

A SPIRITUALITY FOR THE ADVENT CITY: THOMAS MERTON'S MONASTICISM WITHOUT WALLS

THIS ESSAY SEEKS TO reclaim Thomas Merton as a prophetic voice for a renewed sense of Christian spirituality in the multicultural city.

Through a close reading of Merton's life and select writings such as *Wisdom of the Desert* and *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, this paper will demonstrate how Merton provides a voice and provocative vision for Christian spirituality in the twenty-first century. For Merton, the monastic life was not an escape or refuge from the modern city but a prophetic form of spirituality that he offered to the 'urban uncloistered' time and time again. As Merton wrote in *Contemplation in a World of Action*:

[a]s long as I imagine that the world is something to be 'escaped' in the monastery—that wearing that quaint costume and following a quaint observance takes me 'out of the world,' I am dedicating my life to an illusion.

Cities play a large part in Advent. As the church calendar considers the census that brought Joseph and Mary to David's city of Bethlehem, Advent can be seen as a time to reconsider our own ordination to what it means to have a theology of the city. When one thinks of models for deep Christian spirituality within the milieu of today's multicultural city, the name Thomas Merton does not readily come to mind. As a key figure in American Christian Spirituality, Thomas Merton is often remembered as the contemplative critic who left behind the din and clang of New York City for the pastoral cloistered life of Kentucky. However, a closer reading of Merton's life and

writing demonstrates not only a deep concern for the challenges of urban life and multicultural engagement amidst the context of mid-twentieth century Western culture, but also a voice that provides a provocative vision for our lives in the twenty-first century.

The monastic choice was simultaneously traditional and counter-cultural. 'The monk,' he says,

is someone who takes up a critical attitude toward the contemporary world and its structures.²

He does not reject the world: he criticises it from within. In his biography of Merton, Patrick Hart reflects on this quality of Merton to see the modern monastic life as a passionate protest against modern society, like the Egyptian desert dweller of the fourth century who fled the Roman culture of his day.³

While Merton dwelt physically in the monastery in Kentucky, his heart was broken and praying for the modern deserts of twentieth-century humanity he saw in contemporary city streets and alleyways. The comparisons that Merton draws between the Desert Fathers and life in the multicultural city are timely.

The monastic horizon is clearly the horizon of the desert. The monastic Church is the church of the wilderness, the woman who has fled into the desert from the dragon that seeks to devour the infant Word.⁴

As seen in his reflections on the desert tradition in *Wisdom of the Desert*, Merton provides a challenge to many rigid forms of Christian spirituality that seek method over encounter and critique without conviction. Following after the tragedies of Columbine and

September 11th, communities of faith are beginning to reinforce boundaries of certainty and safety as the marks of the life of the spirit. For Merton, those of us who live in such desert times, like the desert Fathers, are not to seek boundaries of the spirit but to seek the void of our 'seeking':

With the Desert fathers, you have the characteristic of a clean break with a conventional, accepted social context in order to swim for one's life into an apparently irrational void.⁵

At a time when spirituality amidst the masses of the city is marked by the loudest voice, Merton compels those who live in cities to stand together amidst the sacred silence of God. At a time after September 11th when the ecumenical concerns of the city are confronted with needs of reconciliation, Merton challenges today's cities to not only pray for mercy and forgiveness, but to actively pray for the ability to love.

For the disenfranchised that seek meaning and purpose, Merton writes that that meaning and purpose in the urban world will not be grounded in the material nor in the dogmatic, but the life that is lived with opened hands, where absence of certainty is not feared, but embraced.

This monastic critique is always a perpetual self-critique that leads to an abiding conviction and love for the other. As seen throughout Merton's writings, the true monk knows that the chaos of the world is no more than a macrocosm in his/her own soul. If one envisions the monastic choice as a choice to retreat from the world then they have failed. The monastic choice for Merton is one of conviction and critique. It is not protest against the world *per se*, only against the world's limitation that dismisses the ultimate concerns of the body and soul. It is the

choice to be liberated from the confines of human potentiality that the world wants us to believe in. As he writes in 'A Letter on the Contemplative Life':

It is true that when I came to the monastery where I am I came in revolt against the meaningless confusion of a life in which there was so much activity, so much movement, so much useless talk. . . that I could not remember who I was. But the fact remains that my flight from the world is not a reproach to you who remain in the world, and I have no right to repudiate the world in a purely negative fashion, because if I do that my flight will have not taken me to truth and to God but to a private, though doubtless, pious illusion.⁶

In seeking after a renewed sense of the Christian spirituality of the multicultural city, it is time for Merton's vision of 'monasticism without walls' within our contemporary discussions of Christian spirituality and life in the post-modern *polis*.

This is a welcome voice for those of us seeking a spirituality for the holistic life. For those in the urban context, Merton offers anew a spiritual grounding for the new millennium with the tension of both critique and conviction for a world that seeks after the ultimate concerns of heart, mind, body and soul. In this season of Advent, Merton's vision of the city is a welcome supplement as we re-imagine the context that the coming of Christ is grounded and ultimately redeems.

Notes and References

1. Thomas Merton, "Contemplation in a World of Action," in *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master* (New York, 1992), 376.
2. *ibid.*
3. Thomas Merton, *Monastic Journey* (New York, 1977), "Foreword."
4. *The Silent Life*, xiii, xiv.
5. Merton, *Wisdom of the Desert*, 9.
6. 'A Letter on the Contemplative Life,' in *Thomas Merton Spiritual Master*, 424.