

# Walking out of a door into the fresh air<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

The possibility of irreversible climate change altering human life on the planet, let alone its increasing likelihood, has brought any number of standard certainties into doubt. Looking back to Merton's world view in the 1960s we can see that, while human damage to the natural world from everyday practices was not a major issue for him, the potential of terminal damage from nuclear war was. His was a clear sense that the West's delight in geopolitics – competing in coming up with wilder and wilder potential dangers if such and such an outcome in a far region was not thwarted – allied with increasing stockpiles of nuclear weapons, meant a potential fatal disaster for us all. This possibility in turn brought into question the whole dream of western progress and the very idea of man's decisions and plans advancing us to some civilizing and world-improving goal. This view was, of course shared by others in the 1960s, but what – jumping forward a half century – makes Merton so relevant today is, to my mind, nothing less than his retreat to the hermitage in the woods in his final years. Putting the two together – fear of nuclear war and abandonment of systems of living in favour of isolation – it is possible to argue that Merton was enacting, and indicating, a redemptive route for the human species as a whole. This would mean a reduction of the human figure, a retreat from progress, an abandonment of established systems of living, and a re-engagement with where the human truly belongs, that is to say in nature.

Being in nature is not a new idea of course. It is, after all, where the human being has been since we became indistinguishable from our present selves thousands of years ago. But nearer home it is where so

many voices in western civilization have spoken from too. To this commitment to surroundings and landscapes that feature so strongly in his writing, another of the aspects of Merton's writing and life was the seamless combination of the spiritual and secular, soul and body, which have usually been kept apart in the west. From a Mertonian perspective of accepting authentic voices, whether secular or religious, this philosophically and theologically central theme of a material and spiritual separation is not so clear. Seeing the natural environment in itself rather than as something added on to human life, and seeing the necessity, as a result of such a vision, of changing one's own life, crosses the secular/religious divide.

Thoreau is a good example. Coming back down from Mount Katahdin on his trip to Maine in 1846, he came out of woods and ravines onto open land where he experienced nature on its own, savage and awful, seeing it for itself suddenly without any mediation of the human. He writes that he 'looked with awe at the ground I trod on, to see what the Powers had made there, the form and fashion of their work. This was the Earth of which we had heard, made out of Chaos and Old Night ... the unhandseled globe.' He went on: 'Talk of mysteries! Think of our life in nature, – daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it, – rocks, trees wind on our cheeks! the *solid* earth! the *actual* world! the *common sense*! *Contact! Contact! Who are we? Where are we?*'<sup>2</sup>

My intention in this paper is to explore what areas there are for a Mertonian input, after more than fifty years, into the urgent question today of our relationship with nature, with the world we live in. How do we get away from our vague sense of having surroundings out there – the environment and ecology – and to become, as Thoreau was, astonished again at who and where we are? What can a Mertonian way of looking at things contribute to this question – a question which has become crucial as we realise how we have not only damaged the planet but also damaged ourselves by the meagreness of our cosmologies? Both Merton and Thoreau saw that radically changing our relationship with the earth, with where we are, meant changing our relationship with our own selves. This parallel activity of contemporaneously rethinking the world and rethinking ourselves is what Merton frequently repeated in his underlying sense of the unity of all, and of the necessary diminution of the individual human demanded by that wider context. What Thoreau's italicised text and use of exclamation marks adds is the sense of urgency we need today.

### Thinking as a universal activity

Cosmological views have been very different in different places and different times. But until these last few centuries in European thought no one has relegated the cosmos to being lifeless, as something passively awaiting a proper use and a proper description. Strangely the more we have developed our thinking to what we think of as greater and greater complexity with more ideas and concepts, the more the inertness of the world has increased. All life and activity and meaning have now retreated from the world into our heads. There we manufacture differences and break things down into their different components and so everything recedes into the background and becomes more separate from us. As Charles Taylor writes in *A Secular Age*: 'Disengaged thinking becomes the most prestigious activity of modern civilisation. ... It's so central that it gets applied to domains like politics, psychology, history etc. It gives us dignity.'<sup>3</sup> But it now seems, faced with disasters emanating from this supposedly inert world, that we don't know anything very much at all. As Thomas Berry writes: 'We never knew enough. Nor were we sufficiently intimate with all our cousins in the great family of the earth. Nor could we listen to the various creatures of the earth, each telling its own story. The time has now come, however, when we will listen or we will die.'<sup>4</sup>

This awakening to the world is what happened with the Apollo 17 astronauts who came to the realisation of where they truly were only after they had lost contact with the ground and were out in space. Only then, when they looked out of the spaceship at where they had come from, were they able to engage with the earth, and then to take the famous photographs of the blue planet that have played such an important part in reorienting our thinking. The astronauts left the earth as instrumental thinkers, having no intention of photographing the earth from space in their programme, and returned as seers bearing the photos that represented the only truly meaningful product of their whole exercise. The philosopher Mary Midgley, upon seeing these photographs, remarked that they 'have deeply changed our response to the planet.' They 'show this earth as having a distinctive honour of its own among the heavenly bodies in being visibly alive. It has a shimmering, multi-coloured surface quite different from the moon and the other planets. ... It is a planet of which we need neither be afraid nor ashamed, and we ought now to find it easier to understand it.'<sup>5</sup>

Kierkegaard suggested that the only way to escape from isolated non-communication was to see thinking as the thing that each individual does

subjectively rather than as an unanchored process conducted by that vague concept humanity in general. He saw our attachment to systematic theoretical thinking as our erecting a 'high-vaulted palace' of intellectual achievement while 'living in a dog-kennel' alongside.<sup>6</sup> This is not to say that we need to try ever harder to move into the palace, but to see we live a double life: what we actually experience and what we think we experience as abstract humans. Thinking about how we subjectively think makes us realise that dialogues and not monologues are taking place, dialogues often with forgotten parts of our own minds, with the voices of others, and with our surroundings, all of which come and go without much exercise of our wills being involved. For a sudden moment in the Maine Woods, Thoreau heard different voices and realised that he was being possessed by the earth. He's not seeing it, he's being shown it, and what appears – its solidity and actuality – makes him realise how insubstantial he himself is. The thinking leap is to make contact with where we are, a leap that Merton made.

### Moving into life in nature

Merton provides us with a route map, in his journal entries, letters and essays, to help us further – but his map bears little resemblance to what we might expect to find from our normal cartographic concepts. These latter are based on our common-sense approach to a map as a horizontal two-dimensional reduction of what we already want to know, fitted out with standard, easily understood symbols. Merton's map, on the contrary, is not a dead representation but one that is still alive and still relates to the reality it depicts. Like so much of his output, it is best seen as in the process of being made and never to be finished. Instead of making the graphic representation superior to what is represented, by virtue of being an interpretation of it, his map involves us as well. Only if we align ourselves to the spirit of the map can we see what is shown.

The primary feature of it, with regard to the topic of us and nature, is his removal from the monastery to the hermitage. This move deserves deeper analysis than is usually given, one that reverses the familiar view of a move from commitment to detachment or from the complexity of Culture to the simplicity of Nature. Can we allow the rule of Benedict that underpinned Merton's monastic life to lose some of its grandeur when put beside the grandeur of the natural world? Benedict's Rule addresses, and in many ways solves, the modern human problem of living in community, but it is, nevertheless, embedded in the idea of maintaining

an idealised life within a threatening environment – the gatekeeper being one of the most important monastic figures. Nothing like that applies to the dense interconnections of the forest setting of Merton's hermitage. There are no figures of authority in the woods. Nothing there is holding a line or protecting an accomplishment. Every moment requires attention to lived experience within a state of change, adaptation and adjustment that accepts being in time. Human cultural achievements – and the rule of Benedict is high on the list of the worthiest – often seek permanence. Civilizations aspire to protecting themselves from this transient outside. Is this what Thomas Berry described as the 'inner rage against the conditions of human existence', that means we hold on to our culture as against its surroundings even though our survival itself is at stake?<sup>7</sup>

One of the things we have done is to downplay the power of the natural world. We are now faced with it in good earnest. Thoreau's evocation of the chthonic powers that created the ground he stood on, 'chaos and old night', have been domesticated and familiarised by modernity. It remains an area for children's stories and for their unwelcome return in adult nightmares, but the idea of universal danger to all of us, with no possible remission, from rising temperatures, seas, floods, loss of biodiversity, loss of food sources and water, makes the return of a proper respect for real power essential. This power lies far beyond simple actions within a field of explicable cause and effect. Instead it belongs outside linear time and works not from the exterior of beings and things but from within them.

### Falling in love

Merton's reconciliation with his isolated self on his move to the hermitage need not be seen as a purely spiritual matter. We don't renounce desire when we renounce the idea of being separate. On the contrary, it can be a renewed acquaintance with another opportunity for contact with nature: the dynamic of living that can be described as falling in love. On Merton's map the exceptional importance of this soon after he made that move stands out. M, the student nurse with whom he fell in love in the spring of 1966, is not the issue here. Rather, what is important is the unexpected access to unexpected feelings. Perhaps it is possible to read his map as telling us that the state of falling in love is essential to accessing contact with nature, and that nature is the actuality of being in love? In *Church of the Wild*, Victoria Loortz writes about falling in love with the world. She focuses on what she calls the 'Courtship of the

Particular', where the key is to abandon the general and focus instead on the particular, repeating Kierkegaard's favouring of the subjective over the objective.<sup>8</sup> The subjective part is that falling in love with a place and with the objects in that place is a recurrent act, and one that opens up a succession of ever newer places that one wants to protect and nurture. The objective part – the view of two discrete items – has proved to be chimerical in the recognition of the doubt about the reality of separate identities that love evokes.

Returning to the idea above of the fear present in our existence in nature, we might see love as benevolence in the face of that fear. Once again, as with Thoreau's encounter with the strangeness of reality, the encounter with love involves an encounter with the strangeness of other people and the nature of relationship. The strangeness and the importance of love becomes clearer in a theological context. Rowan Williams explores falling in love in its theological depth in his book *Lost Icons*. His argument is that the mutual fascination between two lovers in modernity involves a threat that manifests itself in a sense of loss and instability – a loss of normal benchmarks of the self, and the instability of unaccustomed intimacy. At the same time as these horizons contract, others expand bringing quite new and unexpected perspectives. The realisation of being contained in someone else's mind can, writes Williams, be experienced as dangerous and claustrophobic unless you make the leap to 'realising you are both being seen and participating in more than the other.'<sup>9</sup> In other words, falling in love can break up the self-sufficiency of the two egos by widening horizons to include a world of love that is greater than desire, and that opens up an existence beyond personal rivalry. This world, Williams argues, reveals the gratuitous character of our existence and, beyond that, its own gratuitous character. In the context of falling in love with the world, as Loortz discusses, this would then be the presence of God.

### Nature's thought

The idea of falling in love as something both outside normal decision making and involving a reciprocal contact, connects here with another key to nature, that of accepting that thinking in a wide sense occurs within what is normally classified as inanimate things. On Merton's map the quest for access to nature came from outside himself and was marked by the active pull of nature – the call of the wild in romantic terms – rather than any decisive action by him. Thoreau similarly was called by



the solid earth, the actual world. This is phenomenological thought where, in lived experience, the distance between observer and observed disappears. When we observe something we come into the field of influence of the observed thing. It is not then a case of subject observing object but subject responding to something that is also a subject.

Merton presses against thinking as establishing fixed things from the fixed position of the individual person. Writing in a letter to John Wu, he says that this exposes the 'big question, which is the question of the person as void and not as individual or empirical ego', and goes on to discuss the 'void which is I, covered over by an apparent I. And when the apparent I is seen to be void it no longer needs to be rejected, for it is I. How wonderful to be alive in such a world of craziness and simplicity.'<sup>10</sup> This theme which reoccurs with him looks like a deliberate choice of reversing things rather than playing with paradox. Exchange hanging on, he says, for letting go. Escape from the spider's web of civilization where we suffer from the disease of absolutes with every answer right, every problem solved now. We do not find a way ahead, we get somewhere by totally unexpected ways, often retrogressively. This is a search for the truth that Kierkegaard described as 'an objective uncertainty' that is only given meaning and life by 'the most passionate inwardness'.<sup>11</sup> What is involved is accepting and validating this objective uncertainty, something that Merton explored and is embedded in his very style.

Rowan Williams, in *The Edge of Words*, has called for

a metaphysics that thinks of matter itself as invariably and necessarily communicative – not as a sheer passivity moulded by our minds into intelligible structure. Matter itself becomes a specific 'situation' of intelligible form, no more and no less; and the mythology of a 'naturally' meaningless or random materiality, a sort of residue of impenetrable physical stuff, becomes impossible to sustain.<sup>12</sup>

If we can simply see nature without thinking what can be made of it, or using our intellects only to limit and comprehend it, then we realise, like Aquinas, that there is, in reality, no distance between nature and us but only the distance between God and all that is dependent on God. The moral philosopher Susan Parsons suggests that nature is a total entity, and that between humans and nature is a place of encounter where what can be thought is no longer a limit but is opened from without by the graciousness of God.<sup>13</sup>

Around the same time Merton was writing, the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss was exploring 'savage thought' as an imaginative achievement in its own right, in no way inferior to scientific thought.<sup>14</sup> He showed that this thought flourished within a consciousness that brought into participation individual human minds that understood each other without needing to go through the isolating problematics of existential thinking as in the manner of Kierkegaard. What distinguishes this thought from that of the west today, and must surely be an aspect of its superiority in terms of forming the bedrock of peaceable and flourishing existences, must be the inclusion, at the heart of the thought, of other animals, of other places and also, in our terms, of the divine, all as equally sentient beings. There is a sense in which Aquinas echoes this animism although he could not bring it across the theological barriers he inherited into his intellectual realm.

### Articulating unimagined possibilities

Merton's legacy is his contemporary style of formulating new ways of framing religious experience. He expanded the context of religion into new areas not just his well-known opening to the east, but also his drive to rescue the spirituality of the indigenous world from its supercilious neo-colonial backwater, and his determination to value experience as highly as established concepts.<sup>15</sup> This style flourished within an openness to the natural world. Thoreau's awe-struck language on Mount Katahdin similarly presses at the boundary of thought. As with Merton it is hard to separate his insights from the nature of a religious revelation. Both have in common the sense of a total uprooting of their vision of the outer world and at the same time their inner world – the outer world suddenly demanding reverence alters the inner world.

Comparing a response to the mysterious presence of God with the mysterious presence of the material world evokes widespread anxiety in Christians, as is exposed in our hair-splitting definitions of pantheism and panentheism, or the emphasis on our exceptionalist position as humans bearing the image of God. In his book *Roland in Moonlight*, David Bentley Hart offers the possibility of escape from these Christian contradictions. He allows his argumentative and vocal dog Roland to express tabooed opinions that, once expressed, have the ring of truth in comparison with our careful modulations of belief. Our modern materialism which has been mediated by human culture and reproduced in us by generations of educators, is, Roland tells us, not normal but a 'fanatical metaphysics'. All

nature, he says, has a living coinherence mirroring the divine spirit. The only way out for humans is to break the false idea of 'these shriveled positivisms and prejudices camouflaged as true belief, and learning to see the whole of reality as a congress of radiant symbols of spiritual reality'. He goes on to tell us to expand our beliefs and believe 'all of it – all real religious insights – whether it's Christianity or Hinduism or Australian Aboriginal spirituality or Sioux or Yoruba visionary wisdom'.<sup>16</sup>

Expanding the context of Christian theology into seriously embracing natural theology, rather than skirting anxiously round it, allows a whole area of communication and naming to spring into life. We know that Merton's style of paradox and contradiction is liberating and often leaves consecutive logical thought far behind. When a respected theologian like Hart uses his dog as a prophet, we are in the world that Merton spoke from where voices can be valued for what they say not from whence they come. Reflecting on the value of embracing – for example – Aboriginal spirituality from Roland's list, will mean entering into a world of signs and symbols rather than definitive statements. This contact with animate surroundings rather than inanimate ones is what Merton got from 'walking out of a door into the fresh air'. Like him we can become astonished at where we live and, in so doing, bridge the theological gap that Christianity has allowed to open between nature and God.

## Notes

1. Thomas Merton, from a talk to the novices, 'Love for God and Mutual Charity', transcribed and edited by Bernadette Dieker, in *Merton & Hesychasm – The Prayer of the heart* (Kentucky: Fons Vitae, 2003), p. 454. The full quote: 'The presence of God is like walking out of a door into the fresh air. You don't concentrate on the air, you breathe it. And you don't concentrate on the sunlight, you just enjoy it. It's all around you.'
2. Henry David Thoreau, *The Maine Woods* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1988), pp. 94, 95.
3. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass. & London: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 285.
4. Thomas Berry, *The Dream, of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Book Club, 1988), p. xiv.
5. Mary Midgley, *The Myths we Live By* (London & NY: Routledge, 2004), p. 134.
6. Søren Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 176–7.
7. *The Dream of Earth*, note 4, p. 215
8. Victoria Loortz, *Church of the Wild* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2021), p. 127.

9. Rowan Williams, *Lost Icons, Reflections on Cultural Bereavement* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), pp. 154–62.
10. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love* (London: Collins, 1985), letter to John Wu, 31 January, 1965, p. 627.
11. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 182.
12. Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. xi.
13. Susan F Parsons, 'Concerning natural law: the turn in American Aquinas scholarship', in *Contemplating Aquinas, On the Varieties of Interpretation*, ed Fergus Kerr (London: SCM Press, 2003), p. 180.
14. Claude Levi Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Letchworth: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), p. 13.
15. Thomas Merton, *Ishi Means Man, Essays on Native Americans* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2015).
16. David Bentley Hart, *Roland in Moonlight*, (New York: Angelico Press, 2021), pp. 44, 329.

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