

The Time of the End is the Time of No Room... is the Time of... a New Creation... and Room for All

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This article reflects upon the paradox in Thomas Merton's essay, *The Time of the End is the Time of No Room*—a time which is in reality the beginning of a new creation with room for all. The inn which had no room for the birth of Christ symbolizes the time of the final events in humankind's covenant relationship with God, and also a final beginning: 'For eschatology is not finis and punishment, the winding up of accounts and the closing of books: it is the final beginning, the definitive birth into a new crea-

tion.'¹ Merton's words resonate with the Book of Revelation: 'Now I am making the whole of creation new... It is already done.'² With Merton as guide, this article will consider Christ's transforming presence in the world as the source, guide, and destination of the new humanity and new creation. The *time of the end is the time of a new creation... and room for all* because it is for Merton '...above all the time of The Great Joy'³ ...and for us, through the merits of Christ, the time of our union with God.

The Time of the End

'...the end' does not necessarily mean only 'the violent, sudden, bad end'.⁴

The inn symbolizes a gathering up of the kingdoms opposed to the Son of God, situated in the time of the end. Merton distinguishes this Biblical eschatology from the 'vague and anxious eschatology of human foreboding... of secular anxieties and hopes'⁵ which may be a death wish for a violent end. The time of the end is one of both revealed fulfilment (because of the incarnation) and of finality—because it is the time when all of the forces arrayed against God concentrate their efforts. In historical dimension, those to be numbered gather at the inn because of the mandate for a census numbering the people 'to be identified with the structure of imperial power.'⁶ In eschatological dimension, the inn symbolizes those forces described as opposing the reign of God: 'the demon spirits that work wonders go out to the kings all over the world to muster them for battle on the great Day of God Almighty.'⁷ This is the time of the end... 'the time of ... "wars and rumours of wars", of huge crowds moving this way and that, of men withering away for fear, of flaming cities and sinking fleets, of smoking lands laid waste...'⁸

Merton views eschatology as realized in the moment. He says, 'I am coming to see clearly the great im-

portance of the concept of realized eschatology—the transformation of life and of human relations by Christ now rather than eschatology focused on future cosmic and religious events.'⁹ It is the time of finality because the coming of the Messiah marks the end of mankind's banishment from paradise and numbers the days of the kingdoms of this world. It is the time of fulfilment because God's presence is among us, intimating the glory of the Kingdom of God. Merton notes, '...because my faith is eschatological it is also contemplative, for I am even now in the Kingdom and I can even now "see" something of the glory of the Kingdom and praise Him who is King. I would be foolish, then, if I lived blindly, putting all "seeing" off until some imagined fulfilment (for my present seeing is the beginning of a real and unimaginable fulfilment!).'¹⁰

...is the Time of No Room

*'As the end approaches, there is no room for nature. The cities crowd it off the face of the earth. As the end approaches, there is no room for quiet. There is no room for solitude. There is no room for thought. There is no room for attention, for the awareness of our state. In the time of the ultimate end, there is no room for man.'*¹¹

In eschatological context, there is no room for the birth of Christ be-

cause the inn, symbolic of an unredeemed world, is crowded. "The time of the end is the time of the Crowd."¹² Those occupants of the inn who have soaked the earth with the blood of their neighbours blindly serve the power of this world, building up a kingdom of slavery, oppression, even to the edge of nuclear holocaust. The sinful seed planted in the midst of God's creation flourishes into kingdoms characterized by death and destruction through humanity's chaotic pursuit of power. Merton explains that:

...original sin would be a perversion of man's active instincts, a turning of man's creativity away from God so he produces and creates not the society and the temple which God's own creation demands as its fulfilment, but a temple of man's own power. The world is then exploited for the glory of man, not for the glory of God. Man's power becomes an end in itself. Things are not merely used, they are wasted, destroyed. Men are no longer workers and 'creators' but tools of production, instruments for profit.¹³

God could not be born in such an inn because although He emptied himself to become man He '... did not empty Himself to the point of

becoming mass man, faceless man'.¹⁴ He is not part of the crowd which occupies the inn and serves the world, which Merton perceives as 'the body of those who hate, because they are prisoners of their own narrow illusions and petty desires.'¹⁵ In this industrial and technological age, the crowd serves the world of the 'isms'—materialism, consumerism, capitalism, communism etc. in which abstract ideologies are transformed into absolutes treated as idols. 'The mother of all lies is the lie we persist in telling ourselves about ourselves. And since we are not brazen enough liars to make ourselves believe our own lie individually, we pool all lies together and believe them because they become the big lie uttered by the *vox populi*, and this kind of lie we accept as ultimate truth.'¹⁶ As a consequence of the crowd's acceptance of these ultimate truths, there is no room for individual self-understanding and the solitude to obtain wisdom. There is only room for a mass culture that pillages the earth. For Ross Labrie, commenting on this same essay of Merton's,

The focus of the unspeakable in *Raids* is the materialism that Merton... associated with modern culture.... To Merton the materialism that had overtaken modern culture removed from view the latent possibilities of human existence. In particular it

overlooked the crucial solitude that was needed for the self to emerge in the face of intense, collective socialization. What compounded this attenuation of human beings was the exclusion of nature as anything but a tool to produce the goods that purported to assuage people's emotional needs... With his attention on what he thought of as the mesmerizing effect of consumer culture, Merton indicated that this particular dehumanization occurred not at the hands of tyrants but rather inside the appetites and emotional urgings of the majority.....¹⁷

The world is a kingdom in which there is no room for man because of the 'demons who occupy the heart (pretending to be gods) so that man himself finds no room for himself in himself.'¹⁸ Demons occupy the world through men's hearts and such men create a society of hatred. The crowd's hate fuels genocide, the holocaust, the use of weapons of mass destruction, and wars. This hate emanates from individual false selves seeking meaningfulness where there is none. Merton observes, 'By way of social myths the false self is projected into the communal lie of the world, understood in the negative sense as that place which fosters our own deepest lie about ourselves.'¹⁹

In addition to the collective lies, Merton writes that there is no room where people make time for self-understanding. We are living in 'The time when everyone is obsessed with lack of time, lack of space, with saving time, conquering space, projecting into time and space the anguish produced within them by the technological furies of size, volume, quantity, speed, number, price, power and acceleration.'²⁰ Victor Kramer observes that Merton's 'view of the modern world was one where many men seemed to be losing any ability to distinguish the true: appreciation of truth was apparently being lost because of increasingly greedy, cruel, and lustful pressures common to a society which encourages man to ignore the truth and to be primarily concerned with fitting in, or with his own satisfaction.'²¹

In the time of the end there is no room for silence, for solitude, for independent thought—and no room for a person to be himself because he is estranged from that true self which is made in the image and likeness of God. Such a person belongs only to the crowd, a mass man, a worker ant, a drone guided by others and capable of destruction. For Merton, sin creates the crowd because it alienates a person from himself, from others and from God. Such sin is a radical 'refusal to be what we are, a rejection of our mysterious, contingent, spiritual reality hidden in the very mystery of God. Sin is our refusal to

be what we were created to be—sons of God, images of God.²²

To be truly ourselves is to have a connection with our Origin, to be in contact with and nourished by the very Source of our being. To be made in the image and the likeness of God means to be in communion with the Word through which all came to be. 'Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature. For in Him were created all things in the heavens and on the earth...all things have been created through and unto Him and in Him all things hold together.'²³ As the image of God within us, Christ is realized in each of us as we recover our true self, the self that God knows, our unique personhood reflecting our union with the Son of God. The time of the end is the time of opportunity for us to encounter Christ, recover our true selves, and find our room in the Kingdom of God.

is the Time of...a New Creation

*'Not only is Christ the term and fulfilment of creation, but He is also its source and its beginning. The far ends of time meet in His hands.'*²⁴

A new creation emerges with the birth of the God-Child. The reign of God radiates from child to mother and father, to shepherds, to wise men, and to others. Thus emerges the new creation, as our true selves are recovered from 'the inner, basic, metaphysical defilement of

fallen man (which) is his profound and illusory conviction that he is a god and that the universe is centered upon him... a lasting deformity impressed in our nature by original sin...'²⁵ Sons and daughters of Adam are alienated as consequence of this rejection of God, such that lives are lived from this false center in which 'I wind experiences around myself and cover myself with pleasures and glory like bandages in order to make myself perceptible to myself and to the world, as if I were an invisible body that could only become visible when something visible covered its surface.'²⁶ Our false self is the lie of 'one who wants to exist outside the reach of God's will and God's love—outside of reality and outside of life. And such a self cannot help but be an illusion.'²⁷ Sin causes us to worship our false selves as an idol and estranges us from our true selves.²⁸ It 'destroys the one reality on which our true character, identity, and happiness depend; our fundamental orientation to God.'²⁹

Recovering the true self begins with acknowledgement of this lie which is the false self fermented by pride. 'For pride is a stubborn insistence on being what we are not and never were intended to be. Pride is a deep, insatiable need for unreality, an exorbitant demand that others believe the lie that we have made of ourselves.'³⁰ We are assisted in this recovery by the experience of dread. Merton observes

that 'The experience of 'dread', 'nothingness' and 'night' in the heart of man is then the awareness of infidelity to the truth of our life... It is the deep, confused, metaphysical awareness of a basic antagonism between the self and God due to estrangement from him by perverse attachment to a 'self' which is mysterious and illusory.'³¹ Dread provides the opportunity for repentance and an opening to grace. We recover our true self by following the promptings of the Holy Spirit, our source of grace, our guide and our destination.

Merton believes the Holy Spirit acts in baptism and the Eucharist to provide grace for our recovery. Through baptism we become a new creation and through the Eucharist we encounter God. He thinks baptism answers the '...most fundamental question raised... man's true identity.'³² He states that, 'Just as Christ is the New Adam, so Baptism is a new Creation'³³ by giving us a spiritual nature for 'the man who has become *pneumatikos*—spiritual—is indeed a 'new creature'.... who 'is able to love God for His own sake' and '...lives by the Spirit of Christ.'³⁴ Baptism also prepares us to be in communion with God and others as it 'opens the way to existential communion.'³⁵ The Eucharist is an expression of this communion which Merton views as the 'Sacrament of charity—that charity by which we dedicate our freedom to God and to one another.'³⁶

Contemplative prayer, too, is important in our recovery as we learn to dialogue with God and grow in union with Him. For Merton, 'Prayer then means yearning for the simple presence of God, for a personal understanding of his word, for knowledge of his will and for a capacity to hear and obey him.'³⁸ He advises us 'to listen in silence to... God... which is to bring man into a conscious communion with God in Christ.'³⁹ But prayer is more than a dialogue; 'it is the communion of our freedom with his ultimate freedom, his infinite spirit.'⁴⁰

Hence, the search for God through a sacramental life and prayer 'lies essentially in [...] becoming aware of himself as a person possessed by God the Holy Spirit, totally submissive to the grace of Christ.'⁴² We discover that 'the uncreated Image, buried and concealed by sin in the depths of our souls, rises from death when, sending forth His Spirit into our spirit, He manifests His presence within us and becomes for us the source of a new life, a new identity and a new mode of action.'⁴³ But even more, we become transformed into the likeness of Christ and become divinely human.

Transformed into the likeness of Christ, we participate in the time of a new creation. Merton saw Adam as a priest of creation, through whose contemplative union with God, creation itself participated in worship. Merton notes that '...it

was in the sounding solitude of Adam's understanding that things without reason became able to adore their creator, in the flaming silence of Adam's wisdom all that existed and breathed and grew and ran and multiplied upon the earth was united with God in worship and in communion.⁴⁵ Restored in the image and likeness of God we become a new Adam through the merits of Christ and we too offer and consecrate the whole world to God. As members of the mystical body of Christ, we live in the Messianic Kingdom: 'Just as Adam is the one chosen by God to reside over the first creation, Christ is sent by Him to institute and govern an entirely new spiritual Creation. For with the death and resurrection of Christ we are in a new world, a new age.'⁴⁶ The time of a new creation then is the fullness of time, the time of the Messianic Kingdom which has room for all.

...and Room for All

In the solitude of his hermitage, Merton writes about his experience of the divine Kingdom:

How men fear freedom! And how I have learned to fear it myself! I know that in fact, without faith, this would be a different matter, this living alone. But with faith it becomes an eschatological gift. I have never before really

seen what it means to live in the new creation and in the Kingdom. Impossible to explain it. If I tried, I would be unfaithful to the grace of it—for I would be setting limits to it. It is limitless, without determination, without definition. It is what you make of it each day, in response to the Holy Spirit!⁴⁷

Merton asserts that 'we are living in a world that is absolutely transparent, and God is shining through it all the time... And this is something we are not able to see. But if we abandon ourselves to Him and forget ourselves we see it sometimes... He is everywhere, He is in everything, and we cannot be without Him. You cannot be without God. It's impossible, it's just simply impossible. The only thing is that we don't see it.'⁵³ So in our journey let us ask God to help us see it. As we walk the earth during our brief passage, as we cast our eyes upon the gathering technological furies, as we witness to the division among men and their acts of unspeakable horror, may God help us to see it. May He restore us to our true selves that we may dwell in His new creation beyond the time of the end into that time everlasting where through His Merits there will be room for all.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Direc-

tions, 1966), p.70.

2. The New Jerusalem Bible (New York: Double Day, 1966) Revelation 21. 5-6.

3. *Raids on the Unspeakable*, p.56.

4. *ibid.*, p.56.

5. *ibid.*, p.56.

6. *ibid.*, p.60.

7. New Jerusalem Bible, Revelation 16.14.

8. *Raids on the Unspeakable*, p.58.

9. Thomas Merton, *The Intimate Merton: His Life From His Journals*, ed. Patrick Hart, Jonathan Montaldo (New York: Harper Collins, 1999), pp.216-217.

10. Thomas Merton, *A Year with Thomas Merton, Daily Meditations from His Journals*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo, (New York: Harper One, 2004), p.375.

11. *Raids on the Unspeakable*, pp.62-63.

12. *ibid.*, p.58.

13. Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2011), p.93.

14. *Raids on the Unspeakable*, p.60.

15. *The New Man*, p.284.

16. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Image Books, 1968), p.71.

17. Ross Labrie, 'Thomas Merton on the Unspeakable', *The Merton Seasonal*,

vol. 36, no. 4, Winter 2, 2011, p.4.

18. *Raids on the Unspeakable*, p.63.

19. James Finley, *Merton's Palace of Nowhere* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1978), p.46.

20. *Raids on the Unspeakable*, p.62.

21. Victor Kramer, *Thomas Merton*

(Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984), p.93.

22. John J. Higgins, *Thomas Merton On Prayer* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1973), p.35.

23. New Jerusalem Bible, Colossians 1.15-17.

24. *The New Man*, p.210.

25. Thomas Merton, *The Silent Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1975), pp.13-15.

26. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (Boston: Shambhala, 2003), p.37.

27. *New Seeds*, p.33.

28. Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: New Directions, 1989), p.76.

29. Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955), p.84.

30. *The New Man*, pp.154-155.

31. *Thomas Merton On Prayer*, p.80.

32. *The New Man*, p.320.

33. *ibid.*, p.307.

34. *ibid.*, pp.314-315.

35. *ibid.*, p.319.

36. *The New Man*, p.361.

37. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979) p.284.

38. *Thomas Merton On Prayer*, p.72.

39. *The New Man*, pp.251-252.

40. *New Seeds of Contemplation*, pp.1-5.

41. *Thomas Merton On Prayer*, p.72.

42. *The New Man*, p. 253.

43. Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience*, William H. Shannon, Ed. (San Francisco: Harper, 2003) p.38.

44. *The New Man*, p.88.

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45. *ibid.*, pp.226-227.

46. *A Year with Thomas Merton, Daily Meditations from His Journals*, p.206.

47. Thomas Merton, *Essential Writings*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2000), p.70.

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