

Through a Glass Clearly

Tom Finnigan

I first saw Thomas Merton through glass.

There was a Repository outside the chapel at my school which doubled as a junior seminary. In this display case, books suitable for our spiritual reading featured behind glass. I vividly recall three paperbacks: *Le Milieu Divin* by Teilhard de Chardin with the author's unforgettable face on the back, *St Thomas Moore* by Christopher Hollis showing the Holbein portrait, and *Seeds of Contemplation* by Thomas Merton with stalks of wheat on a blue background. I still have all three. Teilhard and Hollis are dated 1963 and 1964, Merton's book 1969 – so I must have mislaid one copy and replaced it.

Until I saw *Seeds of Contemplation* I'd never heard of Tom Merton. I was attracted because he was a Cistercian monk and I had learnt a bit about St Bernard and Citeaux, so I asked Sister Bernard, our sacristan, for the key to the Repository and handed over a half-crown. Reading it on Sunday afternoons under the high windows of our Sixth Form study, whilst November rain fell in sheets, I can't recall being impressed. Fifty-five years later, I'm still unimpressed. It was when I read 'Karl Barth had a dream about Mozart' at the start of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* that Merton got into my blood and stayed there like spiritual haemoglobin. I have read the thirty plus lines of that opening section a hundred times and still envy Barth being able to play Mozart before going to work. I yearn for 'a Mozart who will be our salvation' and when I pick up the journals, letters or diaries of the monk born in the shadow of some French mountains, I hear music.

Last month, I finished *The Sign of Jonas* for the fourth time. That final coda 'Fire Watch' is like a dance from Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute*. Then I started to read for the first time *Thomas Merton in Alaska* and discovered the conferences he gave in Anchorage. I have yet to read the final talk – 'Prayer and the priestly tradition'. As I progress through these chatty pieces, I fall victim again to his breadth of reference and am tempted to buy something by Martin Buber having already succumbed to the attraction of Vladimir Lossky and bought *Seven Days on the Road to France* – my first venture into Russian Orthodoxy.

I say 'again' because as I read Merton over the last fifty-five years, I've

not only gathered fifty-five of his books or books about him but paid for many volumes to which he refers. Some of those – like Gilson's *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* – I started with enthusiasm but could not finish. Another unfortunate (forgive me) occasion for spending money is the Book Reviews section in *The Merton Journal*. The recent Eastertide edition caused me to invest in *Medieval Cistercian History*. This and *When Prophecy Still Had A Voice* lie on top of each other, waiting for my hands and eyes. They would have shimmered in Sister Bernard's glass-fronted repository.

Tom Finnigan is a semi-retired crane dealer in Malin on the Inishowen Peninsula in Donegal. Merton entered his life as a boy in Manchester, blossomed as a church-student in Rome—where he was when Merton died—faded a bit when he got married, but took over when he came to live in Malin twenty years ago. He reads Merton every day.

Merton, Mozart and Barth

In the opening section of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 'Barth's Dream', Merton writes about Barth's great love of Mozart, concluding that Mozart spoke to Barth, not as a theologian, but as a divine child, concluding that: 'There is in us a Mozart who will be our salvation.'

In 1986, the centenary of Barth's birth, a slim volume was published which collected together Barth's writings about Mozart. Here are two excerpts:

Whenever I listen to you, I am transported to the threshold of a world which in sunlight and storm, by day and by night, is a good and ordered world.

A Letter of thanks to Mozart, December 1955

*There is a question which I shall leave unanswered but which surely has not escaped you. How can I as an evangelical Christian and theologian proclaim Mozart? After all he was so Catholic, even a Freemason, and for the rest no more than a musician, albeit a complete one. He who has ears has certainly heard. May I ask all those others who may be shaking their heads in astonishment and anxiety be content for the moment with the general reminder that the New Testament speaks not only of the kingdom of heaven but also of **parables** of the kingdom of heaven?*

Mozart's Freedom, January 1956

Editor