Lessons from Hawk's Diner

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Introduction

For those of us lucky enough to have attended the Merton Society's conferences when Donald Allchin was president, most will remember Donald's addresses given at the conference dinner. Invariably, he included reference to the experience of being with Thomas Merton on the day that Martin Luther King was assassinated – 4th April 1968.

This is Donald's account from the 2002 conference papers:

> I have never ceased to be amazed at the strange fact that we should have been spending the day together in April 1968 at the moment when Martin Luther King was shot in Memphis. We finished the day in a little restaurant in Bardstown, Colonel Hawk's Diner, under the watchful eye of the restaurant's proprietor and manager Colonel Hawk, a remarkable and memorable African-American, a friend of Tom and a friend of the community at Gethsemani.[1]

Another experience that Donald would regularly share with us was his understanding of the teachings of Maximus the Confessor, and his shared interest with Merton in the Shakers' building and craft work.

In this paper I discuss the events of April 4th 1968: the visit by Merton and Donald to the Shaker village at Pleasant Hill, which is then contrasted with the terrible racist assassination of Martin Luther King. My suggestion is that the visit to Hawk's Diner that took place after the two had heard the news of the murder acted as a way of containing these two opposite and immediate experiences of good and evil. The tension of such opposites can lead to a new level of being, a new awareness – something that takes us *beyond* the opposites. Perhaps it's not too far-fetched to suggest that it was something about this that Donald was trying to convey to us.

The visit to Pleasant Hill

The weather was poor for this planned visit, 'raining in torrents and the rain continued all day ... the end of a tornado', and that they 'walked from building to building in pelting rain.'[2] Whilst the journal entry is brief and subdued, written as a catch-up about the 'turbulent' week, I am confident that the discussion that took place would have included their shared interest in Shaker furniture and craft, and how these exemplified the teachings of Maximus the Confessor. After all, this was the subject that established the connection when Donald first visited Merton in 1963 and he asked him if he knew about Pleasant Hill. Donald told us:

> I shall never forget. He got up. He went over to his filing cabinet. He pulled out a drawer. He pulled out a file and there was a whole file of photographs of Shaker architecture and Shaker furniture – which in those days was not very well known ... Merton was right into it ... he made use of the Shaker materials to illustrate the *logos* doctrine of St Maximus the Confessor in an absolutely brilliant way in his lectures on aesthetical and mystical theology ... [Merton] says, 'If you want to have the *logos* of a bed or the *logos* of a chair, look at a Shaker bed, look at a Shaker chair, you can see what the innermost meaning is.' ...
>
> So we started off on Shakers and that got us going. And from that time, we never stopped.[3]

In those talks to the novices that Donald refers to, Merton speaks about contemplation and the cosmos using Maximus' concept of *theoria physike*, where the love of Christ is mysteriously hidden in what Maximus calls the inner *logoi* of created things, in all composite things. There is then something – the essence of God's love in every created thing. *Theoria physike* is the reception of the mysterious, silent revelation of God in His cosmos and in the way that everything works as well as in our own lives, the very reality of things. According to Maximus we are made to know God – it is natural, and we need to be restored to this 'sophianic' contemplation of the cosmos. As Merton writes:

> *Theoria physike* is a most important part of [our] cooperation in the spiritualization and restoration of the cosmos. It is by *theoria* that [we help] Christ to redeem the *logoi* of things and restore them in Himself.[4]

Merton goes on to describe how by uniting the hidden wisdom of God in created things with wisdom within ourselves we can become a mirror of

the divine glory. This is:

> a sophianic, contemplative orientation of [one's] life. … The world is no longer seen as merely material. … It is spiritual through and through. But grace has to work in and through us to enable us to carry out this real transformation.[5]

Christopher Pramuk in his book *Sophia* expands on Merton's definition of *theoria physike* as multiform wisdom that apprehends the wisdom and glory of God through the spirit of scripture, things, and, within ourselves.[6] In Shaker craft the *logoi* of things is not abstract, 'but attends to the concrete nature (inscape) of things in relation to the whole.'[7] Merton writes about the 'silent eloquence of Shaker craftsmanship' where there is the integration of the spiritual in the physical.[8] In Shaker work there is the participation in God's work of creation where each object might fulfil its vocation. Merton famously wrote that 'the peculiar grace of a Shaker chair is due to the fact that it was made by someone capable of believing that an angel might come and sit on it.'[9] Paul Pearson writes how the mind of the Shaker was directed not merely to the good of the work, or to the advantage of the worker, but to something that transcended and included both, 'a kind of wholeness and order and worship that filled the whole day and the whole life of the working community. … [T]heir work was a worship offered to God in the sight of his angels.' This was 'a perfect fusion of temporal and eternal values, of spirit and matter.'[10]

This sophianic wisdom contrasts with the purely instrumental and exploitative relationship with nature – of which we have seen too much in the last decades – consuming, producing and destroying for its own sake. Christopher Pramuk writes: 'In honouring the logoi of all living and non-living things, we become "conscious of their mute appeal to us to find and rescue the glory of God that has been hidden in them and veiled by sin".'[11] Surely then, after visiting Pleasant Hill, the contrast with Lum's restaurant in Lexington where Merton and Donald went afterwards would have been a painful contrast. Merton writes:

> Lum's was a curious sort of goldfish-bowl place out in a flat suburb near a railway viaduct. … The TV was on for the news. Some tanks plowed around in Vietnam, then Martin Luther King appeared – talking the previous night in Memphis. I was impressed by his tenseness and strength. A sort of vague visual auditory impression. At almost that very moment he was being killed.[12]

Racism and the assassination of Martin Luther King

> So the murder of M. L. King – it lay on the top of the travelling car like an animal, a beast of the apocalypse.[13]

In this section I want to briefly explore 'the beast of racism'. Merton saw racism and the myth of racial superiority as a way of turning people into things, the logical consequence of an essentialist style of thought prevalent in Western culture which reduces others to neat categories as a way of objectifying and controlling them — and too often killing them. It was a manifestation of the 'colonial crisis' where the colonialist mentality is inherently racist, and where the Western attitude of complacent superiority imposes onto those seen as 'other' what Merton calls 'invented identities'. This 'white Western myth-dream' of moral, cultural, and religious superiority originated in the European imperial and colonial expansionism of the previous 500 years has never been properly recognised, and so is still causing havoc.[14]

Duncan Dormer links the spread of Christianity with imperialism and colonialism, and writes of 'the deep, abiding legacies', where 'the pervasiveness of cultural superiority and cultural subjugation, and the accompanying attitudes – [is] paternalism at best, but with systematic, institutional and "scientific" racism commonplace', and where 'the transatlantic slave trade stands out as one of the greatest crimes against humanity in history.'[15] In America, repressive and violent measures after the Civil War and period of Reconstruction where segregation and white terror groups held sway persisted into the second half of the twentieth century, and became the chief motivating force behind the rise of the modern civil rights movement.

Merton's sensitivity to the civil rights movement dates back to 1941 and his summer in Harlem. His concern in the 1960s, to quote Patrick O'Connell, was 'now viewed through the lens of contemplative identification with and compassion for all humanity, particularly those most excluded and oppressed.'[16] Merton was clear that the call for integration could not mean the inclusion of black people into an otherwise unchanged social structure, but rather a renewal of fundamental human values where the conscience of white people is awakened to what Merton calls 'the awful reality of [their] injustice and of [their] sin'.[17] Merton consistently sees this as a white problem and in 'Letters to a White Liberal' castigates those who approve of social reform as long as it does not adversely impact their own comfort.[18] Importantly,

Merton later wrote of collective responsibility and collective guilt:

> [W]e have all more or less acquiesced in and consented to a state of affairs in which the Negro is treated unjustly, and in which his unjust treatment is directly or indirectly to the advantage of people like ourselves.[19]

From the mid-1960s, both Merton and Martin Luther King linked the racial unrest, violence and injustice happening in America to the Vietnam war; King proclaimed America to be the 'greatest purveyor of violence in the world today', as 'a result of racist decision making'.[20] King saw that there was something strangely inconsistent in a nation and a media that applauded non-violence in the civil rights protests, but damned and cursed when suggesting non-violence towards 'little brown Vietnamese children'. As King's advocacy for non-violence began to weaken, Merton saw that the Black Power movement was 'trying to channel the exploding energies of the Negro ghettoes in a political direction', and that non-violence was being given up as 'futile idealism' with 'guerrilla war [being declared] on white society'.[21]

With King's assassination, Gayraud S. Wilmore writes: 'The King of love was dead and with his death an era of interracial church social action and theological innocence came to an end,'[22] replaced instead by what Merton described as 'a more elemental, nihilistic revolution'.[23] Merton understood that racial conflict was one symptom of the universal problem of the human hate and violence present in each one of us, but that the violence demanded a new consciousness, one that Merton says 'white people can barely grasp, let alone understand dispassionately … that [white society[has been consistently cruel, hypocritical, unjust, inhuman.' The 'coloured peoples form the vast majority of the world's population, and also are the have-nots' in the world.'[24] In his letter of condolence to Coretta King, Merton wrote about his personal loss:

> [H]ow deeply I share your personal grief as well as the shock that pervades the whole nation. He has done the greatest thing anyone can do… he has laid down his life for his friends and enemies.[25]

On the day of King's funeral Merton wrote: 'These have been terrible days for everyone, and God alone knows what is to come. I feel that we have really crossed a definitive line into a more apocalyptic kind of time. … We will need a lot of faith and a new vision and courage to move in these new and bitter realities.'[26]

Lessons from Hawk's Diner – 'OK – this is what I do'

> It is the cross that points in the direction of hope, the confidence that there is a dimension to life beyond the reach of the oppressor … God's loving solidarity can transform ugliness – whether Jesus on the cross or a lynched black victim – into beauty, into God's liberating presence.
>
> James H. Cone – *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*[27]

In his journal account for 4th April, Merton writes that the murder of King confirms that 1968 is 'a beast of a year'. The hatred expressed in the racist act raises a number of questions summed up for Merton as 'Why?'. He continues: 'Do evil events happen because people in desperation *want* them to happen? Or do they *have to happen*? Is the human race self-destructive? Is the Christian message of love a pitiful delusion? Or must one just "love" in an impossible situation?'[28] In his questioning Merton is tuning into the experience of suffering, and in particular the experience of unspeakable black suffering

In his book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, James H. Cone discusses the same questions raised in the writing of W. E. B. Du Bois whose work in the first part of the twentieth century transformed the way that the lives of Black citizens were seen in American society. Demanding God's explanation for black suffering, the mother of the lynched boy in Du Bois' story, 'The Gospel of Mary Brown', questions divine justice: 'Why, why did you do it God?' Cone adds that you cannot be defined by the black experience and not struggle with religious contradictions:

> One cannot correctly understand the black religious experience without an affirmation of deep faith informed by profound doubt. Suffering naturally gives rise to doubt. How can one believe in God in the face of such horrendous suffering as slavery, segregation, and the lynching tree? Under these circumstances, doubt is not a denial but an integral part of faith. It keeps faith from being sure of itself. But doubt does not have the final word. The final word is faith giving rise to hope. … Such spiritual wrestling did not arise out of abstract reasoning but from enduring and confronting the reality of inexplicable suffering.[29]

King wrote of the same struggles – the struggle of the meaning of the cross – noting that we do not know what we truly believe or what our theology is worth until 'our highest hopes are turned into shambles of despair'.[30] And in a lighter vein: 'It's not the despair,' as John Cleese's

character puts it in the 1986 film *Clockwise*, 'I can take the despair. It's the hope I can't stand.'

What does Merton do in his despair of hearing of the murder of King? Donald Allchin recounts how as the news came over the radio Merton responded by saying that they needed immediately to call in at Bardstown at Colonel Hawk's Diner which Merton sometimes visited. 'Hawk' Rogers had built a small concrete block dinner club in Bardstown in 1941, but for almost 25 years the restaurant was prohibited by law from serving both black and white customers – so until 1964 it was a black-owned public restaurant with a white-only clientele. Merton had gone to Hawk's Diner earlier in this turbulent week with four college girls from St Louis, and the next day had taken a mass, 'though I had no permission', in the house of Beatrice Rogers – Hawk's daughter. 'OK – this is what I do' he notes in his journal.[31]

Speaking about the evening of 4th April, Donald remembered that Merton knew that Hawk would be devastated about King's death, and anxious:

> [T]he whole situation was at that moment in a sense very fragile. And so we went and spent the evening there. It was a very memorable occasion in many ways, particularly because it was the first time that I had really met a black American in any depth. Colonel Hawk kept coming back to us … and talking and talking and talking.[32]

Merton described it as a 'moving and sad experience', and he slept little that night; but at least two lessons emerge for us from that experience.[33]

1 — Proximity

In 1963 Merton wrote to James Baldwin: 'I am therefore not completely human until I have found myself in my African and Asian and Indonesian brother because he has the part of humanity which I lack.'[34]

Jan Willis, author of *Dreaming Me: Black, Baptist and Buddhist - One Woman's Spiritual Journey*, last year held a loving-kindness meditation workshop on racism in the context of Black Lives Matter, and what to do when one hears the news of yet another senseless murder. Using the idea of 'let's get closer', she focused on developing emotional proximity. Especially those of us who are white need to work to cut the distance between us and the black victim, who is probably unknown to us, by substituting someone we know. Then we can begin to *feel* and *identify* with what has happened, and so connect. In Hawk's Diner Merton and

Donald cut the distance that separated them as white men from the hateful act by another white man by being with the African-Americans known to them.

2 — Holding the tension of the opposites

April 4th 1968 was a day above most others when the tension between opposite experiences needed to be held. There was the love of the Shaker craftsmanship exemplifying of Maximus' concept of *theoria physike*, alongside the hate of the bigoted white supremacist. My suggestion is that Hawk's Diner offered a place of containment of these two opposite experiences where the tension could be held. Merton wrote and reflected on the idea of such dialectical tension drawing on Nicholas of Cusa:

> This realization [of my true self] is a coincidence of all opposites (as Nicholas of Cusa might say), a fusion of freedom and unfreedom, being and unbeing, life and death, self and non-self, man and God.[35]

Merton knew experientially about trying to unite the drives and feelings within himself and he also knew about the social suffering that comes from human hate: 'We must contain all divided worlds in ourselves and transcend them in Christ.'[36]

There is resonance here with the Black faith experience. Cone writes about holding the opposites in this way:

> On the one hand, faith spoke to their suffering, making it bearable, while on the other hand, suffering contradicted their faith, making it unbearable. That is the profound paradox inherent in black faith, the dialectic of doubt and trust in the search for meaning.[37]

The Christian gospel remains God's message of liberation in an unredeemed and tortured world. This is the transcendent reality that lifts the spirits, but also an immanent reality, a liberating presence in the here and now where there are real signs of God's presence in the lives of the oppressed. God's word is paradoxical, for Cone 'inscrutable', a mystery that one can neither control nor fully understand, both here and not here, revealed and hidden at the same time. And where the cross is the sign of death and defeat, and yet an opening to the transcendent. Expectations and conventional values are reversed and salvation available through solidarity with the crucified in our midst.

Conclusion: 'I could cry.'

> Hawk with his arm around me saying 'This is my *boy*, this is my *friend*.' … I could cry.[38]

It's hard to find meaning when in despair – perhaps we cannot do it – but we *can* weep. Perhaps we just have to hold on, as best we can, to our good and bad experiences. Perhaps the transcendence happens later.

We might find consolation in Maximus, who over 1,300 years before King's assassination, saw the essence of the love of God in all of creation and all of God's creatures. But Maximus was arrested, accused of treason, questioned about his theology and exiled. When he stood firm in his beliefs he was tried again, tortured, had his tongue and his right hand – the instruments with which he had defended Orthodoxy (or, to his judges, proclaimed heresy) – cut off, and was again exiled, where he died in 662, abandoned, except for his two disciples. But his words of wisdom live on to connect with generations long after the violent ugliness has passed, and his oppressors have been forgotten.

Donald Allchin told us that he always found Merton 'wonderfully ordinary' and someone who gave his undivided attention to the person he was with. So, in essence: if you can be authentically present with whoever you are with, then, you connect with that person – with the *logoi* of that person – and that includes their contradictions and their suffering alongside your own. Perhaps that's what Donald saw at Hawk's Dinner, and perhaps that's what he felt was so important to convey to us when he talked about the murder of Martin Luther King and shared the teachings of Maximus the Confessor.

Notes

1. Donald Allchin, Presidential address, *The World in my Bloodstream*, ed. Angus Stuart (Abergavenny: Three Peaks Press, 2002), pp. 18-25, p. 21.
2. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain - The Journals of Thomas Merton*, *volume 7*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), p. 77.
3. Donald Allchin, 'A Round Table Discussion', *Your Heart is My Hermitage – Conference Papers 1996* (London: Thomas Merton Society, 1996), pp. 11-31.
4. Thomas Merton, *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism*, ed. by Patrick O'Connell (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 2008), p. 125.
5. *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism*, p. 126.
6. Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia, The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Minnesota: Liturgical press, 2009), pp.142-8.
7. *Sophia*, p. 145.

8. Thomas Merton, Introduction to Edward Deming Andrews and Faith Andrews, *Religion in Wood: A Book of Shaker Furniture*. Merton's introduction is also included in Paul Pearson, *Seeking Paradise - The Spirit of the Shakers* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2003), pp. 72-89.
9. *Seeking paradise*, p. 85.
10. *Seeking Paradise*, p. 64-5.
11. *Sophia*, p. 145, quoting from *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism*, p. 130.
12. *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 77.
13. *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 78.
14. Pat O'Connell, 'Racism' in *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*, ed. William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen, Patrick F. O'Connell (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), pp. 377-8.
15. Duncan Dormor, 'The case for postcolonial theology' in *Modern Believing*, 62. 4. 2021, pp. 327-339, p. 329.
16. Pat O'Connell, 'Civil Rights', in *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*, ed. William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen, Patrick F. O'Connell (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), p. 60.
17. 'Civil Rights', in *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*, p. 61.
18. Thomas Merton, 'Letters to a White Liberal' in *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), pp. 13-56. The text is also included in Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace — The Social Essays*.
19. Thomas Merton, 'The Hot Summer of Sixty-Seven' in *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p. 180.
20. James H. Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), pp. 237, 239.
21. *Faith and Violence*, pp. 166, 175.
22. Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Theology: A Documentary History 1966-1979*, ed. Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979), p. 21.
23. *Faith and Violence*, p. 167.
24. *Faith and Violence*, p. 170.
25. Letter to Coretta Scott King, April 5, 1968, in Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, ed. William H. Shannon (London: Collins Flame, 1985), p. 451.
26. Letter to June J. Yungblut, April 9, 1968 in *The Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 645.
27. James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2015), p. 162.
28. *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 78.
29. *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, pp. 106-8.
30. Martin Luther King, quoted by Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, pp. 80-1.
31. *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, p. 76.
32. *Your Heart is My Hermitage*, p. 16.
33. *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 78.
34. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth*, selected and ed. Christine M. Bochen

(San Diego: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1993), p. 245.
35. Thomas Merton, 'Learning to Live' in *Love and Living* (London: Sheldon Press, 1979), p. 10.
36. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Kent: Burns and Oates, 1995), p. 21.
37. *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, pp. 124-5.
38. *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 79.

For further details about Hawk's Diner see the text on the inside back cover.

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