complete inner change and conversion.¹³ This is a transformation deeper into our true selves held within the love and mercy of God, a 'continuous dynamic of inner renewal.'¹⁴ Here is a realistic spiritual journey in the world that is not for the fainthearted and yet offers the promise of peace and hope in everyday life, a life that culminates in the fullness of love.

Life, peace and hope are attractive to individuals but are also themes relevant to renewal in the wider world. Merton, particularly during the 1960s, wrote prophetically about the world in which he lived, offering a challenge to live as nations in ways of peace and love rather than war and alienation. It has been suggested that he was granted a charismatic gift of prophecy that witnessed to the holiness of God in the world.¹⁵ It is the charismatic gift that discerns the voice of God and enabled Merton to speak out without being stifled by the institution.¹⁶ At a time when Roman Catholics didn't speak out on war and social issues, Merton risked speaking out with a deep passion.¹⁷ Themes from his understanding of contemplation begin to be applied

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to the journey of the world. There is a need for the world to be transformed, not repudiated, and the 'civic aspect of contemplative life' comes to the fore in Merton's later work.¹⁸ Of course, care needs to be taken over what is taken as a prophetic stand but Merton spoke words of 'uncomfortable truth' to the systems of his day.¹⁹ We might suggest that Merton modelled a renewal of prophetic wisdom in and for the world.

It is important here to ask how such an approach to the renewal of the church, personal spirituality and the world, was grounded for Merton? I would suggest it is grounded in significant moments of his life and more subtly grounded in his theology. In the story of his conversion Merton points to the work of the Holy Spirit in enabling him to see the things of God.²⁰ It was the Spirit of Love working through human friendships that led him gently towards faith in Jesus. Merton was drawn into the 'immense and tremendous gravitational movement which is love, which is the Holy Spirit.'²¹ This again came to the fore in his ordination seen as an immersion in the divine charity of the Spirit.²² Merton describes the days after the ordination as 'full of the Holy Ghost, and the Spirit of God seemed to be taking greater and greater possession of all our souls.'²³ The transforming work of the Spirit is notable at these times in Merton's life of faith and undergirds his vocation as a writer. He sees his

writing as somehow a work of the Holy Spirit because of the honesty involved in opening his life up to others.²⁴ Merton saw his vocation in terms of having 'a clear obligation to participate... in every effort to help a spiritual and cultural renewal of our time.'²⁵ Merton is concerned with the renewal of the whole person and this can be seen as arising from his experience of the Holy Spirit at work beneath all things, and notably at work drawing us into relationship with others and particularly into the relationship between Jesus and the Father.

In this Merton naturally leads us from life into a consideration of theology. Often Merton is seen in terms of spirituality yet is quite clear that our life with God cannot be separated from theology.²⁶ Merton's theology has been approached in terms of his *Sophia* (Wisdom) Christology in the important work by Christopher Pramuk. In terms of renewal, the themes of Cross and Resurrection and the typography of Adam and Christ are significant and Christology in general is more clearly addressed in his writing. Yet I want to suggest that thinking of renewal, Merton's stress on the underlying work of the Holy Spirit is vital. Considering his discussion of Promethian theology, Merton links the work of the Spirit with the resurrection of Christ.²⁷ He speaks of how people want to steal fire from God out of a refusal to believe that God wants to give his Holy Spirit fire to us. A theology rooted in Pentecost

refutes any Promethian desire to grasp from God and rather affirms God's generous grace and friendship, and how in all things we can be moved by the Spirit. The Spirit is often linked with the transforming love of God that is both given and responded to, although often hidden beneath the surface of our lives. What comes first in renewal is the work of the Spirit, the recognition that all we have is in the hands of God.²⁸ Our intellect, will, emotions, body and skills must be 'under the sway of the Holy Spirit.'²⁹ At times when the church looks to human works to enact renewal, Merton points to a pneumatological basis to renewal that simplifies our focus onto the God whom we worship and who leads us into transforming love.

I have sketched Merton's understanding of renewal through the prominent themes in his writing. For Merton, I have suggested that renewal is rooted in a pneumatology that is experienced in life. Renewal has the effects of transforming individuals, communities and indeed the world in love. Such a renewal is both life-affirming and yet also deeply critical and prophetic. Merton particularly addresses such renewal within monastic life, personal spirituality and a world at war. At the same time his reflections address wider issues in Christian life, the church and humanity. The approach here develops that of Bamberger in its concern for the implications of renewal beyond the monastic and in terms of its empha-

sis on a pneumatological basis. It provides a broad framework that can be used to compare with other renewal movements that seek the work of the Spirit to transform individuals, communities and the world in different ways.

Notes

1. John Eudes Bamberger, *Thomas Merton: Prophet of Renewal*, Monastic Wisdom Series, no. 4 (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 2005).
2. *ibid.*, p.30.
3. *ibid.*, p.49.
4. Thomas Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani* (New York: Ave Maria Press, 1992), p.17.
5. Ron Dart, 'Thomas Merton And *Nouvelle Theologie*,' *The Merton Journal* 19, no.1 (2012): pp.26–35; Gabriel Flynn and Paul D. Murray, eds., *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p.1.
6. Bamberger, *Prophet of Renewal*, p.43; Merton, *Springs of Contemplation*, p.40.
7. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, reprint, 1961 (London: Burns and Oates, 1999), p.13.
8. Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska: Prelude to the Asian Journal: The Alaskan Conferences, Journals, and Letters* (New York: New Directions Pub. Corp., 1989), p.72; Merton, *New Seeds*, p.21.

9. Merton, *Springs of Contemplation*, p.45.
10. *ibid.*, p.31.
11. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone & Patrick Hart (New York: Bantam, 1980), p.192; Bamberger, *Prophet of Renewal*, pp.119–20.
12. James Finley, *Merton's Palace of Nowhere* (New York: Ave Maria Press, 2003).
13. Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1961), p.24; Merton, *The New Man*, p.88.
14. Merton, *New Seeds*, p.34; Bamberger, *Prophet of Renewal*, pp.120–21.
15. Bamberger, *Prophet of Renewal*, pp.11–12.
16. Kyle Arcement, 'In the School of Prophets: The Formation of Thomas Merton's Prophetic Spirituality,' PhD thesis, Catholic University of America (2013) available on aladinrc.wrlc.org. Of course, Merton's writing was often censored and yet this did not stop him from speaking out.
17. William H. Shannon, 'Introduction,' in *Passion for Peace: Reflections on War and Nonviolence*, Thomas Merton (New York: Crossroad Pub. Co., 2006), pp.9–10.
18. Rowan Williams, *A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2011), p.57.
19. *ibid.*, p.66.
20. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, reprint, 1948 (London: Sheldon Press, 1975), pp.169, 177, 209–210.
21. *ibid.*, p.225.
22. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953), p.182.
23. *ibid.*, pp.193–94.
24. Thomas Merton, *The Intimate Merton: His Life from His Journals*, ed. Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: Harper-San Francisco, 1999), p.73.
25. *ibid.*, p.184.
26. e.g. Thomas Merton, *The Ascent to Truth* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1951), p.181. See also the comments of Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2009), p.24.
27. Merton, *The New Man*, pp.3, 23–24, 31–32, 38, 108.
28. Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska*, p.71.
29. Thomas Merton, *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism: Initiation Into the Monastic Tradition 3*, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell, Monastic Wisdom Series (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 2008), pp.35–36; Pramuk, *Sophia*, pp.22, 28.

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