

Thomas Merton and Baptist Spirituality

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Introduction

Much has been written about Thomas Merton's broadening ecumenical and inter-faith connections, with great interest having been shown, for example, in his exploration of Buddhism. Much less has been written about his influence among Baptists, a denomination that traces its roots back to radical ideas in the seventeenth century.¹ This article looks at developments that took place from the 1960s onwards through which Baptists in the USA and in the UK came to appreciate and draw from Merton and his work, especially in the area of spirituality. Much of the spirituality that has marked Baptist life since the eighteenth century can be located in the evangelical tradition.² However, this study shows that the contemplative stream, which shaped Merton, has been a source of renewal for many Baptists of the past and increasingly so in more recent years. For Baptists, a seminal figure in this process has been E. Glenn Hinson, who argued that the Baptist movement had contemplative roots which could, with great benefit, be recovered.

Merton and Glenn Hinson

In 1960, Glenn Hinson (1931-), who in that year had begun teaching church history at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky, arranged to take his initial class of theological students, numbering about seventy-five, to the nearby Abbey of Gethsemani. This was not to meet Thomas Merton, 'about whom', as he said, 'I knew next to nothing': he had seen notices about *The Seven Storey Mountain* but had not read it. Rather, he took the students to 'expose them to the Middle Ages', as found in a monastery. He considered that students would learn more from this experience than from lectures. Most of them had never met a Roman Catholic. As it turned out, Thomas Merton was their designated host and Hinson described how he 'enthralled us with his

sense of humour and engaging manner'. After his tour and talk, Merton invited questions, and a student asked a question Hinson did not welcome: 'What is a smart fellow like you doing throwing his life away in a place like this?' Hinson waited for Merton to 'eat that guy alive', but instead Merton grinned a little and replied, 'I am here because I believe in prayer. That is my vocation.' Hinson realised he 'had never met anyone who believed in prayer enough to think of it as a vocation'. Merton's answer, according to Hinson, 'kept whirling around in my head'.³

The conclusion Hinson came to was that Merton's way offered something important for Baptists, not least for ministers. The cultivation of a more contemplative spirituality was a new departure for many Baptists: indeed, teaching on prayer had been rare in Baptist seminary training. This was a serendipitous time, as Merton's ecumenical contacts were increasing and, in his journal entry of 1 May 1961, he referred to those he was meeting: the 'sweet earnestness' of Methodist students, the 'polish and sophistication' of Episcopalians, and the 'sometimes rather taut fervor' of Baptists – a group he defended when they were the butt of jokes.⁴ Soon Hinson arranged opportunities for Merton to speak not only to Southern Seminary students but also to Faculty members.⁵ On 21 June 1961, Merton wrote of the Baptist scholars he had met through this, such as Hinson, Dale Moody, who was to complete a DPhil at the University of Oxford in 1965, and Leo Garrett. They had become his 'good friends'.⁶ It was Moody who introduced Donald Allchin to Merton.⁷ With specific reference to Hinson and the Baptists, Merton recognised that this was contact with those who were 'in Christ'. It was not 'official dialogue', but a 'blessing'. On 30 October 1961, he wrote that 'Glenn Hinson brought his Church History students out from the Baptist seminary and I spoke to them briefly after dinner about peace. We had a good conversation, and felt we understood each other completely. At the end we all said the Our Father together.'⁸

In 1960, the monks at Gethsemani built a little house where Merton could converse with small groups of ecumenical visitors. By 1965, he was granted permission to live there and it became his hermitage. Hinson was among those who soon came to be regular visitors to the small house and Merton wrote of him as one who 'knows and loves the Fathers of the Church'. Merton was less impressed by Dale Moody's advocacy of the new charismatic wave of spirituality.⁹ Looking back in the 1990s, Hinson recalled that Merton sent him copies of manuals he used for training novices in Gethsemani, which drew from sources in the contemplative tradition, and he followed this up with a gift of a copy of his *Spiritual*

Direction and Meditation.¹⁰ Although Hinson dutifully read this material, initially much of it, he recounted, 'rolled off me like water off a duck's back'. Change was to come: having mistakenly thought that Merton's materials were not relevant for training Baptist ministers, in 1998 Hinson was able to review what had happened over previous decades. In order to introduce students to spirituality, Hinson had incorporated insights from what Merton passed to him. He had encouraged many to read *Spiritual Direction and Meditation* in a course he taught entitled 'Ministers as Spiritual Guides'. Merton, he noted in 1998, 'has guided me and hundreds of ministers I have taught toward the contemplative mainstream'.¹¹ A year later, in *Spiritual Preparation for Christian Leadership*, he wrote that Merton 'awakened me to the necessity of a life of prayer in a world of action'.¹²

Exploring traditions

The impact of Merton did not mean that Hinson abandoned his Baptist tradition, although that could have happened. Instead, as he explored the area of spirituality more deeply, he saw that a 'great gift' which Merton was giving to broader communities of faith was 'his determined effort to convince people caught up in active pursuits that they need contemplation, that contemplation could do much to enrich their lives and indeed might lead to transformation of the world'.¹³ Hinson quoted from Merton's *No Man Is an Island*: 'Action is charity looking outward to other men [and women], and contemplation is charity drawn inward to its own divine source. Action is the stream, and contemplation is the spring.' Hinson was himself drawn to the way this process, as seen by Merton, was one in which the Holy Spirit was active: it was not a human achievement. He continued to quote Merton: 'When action and contemplation dwell together, filling our whole life because we are moved in all things by the Spirit of God, then we are spiritually mature.'¹⁴ Hinson was later to write about the Spirit in *Fire in my Bones*.¹⁵

As time went on, Hinson began to explain more fully how 'a Baptist and a Catholic, especially a monk in the Trappist order', two people who might seem 'so unlike one another', actually had much in common. In an article "'Thomas Merton, My Brother": The Impact of Thomas Merton on My Life and Thought', published in *The Merton Annual*, Hinson admitted that his thinking at this point might provoke in readers 'expressions of puzzlement and perhaps laughter'. Hinson's argument was that there was significant 'congruity' between the Catholic and Baptist traditions, with both being contemplative. In Merton's case, Hinson continued, the

tradition he inherited went back through the Order of Reformed Cistercians, to Cîteaux, the birthplace of the Cistercian Order, and 'to Monte Cassino and from there to the desert fathers and mothers'. Hinson saw the Baptist movement, going back to the seventeenth century, to 'Puritans who deliberately returned to the medieval contemplative tradition', as they attempted to effect a 'further reformation' in which 'heart religion' was crucial.¹⁶ After Merton's untimely death in 1968, Hinson read everything written by Merton with the intention, as he told a colleague, Loyd Allen, of making 'key ideas of Thomas Merton available to a Protestant audience'.¹⁷ Out of this came Hinson's book *A Serious Call to a Contemplative Life-Style* (1974).¹⁸ The title drew from the Protestant classic by William Law.¹⁹

In the 1970s, Hinson wrote a range of books, largely in the area of church history, and many articles, including several on Merton.²⁰ Two further essays, in *Cistercian Studies*, in the 1980s, pursued the theme of the indebtedness of the Baptist tradition to contemplative spirituality. Hinson argued that John Bunyan's perceptions about prayer 'reflect an amazing likeness to those of the desert fathers and mothers'; similarities were to be seen in emphases on 'sincerity, spontaneity and the role of the Holy Spirit in prayer', and in how they 'looked with suspicion on forms'. Hinson proposed that each was 'charismatic' in a broad sense. He also examined Baptist hymnals, and found evidence of 'surprising similarities' between Baptist spirituality as expressed in its hymnody and aspects of the medieval - especially the English - contemplative tradition. Hinson argued that there was a shared concern for experiential faith, for a piety that was Jesus-centred - 'which is remarkable', he commented, 'when you remember that the Protestant reformers insisted on addressing the Father in prayer'. His conclusion in both essays was that Baptists and the contemplative tradition both 'exult in the name of Jesus', 'emphasize grace', and 'know the world is not home and that the way of the cross leads home'. Hinson realised that for some his proposal might be 'shocking', but his conviction was that he and Merton, though shaped by different pathways, were 'cousins', certainly once or twice removed, 'but not nearly as distant as many think'.²¹ The argument did not dwell on the contrasting elements in the two traditions, but was important in highlighting the 'surprising' nature of the similarities.

Ongoing Baptist indebtedness to Merton and Hinson

Thomas Merton's contact with Baptists, especially with Hinson, has had a lasting effect in the area of spiritual formation among Baptists in North

America and in Britain. Writing in 2006, Loyd Allen, in his role teaching church history and spiritual formation at the James and Carolyn McAfee School of Theology, Mercer University, Georgia, USA, recalled that in his own seminary education spiritual formation had been covered in two sentences by his seminary's President at student orientation: the students were told that spiritual development was absolutely vital and that the hope was for its provision through local churches. By contrast, Allen wrote, Hinson integrated spirituality into his church history teaching, offering what was from its inception a very popular class entitled 'Classics of Christian Devotion'. Allen drew from Merton's widely-read and much-republished book, *Seeds of Contemplation* to observe that, for three decades, 'Hinson planted the seeds of contemplation in the spiritual formation of Baptist ministers in training' at Southern Seminary - where Allen joined him as a colleague. Hinson's position at that Seminary became untenable, however, when it moved to a fundamentalist stance, and in 1991 he became Professor of Worship and Spirituality in the newly-formed Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, Virginia.²²

Another Baptist who as a student of Hinson's was introduced to the writings of Merton was Raymond Bailey, from Texas. At the time of his introduction, he was an MDiv student, and he went on to study under Hinson for a PhD. His subject was 'Thomas Merton on Mysticism', and he later turned his thesis into a book. Bailey explored in particular Merton's conviction that the presence of God was to be found in all creation.²³ Much of the research work by Bailey was undertaken while he was the first Director of the Thomas Merton Studies Centre at Bellarmine College, Louisville, Kentucky, where Merton's papers had been housed. Bailey, who had interests in drama, theology and preaching, was able to develop these at Bellarmine and then through founding a National Center for Christian Preaching. A further area that attracted Bailey's attention was life in Christian community. One expression of this, which had baptistic connections, was the Anabaptist-inspired Bruderhof community, founded in 1920 in Germany by Eberhard Arnold. In 1995, as Bailey noted, the Bruderhof reproduced a crucial essay by Arnold, 'Why we live in Community', appending to the original essay of 1925 two interpretative addresses by Thomas Merton and an introduction by Basil Pennington, like Merton a Trappist monk.²⁴

For Hinson, visits to Britain, which opened up British Baptist and wider international connections, were increasingly significant. In 1966-1967, he had a sabbatical at the University of Oxford, to study Patristics

and prepare for embarking on a DPhil, and in this period he wrote *Seekers after Mature Faith*, a guide to devotional classics.²⁵ He was also introduced during that visit to the Orthodox theologian, Kallistos Ware, and the historian, Henry Chadwick, Regius Professor of Divinity in Oxford. A more testing event in Oxford came in 1971, when he was there with his wife Martha and their two children. This was Hinson's DPhil viva. Barrie White, Principal of the Baptist Regent's Park College, Oxford, and his wife Margaret, were supportive friends, but Hinson was devastated when he was subsequently asked by his examiners, Maurice Wiles of Oxford and Stephen Sykes of Cambridge, to revise his thesis. He finally re-submitted in 1974 and his work was readily accepted. He had learned that he needed to focus his energies and in his spiritual and academic work to make sure that in his 'busyness' he did not miss – here he quoted from the eighteenth-century French Jesuit, Jean Pierre de Caussade – 'the sacrament of the present moment'.²⁶

When Hinson had a further period in Oxford in 1991, he was by that time more widely known among a range of British Baptists for his contribution, especially through his extensive writings, to the study and practice of spirituality. Paul Fiddes, who was by then Principal of Regent's Park College and was to become a Professor of Theology in the University of Oxford, arranged for Hinson to give lectures to Baptist ministers and in the University. This was followed by lectures Hinson gave in Bristol. Karen Smith, who in 1979 was in Hinson's classes on 'Classics of Christian Devotion' and 'Prayer in Christian History', and was later a colleague of Hinson's, was now one of the lecturers at South Wales Baptist College, and she suggested Hinson for guest lectures in Cardiff. As a result of this, he gave, for the second time, the Edwin Stephen Griffith lectures to a Cardiff University audience in February 1992. He featured in these lectures Thomas Merton and also Douglas Steere, a contemplative Quaker whose influence on Hinson had – like that of Merton – been profound.²⁷

Contact with Merton had broadened Hinson's outlook and also strengthened his ecumenical ties, and this in turn affected other Baptists. In a book he edited in 1993, *Spirituality in Ecumenical Perspective*, Hinson wrote an introductory chapter about Merton and Steere, and features of ecumenical spirituality. Hinson offered several features that he saw in ecumenical spirituality, noting how these characteristics were seen in both Merton and Steere: mutual appreciation – appreciation of one's own faith tradition and that of others; cosmic Christology or pneumatology; and a person-centred approach to Christian unity.²⁸ Hinson was a member of the Ecumenical Institute of Spirituality and regularly attended

ecumenical meetings. His friendship and conversations with Merton had shaped his desire to meet with other Christians and to develop a spirituality that was authentically ecumenical. In 2002, the E. Glenn Hinson Institute for Spiritual Formation was established and Lloyd Allen and Karen Smith gave the first set of Hinson lectures. When a *Festschrift* for Hinson was produced in 2018, it was edited by Allen.²⁹ Hinson's influence among Baptists, and thus the influence of Merton, continued to grow.

Conclusion

This article has looked at Thomas Merton and Baptist spirituality primarily as Merton's thinking and writing were mediated through Glenn Hinson. Others had a part to play in this process, but Hinson's role was paramount. Through his friendship with Merton, and his later study of Merton's work, Hinson became committed to the implementation of contemplation in action and to discovering resources for this within his own tradition as a Baptist as well as more widely. For my part, when I began in 1992 as a tutor at Spurgeon's College, London, teaching church history and spirituality, I was not aware of Hinson. My goal was to offer to students in spirituality through classes, by retreats, and through spiritual direction, experiential engagement with a range of spiritual traditions. It was not until 1994, however, that a book was produced which I could point to as a study of Baptist spirituality. This was *Ties that Bind: Life Together in the Baptist Vision*. Unsurprisingly, the fourteen authors dealt with 'the conversionist tie' (the first part) and 'the corporate tie' (the third part), in Baptist experience, but in the centre was 'the contemplative tie', which opened with a chapter by Hinson on John Bunyan and 'the contemplative roots of Baptist spirituality'. Hinson concluded his study by affirming the 'wonderful prospects' for recovery of the contemplative dimension, while he looked, too, for 'more and bigger steps' in the 'recovery of our common roots'.³⁰

Notes

1. For the history of Baptists see David W. Bebbington, *Baptists through the Centuries: A History of a Global People* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2010).
2. See Ian Randall, *What a Friend we have in Jesus: The Evangelical Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2005).
3. E. Glenn Hinson, *A Miracle of Grace: An Autobiography* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2012), pp. 124-125.
4. Thomas Merton, *Turning toward the World: The Pivotal Years, Journals*, Vol.

- 4: 1960-1963, ed., Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), p. 114.
5. Hinson, *Miracle of Grace*, p. 125.
6. Merton, *Turning toward the World*, pp. 129-130.
7. A.M. Allchin, 'Merton at Ninety', *The Merton Journal*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (2005), pp.2-4. Donald Allchin subsequently became President of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland.
8. Merton, *Turning toward the World*, p. 175.
9. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage*, Journals, Vol. 5: 1963-1965, ed., Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997), entry for 30 November 1963, p. 40.
10. Thomas Merton, *Spiritual Direction and Meditation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1960).
11. E. Glenn Hinson, 'Thomas Merton, My Brother: The Impact of Thomas Merton on My Life and Thought', *The Merton Annual*, Vol. 11 (1998), p. 96 (88-96).
12. E. Glenn Hinson, Preface, *Spiritual Preparation for Christian Leadership* (Nashville, Upper Room Books, 1999).
13. 'Glen Hinson Remembers Thomas Merton', *Baptists Today*, July 2015, p. 5.
14. Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1978), pp. 70-71.
15. E. Glenn Hinson, *Fire in my Bones: Transcendence and the Holy Spirit in African American Gospel* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).
16. E. Glenn Hinson, "'Thomas Merton, my Brother": The Impact of Thomas Merton on My Life and Thought', *The Merton Annual*, Vol. 11 (1998), p. 91 (88-96).
17. Wm. Loyd Allen, 'Thomas Merton and E. Glenn Hinson: The Aggiornamento of Spiritual Formation Among Progressive Baptists', *The Merton Seasonal*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Summer 2006), pp. 25 (23-29); cf. Wm. Loyd Allen. "Glenn Hinson: 'Extraordinary "Ordinary Saint"', *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Spring 2004), pp. 13-20.
18. E. Glenn Hinson, *A Serious Call to a Contemplative Life-Style* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974).
19. William Law, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* (1729).
20. See, for example, 'Merton's Many Faces', *Religion in Life*, Vol. 42 (Summer 1973), pp. 153-67; 'The Catholicizing of Contemplation: Thomas Merton's Place in the Church's Prayer Life', *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, Vol. 1 (Spring 1974), pp. 66-84; and in *Cistercian Studies*, Vol. 10 (1975), pp.173-89; 'Expansive Catholicism: Ecumenical Perceptions of Thomas Merton', *Religion in Life*, Vol. 48 (Spring 1979), pp. 63-76.
21. E. Glenn Hinson, 'Prayer in John Bunyan and the Early Monastic Tradition', *Cistercian Studies*, Vol. 18 (1983), pp. 217-230; 'Southern Baptist and Medieval Spirituality: Surprising Similarities', *Cistercian Studies*, Vol. 20

- (1985), pp. 224-36.
22. Allen, 'Thomas Merton and E. Glenn Hinson', pp. 26-27.
23. Raymond Bailey, *Thomas Merton on Mysticism* (New York: Image Books; Doubleday, 1987).
24. Eberhard Arnold, *Why we live in Community* (Farmington, PA: Plough Publishing Company, 1995). Reviewed by Raymond Bailey, *Review and Expositor*, Vol. 93 (Summer 1996), pp. 439-440.
25. E. Glenn Hinson, *Seekers after Mature Faith: A Historical Introduction to the Classics of Christian Devotion* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1968).
26. Hinson, *Miracle of Grace*, pp. 143-156.
27. See the published version, E. Glenn Hinson, 'Ecumenical Spirituality', *Ecumenical Trends*, Vol. 20 (July/August 1991), pp. 97-104. For Steere, see E. Glenn Hinson, *Love at the Heart of Things: A Biography of Douglas V. Steere* (Wallingford, Penn.: Pendle Hill Pubns., 1998).
28. E. Glenn Hinson, ed., *Spirituality in Ecumenical Perspective* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), pp. 1-14.
29. Karen Smith's lectures were published as *Christian Spirituality* (London: SCM, 2007). Wm. Loyd Allen, 'A Festschrift in Honor of E. Glenn Hinson', *Baptist History and Heritage*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (Spring 2018).
30. E. Glenn Hinson, 'The Contemplative Roots of Baptist Spirituality', in Gary Furr and Curtis W. Freeman, eds., *Ties that Bind: Life Together in the Baptist Vision* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1994), pp. 69-82.

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