

Thomas Merton and Mission-Shaped Church:

Monastic Spirituality and the Future of the Church

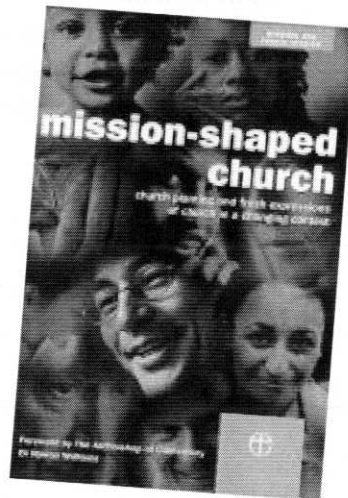
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Mission-shaped Church is that rare phenomenon in the Church of England – a report that became a bestseller. Church House Publishing described it as its ‘Harry Potter title’. It has made a major impact on understandings of mission, affecting areas such as the recruitment, training and deployment of ministers. The C of E, for example, has begun to train ‘Ordained Pioneer Ministers’, following the recommendation of the report that the Church needs to ‘identify and affirm pioneers and mission entrepreneurs’.¹

The word ‘mission’ has become ubiquitous in Anglican life – a good example is the way in the paperwork sent annually to each parish from its Diocese, requesting details of attendance, and numbers of funerals, baptisms and weddings, has been re-branded as ‘Statistics for Mission’!

The main thrust of the report is that the parish church can no longer be the only Anglican expression of church in Britain. Certain trends are identified as having changed the environment in which the Church of England ministers, such as increasing mobility, secularisation, multiculturalism, and consumerism. The parish

church, with its fixed territorial boundaries and increasingly elderly congregations, is no longer able to effectively connect with many people as a result. *Mission-shaped Church* recommends that other kinds or ‘shapes’ of church communities are formed. These ‘fresh expressions of church’ may, for example, take the form of ‘youth congregations’, or café church (where the ambience and style of



The report, published in 2004

modern café culture is the context for a congregation to meet). The report gives many other examples of such initiatives. It challenges the wider church to recognise these developments as legitimate, and necessary if the church is to survive in the new millennium. It also calls the Church to make ‘mission’ its core concern.

Two Worlds

It seems that people who are drawn to ‘spirituality’ tend not to be quite so attracted to ‘mission’ issues and vice-versa. Thomas Merton could easily be categorised as a ‘spirituality’ person – he was a monk after all – but he was also familiar with many of the areas that are identified in *Mission-shaped Church* as challenging conventional church life, such as consumerism, and the flourishing of other faiths and beliefs.

In this article I want to ask the question: ‘If Thomas Merton were able to read *Mission-shaped Church*, what would be his reaction?’ It is a bit of a fool’s errand, as Merton was anything but predictable. He believed that his role was not to supply easy answers to problems, but to ask questions and raise awareness: ‘I do not have clear answers to current questions. I do have questions, and, as a matter of fact, I think a man is known better by his questions than by his answers.’² However, I do believe that Merton’s work offers insights to people who belong to a Church that wishes to be missionary in the twenty-first century.

I. Mission according to *Mission-shaped Church*

Mission-shaped Church does not attempt, in the words of one of its authors,

‘a full-blown, integrated theology of mission’.³ Instead, it identifies a number of ‘theological anchor points’ which it believes should influence the future direction of the Church of England.

The God of Mission

The Report’s first principle is that the ‘shape’ of the Church should reflect the reality of God, whose nature is ‘a communion of persons...an outgoing movement of generosity. Creation and redemption are the overflow of God’s triune life’.⁴

Mission is not a Church-related activity for those who like this kind of thing rather it is the attribute of God in which the Church is invited to participate: ‘If the Church is not missionary, it has denied itself and its calling, for it has departed from the very nature of God.’⁵

Incarnation and Inculturation

The incarnation of God in Christ, is seen as the key model for mission. Just as God was ‘shaped’ by a particular context, so the Church should be shaped by the context in which it finds itself. The Church needs to balance three key ingredients in its mission to inculturate the Gospel: ‘the historic Gospel, uniquely revealed in Holy Scripture and embodied in the Catholic creeds; the Church, which is engaging in mission, with its own particular culture and history; the culture within which the gospel is being shared.’⁶

The Church is designed to reproduce

The report believes that Churches are created by God to grow in number; ‘the Church is God’s community with a divine mandate to reproduce. It is intended by God to multiply, by the Spirit and fill all

creation.⁷ The destiny of the Church, is to be 'a new humanity, which is to reproduce itself through mission, and so fill the earth.'⁸

There is a caveat however, which is that it must be 'faithful' to the Gospel and maintain a cultural relevance that means its message is heard and understood: 'We do not argue that it is the natural condition for every local church to be growing. But we do argue that it is the normative condition for the national church in normal times if it keeps the faith, and keeps up with the culture.'⁹

Mission is broadly understood in terms of enabling an unchanging truth to be understood in new contexts so that people can be converted, and become a part of the Church.

2. Merton's Gifts to a Missionary Church

Thomas Merton did not write a book on mission. There is no one publication which sets out his thinking in this area. It is only in sifting the huge amount of material that flowed from him, that one begins to see a number of themes in how he understood mission.

Ongoing conversion

The conversion of people is important in *Mission-shaped Church's* understanding of mission. Thomas Merton believed that conversion was more than adding numbers to congregations, and adopting a new set of beliefs. He was deeply influenced by the trial of Adolf Eichmann. He was struck by how Eichmann was able to act in such an inhuman way without displaying any evidence of self doubt: 'The tragedy of the concentration camps, of Eichmann and of countless others like

him, is not only that such crimes were possible, but that the men involved could do what they did without being in the least shocked and surprised at themselves. Eichmann to the very last considered himself an obedient and God fearing man!¹⁰

Eichmann's example teaches that the Christian faith does not, 'guarantee a sudden illumination which dispels all darkness forever.'¹¹ It calls, instead, for a commitment to dismantle destructive illusions, which may lie hidden in one's self.

Converted to become ourselves

Merton was also convinced that to be a Christian was to embrace a way of life which leads to discovering our authentic self; to 'be born again is not to become somebody else, but to become ourselves.'¹² Programmes of 'renewal' can mask the need for people to find a truly authentic way of living: 'Insofar as this need for change is flavoured with a kind of desperation, it may be seen as proceeding from people who are struggling with this deep identity problem and who hope against hope that changes of rule and ritual will solve it for them.'¹³

The Church's mission is not to make people 'Christians', but to nurture them on the path to becoming fully human and truly alive.

Love – the vital ingredient

Merton believed in the necessity of loving people, however far from the truth one may feel them to be. Strangely, loving those who are the focus of the Church's mission is not mentioned once in *Mission-shaped Church*. Perhaps it was assumed or taken for granted. Merton

makes no such assumptions: 'The thing that Christians must understand...is that there is no use whatever trying to "get these people into the Church" or to make "believers" out of them. There is perhaps no way of bringing them a specifically Christian comfort which would in any case only disturb or confuse them. What is needed is to love them with a love completely divested of all formally religious suppositions, simply as our fellow men who seek truth and freedom as we do.'¹⁴

Silence

In response to the crisis in churchgoing identified in *Mission-shaped Church*, Merton would surely have questioned whether activity is the right response; silence would be more fruitful. Inspired by his reading of Bonhoeffer, he warned Churches against the temptation of responding to decline by talking about its own concerns in ever louder voices: 'We have now entered into a strange period of desolation and readjustment in which not only the individual Christian but the churches themselves will to a great extent remain silent. There will of course be much resistance to this state of affairs and many will raise their voices louder and louder, not so much to proclaim the Kingdom of God as to make known their own presence and declare that they and their churches are worthy of attention. Bonhoeffer wisely saw that the real purpose of this period of relative silence was a deepening of prayer, a return to the roots of our being, in order that out of silence, prayer and hope, we might once more receive from God new words and a new way of stating not our message but His.'¹⁵

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cernment and learning how to speak and act in a way that transforms others; for truly effective mission, in other words.

It may lead to recognising that, 'there are some problems in life which are not to be solved except by being lived with all the honesty, humility and courage that grace and nature can provide for us...'¹⁶ Perhaps there are no solutions to the question of how churches may grow in number. Silence could be a resource that helps the Church to live with this possibility with honesty, without resorting to anxiety-driven activity.

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Prophecy

Merton believed that the Church's mission to the world involved a prophetic calling to 'disturb man in the depths of his conscience', rather than simply trying 'to make converts.'¹⁷ Prophecy is central. Christians must either 'face the anguish of being a true prophet' or 'enjoy the carrion comfort of acceptance in the society of the deluded by becoming a false prophecy and participating in their delusions.'¹⁸

In contrast *Mission-shaped Church* has very little to say about prophecy or

the social engagement of the Church. It should be admitted that *Mission-shaped Church's* focus was mission and new forms of Church. Merton's writing though, questions whether in this instance, the Church's institutional survival has taken centre stage at the expense of an engagement with 'the great issues which compromise the very survival of the human race.'¹⁹

There is more however, to prophecy than 'denunciation'. In his last address to novices, Merton said, 'We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent, and God is shining through it all the time... You cannot be without God. It's impossible, it's just simply impossible. The only thing is that we don't see it. This again is what we are here for.'²⁰

A healthy Church holds together the two parts that make up prophecy, both 'annunciation' and 'denunciation'; there 'has to be a dialectic between world refusal and world acceptance.'²¹

Detachment and success

Mission-shaped Church believes that the Church is willed by God to grow in number. Responsibility for the numerical decline of the Church in this country lies with the Church itself: 'We have allowed our culture and the Church to drift apart, without our noticing... If the decline of the Church is ultimately caused neither by the irrelevance of Jesus, nor by the indifference of the community, but by the Church's failure to respond fast enough to an evolving culture, to a changing spiritual climate, and to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, then that decline can be addressed by the repentance of the Church... A diocese or parish, which out of repentance, grows a new relevance to

*the contemporary world, may also grow in numbers and strength, because the Spirit of Jesus has been released to do his work.'*²²

Merton's work stresses the importance of being detached from the fruits of one's work, however worthy that work may be. The true test of whether any action has its roots in God does not lie in popular acclaim or numerical support – it is simply whether it is true: 'We must learn to be detached from the results of our own

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activity. [One needs to learn] to work without expecting an immediate reward, to love without an instantaneous satisfaction, and to exist without any special recognition... Our Christian destiny is, in fact a great one: but we cannot achieve greatness unless we lose all interest in being great.'²³

Detachment does not prevent disappointment; it means that one's focus is on acting for the truth. The more one is focussed on that and less on 'results', the

more one will be able to continue acting in the face of discouragement.

Jim Forest wrote that Merton was 'convinced that engagement was made stronger by detachment. Not to be confused with disinterest in achieving results, detachment meant knowing that no good action is wasted even if the immediate consequences are altogether different from what one hoped to achieve.'²⁴

A healthy sense of detachment trusts that God is free to act in a way beyond our vision and imagination. As Rowan Williams writes, 'Who knows what serves God?'²⁵

Contemplation

Mission is often portrayed in terms of 'action' of one form or another. Merton believed that action needed to be married with contemplation. Contemplation is not 'incompatible with action, with creative work, with dedicated love. On the contrary, these all go together. A certain depth of disciplined experience is a necessary ground for fruitful action...'²⁶

Merton, in no way, devalued missionary action 'but even the good side of activism has tended towards an overemphasis on will, on action, on conquest, on "getting things done" and this in turn has resulted in a sort of religious restlessness, pragmatism and the worship of visible results.'²⁷

The following quotations from Merton's introduction to the Latin American edition of his writings beautifully summarises why contemplation and action belong together in any understanding of mission: 'Contemplation cannot construct a new world by itself...', but 'without contemplation we cannot understand the significance of the world in which we must act...' and 'without contemplation,

without the intimate silent, secret pursuit of truth through love, our action loses itself in the world and becomes dangerous.'²⁸

Merton, mission and the monastic tradition

Thomas Merton's understanding of mission did not emerge from a vacuum. Whilst acknowledging his own genius, it is important to be aware of the way in which monastic spirituality, especially that of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, helped to shape his thinking.

For example, his belief that the mission of the Church is not to make 'Christians' but to enable people to embark on a journey of ongoing conversion, to discover their 'true self', and become fully human, echoes the oft quoted saying of the second century saint, Irenaeus, 'the glory of God is man fully alive.' This was not an isolated thought, but one which has always been present in the monastic tradition. John Chrysostom, in his study of the Desert Tradition, *In the Heart of the Desert*²⁹ quotes a fourth century eucharistic prayer of Sarapion of Thmuis, as typical of how early Christians viewed their faith: 'We entreat you, make us truly alive.'³⁰

This transformation of the whole person is at the heart of the monastic vision, as illustrated in this story from the Desert: 'Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph and said to him: 'Abba, as far as I can I say my little office, I fast a little, I can purify my thoughts. What else can I do?' Then the old man stood up and stretched his hands toward heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire, and he said to him, "If you really want, you can become all flame."³¹

Benedictine and Cistercian monks, like Merton, take a vow of *Conversatio Morum*, a Latin phrase which implies an ongoing process of conversion, as the monk leaves behind his former life and commits to the monastic one. Merton acknowledged the Benedictine roots of his thinking when in the final lecture he delivered before his death, he said, 'When you stop and think a little about St Benedict's concept of *Conversatio Morum*, that most mysterious of our vows, which is actually the most essential I believe, it can be interpreted as a commitment to total inner transformation of one sort or another – a commitment to become a completely new man. It seems to me that that could be regarded as the end of the monastic life, and that no matter where one attempts to do this, that remains the essential thing.'³²

One could take each of Merton's 'gifts' to the Church identified in this article and find echoes in the Christian monastic tradition. There is a sense in which Merton said little about mission that is new. What is striking, however, is the way in which he took and expressed this ancient wisdom for his own age and time.

3. Conclusion

The Mission-shaped movement calls the Church to rediscover 'mission' as its vocation, and create different 'shapes' of Church in order to 'translate' the gospel within contemporary culture. If this is done then people will be converted, and the Church will be reinvigorated.

Thomas Merton's work considers that there is more to mission than translating an unchanging Gospel for a rapidly changing world. He suggests that the

most urgent task for the Church is the renewal of people's lives. In his final talk before his death, Merton recounted a conversation he had had with a Tibetan lama who was faced with the decision of whether to leave his monastery in Tibet in order to save his life. The lama sought advice from an abbot whose response was, 'From now on, Brother, everyone stands on his own feet'. Merton went on to say that, 'You cannot rely on structures. The time for relying on structures has disappeared. They are good and they should help us and we should do the best we can with them. But they may be taken away and if everything is taken away, what do you do next?'³³

The most pressing issue for the Church is not the creation of new, mission-shaped structures, but the deeper, more hidden work of ongoing conversion so that people can 'stand on their own feet'. Merton believed a Christian's vocation is not so much to convert others, but to seek ongoing conversion oneself so that one can see the reality of the world, in its beauty and illusion, and so that others can see the presence of Christ in us: 'What we have to do at present is not so much speak of Christ as to let him live in us so that people may find him by feeling how he lives in us.'³⁴

The Church of England has been challenged to adopt a renewed missionary vigour. Merton calls the Christians to value detachment, silence and contemplation as well as action – however worthy that action may seem to be. Silence is the cradle where contemplation of God and the world can grow, which can lead to action and prophetic witness. Detachment leads to a deeper dependence on God and less on 'results' (however we may define

them).

What all this means in practice is not easy or simple to describe. Merton, as has been noted, wasn't keen on providing detailed blueprints for revival anyway. He liked to ask questions and encourage people to look deeper within themselves, others and the monastic tradition. Merton also came to believe that there are more pressing issues for any Church community than its own survival, such as the future of the planet and its peoples; 'the vocation of the monk in the modern world...is not survival but prophecy. We are all too busy saving our skins.'³⁵ It is for this reason that the focus in Merton's own work began to change in later life. In a letter to Dorothy Day, he wrote, 'I don't feel I can in conscience at a time like this, go on writing just about things like meditation, though that has its point. I cannot just bury my head in a lot of rather tiny and secondary monastic studies either. I think I have to face the big issues, the life and death issues: and this is what everyone is afraid of.'³⁶

It is safe to say however, that a Church that followed Merton's lead would be one that remembered its desert heritage, and developed a deep, complex understanding of mission. In this way it would be more able to bring about a sure, lasting, firm foundation for the realization of the Kingdom of God: 'The Coptic hermits who left the world as though escaping from a wreck, did not merely intend to save themselves. They knew they were helpless to do any good for others as long as they floundered about in the wreckage. But once they got a strong foothold on solid ground, things were different. Then they had not only the power but even the obligation to pull the whole world to

safety after them. It would perhaps be too much to say that the world needs another movement such as that which drew these men into the deserts of Egypt and Syria...but we must be as thorough and as ruthless in our determination to break all spiritual chains and cast off the domination of alien compulsions, to find our true selves, to discover and develop our inalienable spiritual liberty and use it to build on earth, the Kingdom of God.'³⁷

Notes

1. Mission-shaped Church. London: Church House Publishing, 2004. The report will be referred to by its initials, MSC, throughout this article.
2. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. New York: Image Books, 1989, p. xvii.
3. Graham Cray in *The Future of the Parish System*, ed. Steve Croft, London: Church House Publishing, 2006, p.62.
4. MSC p.85, quotation from *Eucharistic Presidency*, Church House Publishing, London, 1997, 2.6.
5. Ibid p.41.
6. MSC p.91.
7. Ibid p.93.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid, found in Bob Jackson, *Hope for the Church*, London: Church House Publishing, 2002.
10. Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace*, New York: Crossroad, 1995, p.133.
11. Ibid p.145.
12. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*. New York: Harvest, 1979, p.196.
13. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998, p.69.
14. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, op cit, p.326.

15. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, New York: Harvest, 1979, p.44-5.
16. *ibid* p.57.
17. Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967, p.273.
18. Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence*, Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968, p.68.
19. *ibid*.
20. Thomas Merton, 'A Life Free from Care' – the last talk he gave to novices before living in the hermitage full time – in Christine M. Bochen, *Thomas Merton – Essential Writings*, New York: Orbis Books, 2004, p.70.
21. Thomas Merton, *Asian Journal*, London: Sheldon Press, 1974, pp.329-30.
22. MSC. pp.13-14.
23. Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island*, Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1990, p.106.
24. Jim Forest, *Living with Wisdom*, New York, Orbis, p.154.
25. Rowan Williams, *Silence and Honey Cakes*, Oxford: Lion Publishing, 2003, p.112.
26. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, *op cit*, p.202.
27. Thomas Merton, preface to the Argentine Edition of *The Complete Works of Thomas Merton*, in Christine Bochen, *op cit*, p.147.
28. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, *op cit*, p.202.
29. Quoted in Philip Sheldrake, *Thomas Merton's Contribution to 20th Century Spirituality*, *The Merton Journal*, Eastertide 2005, vol. 12 number 1.
30. John Chryssaavgis, *In the Heart of the Desert*, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 2003.
31. *ibid*, p.1.
32. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*. *op cit*. p.337.
33. *ibid*, p.338.
34. Jim Forest, *Living with Wisdom*, *op cit*, p.216.
35. Thomas Merton. Letter to Jean Leclercq, July 23, 1968, in *Survival or Prophecy*, New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002, p.175.
36. Thomas Merton, 23 August 1961 in *The Hidden Ground of Love*, ed. William H. Shannon, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985, p.139-140.
37. Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert*, New York: New Directions, 1970, p.23-4.

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