

Merton at Ninety

A.M. Allchin

THE FIRST AND MOST basic thing I should like to do, as it were, is to introduce you to this striking and memorable man and to assure you of his remarkable accessibility and directness. When you met him, almost at once you felt at home with him. Merton would have been 90 this year; I shall be, God willing, 75. In the last years of his life I had the opportunity of visiting Gethsemani three times - in 1963, 1967 and 1968. On each occasion I had the possibility of long and fascinating conversations with Merton, sometimes in the guest house, sometimes walking in the fields and woods around the monastery, and once (in 1963) spending some time with him in his hermitage.

I think I should tell you that 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 these 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 60s, 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.'

All this seemed self-evidently good and easy for Dale Moody, for he had got to know Merton in the preceding years. He and a group of his fellow professors in the seminary had got into the habit of taking groups of students out to the

monastery to meet Merton and to discover something about the life of the community and to break down some of the barriers which divided Protestants and Roman Catholics in those far-off days before Vatican II. Merton's own ecumenical interests were to grow enormously during the last ten years of his life, involving him in dialogue and exchange, not only with all the major traditions of the Christian world but with all the major religious traditions of humanity. But all that had begun very simply with these days of discussion and shared prayer with groups of protestant seminarians from that part of Kentucky, Baptist, Methodist and Presbyterian.

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 19th 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 began to explore was the 17th 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 RS 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 there were other fields to be explored. I had not realised when I first met him how deeply he had been influenced by the eastern Orthodox tradition and in particular some of the outstanding theologians of the Russian emigration in Paris. Among them Paul Evdokimov and, above all, Vladimir Lossky. Here with the Lossky family I was able to provide personal links and contacts, for while from the 1950s Merton had been much involved in their writings, I don't think that he had had before any direct personal links into their circle. Through the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius, I had had a chance to know them well.

Then of course, there were questions about the monastic life. I was already in close touch at that time with Crawley Down and with the sisters at Fairacres. Merton wrote in a letter in September 1967:

'For my own part I am all in favour of people going to a monastery for a year or two. In fact I am more and more persuaded that, as we go on, that is going to be one of the main functions of a monastery. I think our monasteries should be quite small and simple places, not great triumphant and solemn castles of prayer, and these simple places should be manned by a small group of permanent members, some more active, others so to speak, primarily contemplative... and then there should be another group, perhaps half of those in residence at any time, simply there for a year or two... I think that the idea of getting everyone tied up with solemn vows for life is simply no longer suitable for a great number of people who nonetheless have monastic vocations of modified kind.'

Here it seems to me we see something of the truly prophetic element in Merton. (See *The Hidden Ground of Love*, edited by WH Shannon.)

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*. Here again is Merton for the 21st century, the Merton who has already got beyond September 11th 2001, and here it is moving to observe that, on September 11th in 1960, Merton was meditating deeply on the life and prayer of the Staretz Silouan (St Silouan 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 20th 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.

I began these thoughts from the conviction that 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.

Donald Allchin is President of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland, and Honorary Professor of Theology at the University of Wales, Bangor.