

'O fearful meditation'

Peter Ellis

Introduction

Merton began his 'The time of the end' in *Raids on the Unspeakable* with a short preface and it is this that is the background to this essay.¹ The preface spoke about the two superimposed eschatologies of the time when he was writing. On the one hand was the 'vague and anxious eschatology of human foreboding', our 'secular anxieties', and on the other was the biblical end of Christian eschatology which Merton speaks of as 'revealed fulfilment' and 'profound hope' and in the text itself as the arrival of 'Great Joy'. These two 'ends of the world'

—nuclear catastrophe as it was at the time he was writing, and the last things of the Bible, should not, says Merton, be confused though he recognises that they are.

Two areas of this confusion particularly jump out for me. Firstly it strikes me that the level of anxiety and foreboding of an actual catastrophic end to the world is distinctly lower among Christians than among non-Christians. Many of us have encountered the argument prevalent among evangelicals and perhaps to an extent in Christians of all types that 'the Lord' will sim-

ply not let the world come to grief. How I envy them their certainty! How one has searched for some kind of comfort faced with the daily progress toward self-destruction of the species—and here it is right in our churches! The second area of confusion that I focused on was worse—that of the Dispensationalists, that the Lord is positively looking forward to the end of the world in a preordained political calamity and that therefore it is to be welcomed and indeed helped to come about. The story here is that the Bible foretells the arrival of a new creation through a final confrontation between good and evil at Armageddon, the ‘rapture’ of saved Christians into the clouds, etc, etc.² Apocalypse and visions of the end—the subjects of this essay—have taken many strange forms but none have achieved the political influence of the Dispensationalist story in north America over the last 40 years or so. These beliefs outweigh any necessity for concern about our world—for as Ronald Reagan’s Secretary of the Interior put it in the 80s: ‘Why waste time and money preserving things for future generations when everything is going to come to a fiery end with this one?’³ This thinking influences many today: indeed there is now a rapture index, like the Dow Jones, accessible on the web which tells you how close the end is day by day.⁴

It is so difficult to understand the harshness of the Dispensationalist view—which includes no place in

the rapture for Christian peacemakers, feminists, internationalists, communitarians, ecumenists, non heterosexuals, etc—but I have found one of Reagan’s childhood memories helpful. Coming home from school the boy Ronald would find his father lying dead drunk on the couch most days. As he went through the living room he would pretend his was the ideal home of the TV adverts and would say to his unconscious dad: ‘Hi pop, great day at school, really enjoyed math, must do some more schoolwork upstairs in my room’. It was this pretend mantra that kept him going. Is Reagan’s childhood coping strategy not the essence of far right Christian Dispensationalism? What the key texts about Armageddon in Ezekiel 38 and the Rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4 offer is a way of not engaging with existence. It’s an amazing outcome from reading sacred scripture which, I would have thought, demonstrates an engagement with human existence here and now from the first.

Merton and Nuclear Disaster

In an attempt to disentangle the confused and superimposed eschatologies that Merton described, my plan for this essay is to look at Merton’s thinking about our secular anxieties on the one hand—essentially how he wrote about and processed the possibility of nuclear disaster, and on the other hand his views about our location as already in a world where a different kind of

end has been prefigured by Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection.

To do this there are two key words whose meanings need to be brought out: apocalypse and eschatology. Apocalypse is from the Greek *apo* meaning from and *kalypsis* meaning covering and so is an uncovering, an unveiling, a disclosure or a revelation. Eschatology is from the Greek word *eschaton* meaning last or furthest, and so a spatial and/or temporal end or edge. Eschatology has pre-Christian origins but emerges full blown with Paul and Revelation though the actual word eschatology itself is of nineteenth century origin. These last things of the *eschaton* are traditionally Christ’s return, a new creation, a final judgement, the resurrection of the dead and everlasting life. Some still see this in its medieval guise, illustrated by Hieronymus Bosch and overlain with images of what Merton in the preface we are discussing calls a ‘violent, sudden and bad end’. In more modern and meaningful terms eschatology is about overcoming evil, vindicating ultimate justice in personal and social relations and about transcending finitude and death.

To start then with Merton and our secular anxieties. The anxiety and foreboding that Merton referred to in his note in the 1960s was dominated by the fear of nuclear catastrophe, a fear that was initiated by the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. These were a great unveiling of the potential evil that

science could achieve. The protest response has been one of disarmament campaigns, demonstrations, petitions, public appeals—all conducted in the language of rational discourse. I spent many years in the peace movement in the 1980s. We maintained an approach that was factual—numbers of megatons etc; that was focused on process—if we can persuade Party x to vote for proposition y at their annual conference etc; and that was relentlessly optimistic. None of it began to touch the magnitude of what had been disclosed as lying behind the modern world. Here’s Merton’s response though: ‘I have seen the SAC plane, with the bomb in it, fly low over me and I have looked up out of the woods directly at the closed bay of the metal bird with a scientific egg in its breast. A womb easily and mechanically opened! I do not consider this technological mother to be the friend of anything I believe in. However, like everyone else, I live in the shadow of the apocalyptic cherub.’⁵

This is more like it! Only this kind of apocalyptic poetic language does our desperate situation justice, uncovers the deceptions of contemporary politics and allows our tongues to be loosed.

Another focus of Merton was the pointlessness of identities formed by opinions and of getting others to join and be identified with them, ‘who you are with, who you are against...what button you wear, whom you vote for’.⁶ The degree of

frenzy of the activist was in inverse proportion to the success of peace work. All these symbols, slogans and images, like advertising, take us into 'realms of commitment and absurdity' where 'one is quarantined from the ordinary world of right and wrong'.⁷ What, after all, would be the post-Holocaust advantage of having been right?

It was important, Merton thought, to give up on the dominant discourses about planning x to achieve y. This was for two reasons. Theologically, at least as I understand the gospels, our role is to accept that this is not the way God works, but a second reason is that detachment from this secular thinking is vital from the point of view of our own human well being. We have to follow a different discourse from the secular world's, then 'we... get so that the world and its rule of terror does not reach in to try to dominate our inner soul'.⁸ Finding an authentic new language is difficult for 'In the presence of the darkness, the cloud of falsity and pretence, of confusion, evasion, of desecration, one grows more and more to distrust words, to distrust even human communication itself'.⁹ We need to be detached from the results of our own activity. So he wrote in his famous letter to the activist Jim Forest: 'You may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect. As you get used to this idea

you start more and more to concentrate not on the results but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself'.¹⁰ In the confusion Merton saw that we can never know the real form of events, 'what it is we do not know because we are it'.¹¹

Merton realised that the existence of 'the bomb' changes everything. Our fundamental and age old relationship with violence has now developed a new and terrifying toy. 'The great men of the earth would not talk of peace so much if they did not secretly believe it possible, *with one more war*, to annihilate their enemies for ever. Always after just one more war it will dawn, the new era of love but first everybody who is hated must be eliminated'.¹²

But perhaps the great men are as fearful as we are? Merton thought it might be the case that, 'The pathological fear of the violent end... when sufficiently aroused actually becomes a thinly disguised hope for the violent end'.¹³ Could this be because, as Merton saw, 'now it is the weapons themselves that make all the decisions: men humbly obey the creations of their own technology'.¹⁴ From this view the geopolitical matrix of our times though delivered by humans is actually decided by the brute voice of the weapons themselves.

So we are left to live with a desperate hope that a nuclear disaster or a catastrophic change to the planet's balance will be averted. St Augustine said something wonder-

ful about the activity of hope: 'Faith tells us only that God is love', he wrote. 'Love tells us that God is good. But hope tells us that God will work God's will. And hope has two lovely daughters: anger and courage. Anger so that what cannot be, may not be. And courage, so that what must be, will be'.¹⁵

Merton and Christian Eschatology

To turn now to Christian eschatology—our sense of an ending quite different to the absurdity of a self-inflicted destruction of ourselves and our world. Its themes are, as we have seen, about overcoming evil, vindicating ultimate justice in personal and social relations and about transcending finitude and death. Our Christian encounter with eschatology in our liturgies and in our creeds does tend to focus on transcending finitude and death. The first two themes—eschatology as an answer to evil and injustice are more what I am looking at here. These themes impact on us in two very different ways depending on our life situation. The first is for those whose very survival is under threat, in central and southern America for example. People living in actual inescapable end times are also perforce living an eschatological Christianity where the promise that Christ will come again becomes central. The second is a less visceral involvement but nevertheless a powerful one that applies more to

us in the west where our lives may be relatively comfortable but our thoughts aren't. So we wrestle with the themes of evil and the vindication of justice in a world where the voices of the wretched of the earth are obliterated. For both us and them there is a recognition of apocalypse—of an unveiling of some other meaning beneath the surface.

For Merton, 'If it were a matter of choosing between "contemplation" and "eschatology", there is no question that I am, and would always be, committed entirely to the latter'.¹⁶ He goes on to say how his faith is not 'a means of penetrating the mystery of the divine presence', but an acceptance that his faith is in the calling of God to him beyond death. By becoming a monk Merton had already taken a first step beyond life toward or into death. 'The office of the monk or marginal person, the meditative person or the poet, is to go beyond death even in this life, to go beyond the dichotomy of life and death and to be, therefore, a witness to life'.¹⁷

And it is this idea that the last things send you back to the first things—to the world itself—that Merton followed. 'I am coming to see clearly the great importance of the concept of realized eschatology, the transformation of life and human relations by Christ *now*'.¹⁸

The transformation taking place *now* freed Merton—and I would suggest can free us—from the idea that 'end times', the eschaton, must

necessarily be a promise for the future that means leaving the world behind. As Merton saw it, the world's place and time are not simply what they appear, but contain new and different worlds that are already present but invisible. Place for Merton was a multiplicity of potential places—where as he said, 'Paradise is all around' or where a visionary experience breaks in and transforms the ordinary. This is how location is in sacred scripture—the place of the cross or the burning bush. Equally our experience of time includes moments when clock time can be replaced by different kinds of time, ones filled with significance, charged with meaning, and related to the end.¹⁹ Accepting that place and time disclose deeper places and time beneath them brings about a change in the relationship of observer and observed—you start to really become one with what you experience, to really inhabit the world in its fullness, as was often the case with Merton.

Thus realized eschatology is about place and time forever new but here and now in the world itself as seen and experienced. Such an idea accords with the times we find ourselves in. Today's postmodern consciousness is located in the here and now. While premodern consciousness offered a promise of the past, modern consciousness a promise of the future, postmodernity opens up the present as something new, stripped of the illusions

of past and future, that we are only beginning to explore.²⁰ That's what realized eschatology is—it ensures that living and thinking remain inescapably together.

Some examples of this. At the heart of evil and injustice is violence. James Alison, working out the ideas of René Girard, suggests that the gospel narratives tell us about an end of violence that we haven't rightly understood.²¹ The reason for this is that we have moved the cessation of violence out of the here and now into a then and there of a second coming and a final judgment. Understanding violence needs a reintegration of the gospel narrative events with our violent world and violent selves now as, for example, in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa.

This idea can be expanded. Life can be seen as imbued with eschatological significance not in the sense of just touching the edge of a grand utopian design with its aura of ultimate meaning that will be revealed after our deaths.²² In his amazing book *Eccentric Existence*, David Kelsey sees the consummation of eschatology not as eternal life and defeat of death, etc, but the realisation now of a 'creaturely participation shared with others in the quality of God's own life'.²³ 'We are those', he suggests, 'to whom the catastrophe of final judgement is happening'.²⁴

Another example is reading sacred texts—an appropriate one

given the absurd interpretations of their key texts by the Dispensationists. Eschatological reading is not just a passive act but seeing that when we read we are being acted on now, often against our deepest wishes, rather than acquiring instructive knowledge for the future. Matthew's sheep and goats text in chapter 25:31-46—'Lord when was it that we saw you hungry/naked/in prison, etc?' is an actual here and now eschaton for the reader alone, not about a future occurrence in separate end times.²⁵

One last example. Apart from the Dispensationists I have avoided as far as possible moving on from Merton's day to the present but cannot omit the feminist voices which have now entered the eschatological debate. Could it be that the language of end things in a world to come is the language of men rather than the language of all of us? Hildegard of Bingen, for example, saw the end of the world not as dramatic comings accompanied by lightning and thunder but rather differently: 'It will be brought forth with gentle words...in the seventh day of quietness'.²⁶ 'Apocalypse' says Catherine Keller, 'is a quintessentially male product'.²⁷ Rosemary Radford Ruether, who corresponded with Merton, has written a number of texts exploring these male and female patterns of thinking about death. She asks, for instance, if the 'eschatological search to transcend mortality is an intrinsic expression of patriarchal false

consciousness?'²⁸ Has it been built she asks 'on a male negation of women as birthgiver of our real though mortal lives?'²⁹ She sees the emphasis in Christianity on personal immortality as 'created by the effort to absolutize individual ego as itself everlasting, over against the total community of being'.³⁰ Essentially, the feminist argument goes, women are more grounded in the world and in its cycles of birth and death than men who, as Nietzsche had it, cherish in their hearts a 'hopelessness toward all coming ages of earthly existence'.³¹ I suspect that Merton might have responded positively to all this.

Conclusions

So to return to the two superimposed eschatologies, the two ends of the world that we started with. The confusions are hard to disentangle. Because of their influence on contemporary power the Dispensationists are fudging an actual human-made catastrophe with the grand design of the traditional eschatological end. At the same time the very attractive ideas of realized eschatology stand on a wholehearted commitment to God's creation, ie this world, as the theatre of that realization not to an imagined elsewhere. In his sermon 'The shaking of the foundations' more than fifty years ago, Paul Tillich saw that the possible end of the world in an actual catastrophe must change our whole approach to the biblical account—the two are

not just superimposed but coincide.³² To put what I'm saying in a nutshell—commitment to God's creation today requires major modifications and revisiting of traditional eschatological teachings of other worlds where all is brought to a conclusion.

My title 'O fearful meditation' comes from half way through Shakespeare's Sonnet 65 where he imagines time's destruction of the world and comes to a horrified halt with these words. It seems impossible when thinking or speaking about an actual end to the world not to come to this halt. Shakespeare ended his poem with hope and we too balance our sense of fearful foreboding with hope. For Shakespeare it was a hope that poetry itself would transcend time, for Christians it is more a commitment to hope as a life-giving mystery itself, hope without a named objective but here and now—Paul's hope against hope, or a 'waking dream' as Aristotle defined hope.

We looked earlier at Merton's way of living with the prospect of nuclear catastrophe. This encouraged us to hold to four things: to be unafraid of using poetic and apocalyptic language (the metal bird with the scientific egg in its breast), to avoid identifying with the world's rule of terror (its realms of commitment and absurdity), to accept that human agency and causation are an illusion (don't concentrate on the results), and lastly to abandon any idea that we are living in rational

times (it is the weapons themselves that make the decisions). There is no way out of the fearful meditation, but we can follow Merton's example of relaxing into the presence of God 'like walking out of a door into fresh air',³³ and into his vision, emphasised by Christopher Pramuk, of a world redeemed by Christ, 'not in spite of, but precisely in and through its inescapable strickenness'.³⁴

Notes

1. 'The time of the end is the time of no room', in Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1965), p.65.
2. See for example Stephen Sizer, *Christian Zionism, Road Map to Armageddon* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004).
3. *ibid.*, p.89.
4. Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, 'Eschatology in pop culture', in Jerry L. Walls (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), pp.657.
5. Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981), p.31.
6. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968), p.29.
7. Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence, Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame Press, 1968), p.160.
8. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns* (New York:

- Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1985), p.22.
9. Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom, The Letters of Thomas Merton in Times of Crisis* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1994), p.279.
10. Thomas Merton, note 8, p.294.
11. Thomas Merton, *ibid.*, p.468.
12. Thomas Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963), p.72.
13. Thomas Merton, note 1, p.65.
14. Thomas Merton, note 8, p.621.
15. Quoted in David H. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p.501.
16. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life, Journals Vol. 5*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p.375.
17. Naomi Burton et al. (eds) *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1973), p.306.
18. Thomas Merton, note 16, p.86.
19. See Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: OUP, new edition 2000), p.46.
20. Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart, *Hope Against Hope: Christian Eschatology in Contemporary Context* (London: DLT, 1999), p.26.
21. James Alison, *Raising Abel, The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination* (London: SPCK, 2nd edition, 1997).
22. Christopher Rowland, 'Reading scripture eschatologically (2)', in David F. Ford and Graham Stanton (eds) *Reading Texts, Seeking Wis-*

- dom: Scripture and Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2003), p.269.
23. David Kelsey, note 15, p.510.
24. *ibid.* p.527.
25. Christopher Rowland, note 22, p.265.
26. Quoted in Mary C. Grey, *The Outrageous Pursuit of Hope, Prophetic Dreams for the 21st Century* (London: DLT, 2000), p.11.
27. Catherine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), p.28.
28. Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'Eschatology and feminism', in Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel (eds), *Lift Every Voice, Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside* (Maryknoll New York: Orbis, revised edition 1998), p.131.
29. *ibid.* p.132.
30. *ibid.*, p.140.
31. Quoted in Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope, On the Ground and the Implication of a Christian Eschatology* (London: SCM Press, 1967), p.265.
32. Paul Tillich, 'The shaking of the foundations', in *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), pp 1–11.
33. Quoted in Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia, The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2009), p.298.
34. Christopher Pramuk, note 33, p.233.

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