

With Merton in California

Andy Lord

There were clear skies as we flew into California with a few cotton wool clouds casting shadows across the dry landscape. Mile after mile of variegated brown plains and hills across which meandered dark blue rivers. We passed Los Vegas, a colourful island in the desert, before crossing the mountains that separate Los Angeles from the ocean. Neatly ordered and spreading shoots of habitation have filled the land and we touched down to discover the life-filled if compressed mega-city from sea level. I had been reading Thomas Merton's last journals and the recently published *Merton in California* as we travelled from London on a sabbatical journey.¹ It seemed appropriate that the flat we rented had an old redwood tree at its entrance, echoing Merton's flight into California back in 1968:

It was a quiet flying to Eureka yesterday afternoon in a half empty plane... The redwood lands appear. Even from the air you can see that the trees are huge. And from the air too, you can see where the hillsides have been slashed into, ravaged, sacked, stripped, eroded with no hope of regrowth of these marvellous trees.²

Fifty years after Merton I was catching up with the beauty and fragility of creation, pondering the growing environmental crisis that continues to gather pace. Alongside others I was seeking contemplative wisdom to guide and challenge us, hoping that a landscape and people very different to the UK where I live would stimulate fresh thinking and spiritual practices.³ Here I want to explore some reflections from my reading of Merton, particularly from his California travels and conferences which may be less well known. I want to suggest that Merton encourages us to develop an ecological imagination that leads to spiritual practices, recognising that this requires a renewal by the Holy Spirit that enables more active steps to protect and nourish the created environment.

Ecological Imagination

The influence of Romanticism on Merton's early thinking has been recognised, particularly in the way the movement brought together imagination and the interconnected unity of all things.⁴ This seemed to be shaping him still as he resonated with Aldo Leopold's idea of an ecological conscience more than thirty years later in his February 1968 review of Roderick Nash's book *Wilderness and the American Mind*.⁵ Here Merton speaks of an imagination filled with a sense of being a dependent part of the whole biotic community. As always, this seems suffused with a sense of mysticism, a uniting with God in and through all creation. Contemplation of the trees and wildlife round his hermitage fills Merton's journals and in California he intuitively connects this with the great redwoods he found around the Redwoods Monastery he visited and where he led two conferences.⁶ In May 1968 he was writing:

Driving down through the redwoods was indescribably beautiful along Eel River. There is one long stretch where the big trees have been protected and saved – like a completely primeval forest. Everything from the big ferns at the base of the trees, the dense undergrowth, the long enormous shafts towering endlessly in shadow penetrated here and there by light. A most moving place – like a cathedral.⁷

An imaginative connection with particular places that also bring a connection with God in worship and wisdom are at the heart of Merton's contemplative approach to the environment at a time of crisis. Merton had been awakened to this crisis in 1963 through reading Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* which sparked an exchange of letters with her.⁸ The first Redwoods conference focuses on the development of a 'religious consciousness' in contrast with the 'modern consciousness' of the time. Merton explores a range of religious insights, representing his wide interest in Eastern religion. Despite the largely human focus, Merton does recognise:

the awareness of a cosmic community of creatures; that we are members of a larger than human community on earth. We're in it with all the animals, and we're in it with all the plants, and we're in it with the elements, and the water, and the earth... The ecological conscience is something that I think is very relevant for us, for our kind of life: for contemplatives, for monks and nuns. We should be very much aware of being a member of a community of living beings, which we respect.⁹

He sees this as a challenge to the kind of modern consciousness that equates the wilderness with evil and so justifies the cutting down of redwood trees.¹⁰

I am using the term ecological imagination to cover this sense of consciousness, alongside an understanding of God in all and the ethical conscience that stirs action. The challenge to stir our imaginations came to me through the efforts to recover the storied history of Native Americans in California and Arizona, particularly in regard to their care for the environment. The Wupatki National Monument celebrates the Pueblo communities that lived there in the 1100's to create a busy centre for trade and culture in what appears now as a desolate desert landscape. The Native American's we met traced their stories back to such communities and breathed life into the landscape we had experienced. Merton touches on such stories, although without personal experience and there remains much to be done in stimulating our ecological imaginations through the experience of landscape and people alongside reflection, theology and prayer.¹¹

Spiritual Practices

How are we to develop such an ecological imagination? There are a wealth of possible spiritual practices that might aid us, but here I want to note those evident from Merton's time in California. He starts the second Redwoods conference with the need to spend quality time in places that stir the imagination and prayer:

To be simply out there with this vast expanse of land, with nothing there except for pasture and the sea. Even the sheep are gone now, because the man moved out of his sheep ranch. And these waves coming in, and sea lions playing in the sea, and hundreds of birds flying back and forth — and nothing else. Just sea, sky, waves, birds, sea lions. This is where you get your answers... Everything connects.¹²

This nurtures the experience of a consciousness different to that found in the rush of modern life:

This is so necessary to have something like this in redwood trees as a witness to the beauty of God's creation. It's always necessary to have somebody who has left the modern world and gone back to the primeval forest, which this definitely is, and simply to live there quietly, peacefully, and to develop a whole different consciousness.¹³

There are disciplines of solitude and awareness inherent in this that give time to see and value the connections between all things: 'What we have to cultivate is this awareness that we're not all alone in this... It's not "I" alone. It is God, and it is part of the whole universe. Everything that happens is part of this whole.'¹⁴ Such disciplines grow out of and cultivate a basic orientation to God, a life centred on the God who is open to all, a real self who is grounded in the God seen in the world and responsive to this active God.¹⁵ In his Californian journals Merton mixes observation and reflection: 'Attention. Concentration of the spirit in the heart. Vigilance. Concentration of the will in the heart. Sobriety. Concentration of the feeling in the heart.'¹⁶ Drawing on his contemplative experience he notes that, 'I am the utter poverty of God. I am His emptiness, littleness, nothingness, lostness. When this is understood, my life in His freedom, the self-emptying of God in me is the fullness of grace.'¹⁷

The sabbatical pilgrimage to California and Arizona gave me time to pause, observe, and see the connections that I often miss in the rush of ministry. It has suggested slower and more attentive forms of ministry and mission for the future. I am still learning here and needed sabbatical sights that forced me to be still. The experience that has stayed with me, helping me pause more, was the journey across the Colorado Plateau towards the Grand Canyon. Anticipation built as we drew close and the first sight silenced me, in humbled awe at the heart-stretching landscape before us. Layer upon layer of rocks seeming to stretch out to infinity and down two billion years of time. Towards dusk the light was constantly changing, highlighting different features in turn: the textures of small rocks, sheer cliffs, the Colorado river filled with blue and white, tree covered slopes, dark plains and walking tracks like lines scribbled leading to high rise towers. We stood the hour or so leading up to sunset simply being with the landscape, noting the highlights and connections, allowing God's living energy to seep through us. Maybe I needed such a canyon to pause my rush and more deeply connect me with what Merton was attentive to in everyday life.

Renewal

How are such practices to be embedded in the life of individuals and churches? The scale of the environmental crisis seems beyond easy solutions and simple practices. Our ability to change as individuals, corporations and nations appears more limited than the science demands of us. We need something deeper to happen in us, experiences that so flood us with light that we can but act out of a different vision for the future. What is needed is a deep renewal, a transformation in the

Presence of God that enables different ways of life.¹⁸ Such a renewal was underway through the charismatic movement during the 1960s and the second Redwoods conference took as its theme the Houses of Prayer discussed at an earlier Catholic charismatic conference. Merton had not attended this and appears to have limited understanding of Pentecostal and charismatic spirituality, but he responds to the renewed interest in prayer from his monastic perspective and in the light of Vatican II which shaped his understanding of renewal in the church.¹⁹ The key challenge in renewal is not to get preoccupied with changing the structures that limit us which might only lead to a lot of talk.²⁰ We need to focus on the heart in prayer, the renewal of which should lead to a renewal of theology and practice as well as structures.²¹

Such an approach to renewal naturally stresses the role of God the Holy Spirit in transforming hearts, communities and institutions. This has been the case in both charismatic and monastic renewal, although we have to look elsewhere for Merton's more detailed treatment of the Spirit in general as well as in particular relation to renewal.²² In the Redwoods conference he draws on Romans 8 in exploring the role of the Spirit as leading us into prayer.²³ As often for Merton, this work of the Spirit is linked with the resurrection of Christ: 'the resurrection is the center of all this. I am not under judgment, because the risen Christ lives in me by His Spirit, and the flesh is dead because of sin. And this I have to experience, too. You have to experience both.'²⁴ To address challenges to the church and environment requires the transforming work of the Spirit in our lives, the results of which may not be fit with the established norms.²⁵ At the same time the Spirit comes in the context of community rather than as a means of revolt against the community: change requires we come together in the Spirit of the resurrected Christ.²⁶

Merton pushes renewal further beyond this to include the hearing of voices beyond the church to hear what God might be saying through them:

the practical thing for active congregations is to expand this concept and to think of it not just as a House of Prayer, but as a 'house of renewal.' If you give it that title, then you can also incorporate into it something in the realm of dialogue with scientists, for example, and have people come in, giving insights from other fields, and also have a place where people are doing 'spiritual research' for your own community.²⁷

This may be in tension with the need for solitude mentioned above but is the natural fruit of such solitude. It is through the Spirit that we are

drawn to hear the stories and insights of others deeply involved in addressing the environmental crisis, voices the church has often neglected.²⁸

One evening in California we stood with a growing community of people to watch the sunset from the Joshua Tree National Park, overlooking the San Andreas Fault. The dry, rocky mountains slowly lost their colour, becoming hazy and filled with rays of the sun shining through one after another. There was a good feel as people marvelled at the colours, the outline of the Joshua trees and the great variety of plants. It was almost as if the Spirit was leading us together into a fresh appreciation of creation, run through with a Fault that could upend everything. Here was something well beyond our control whilst drawing us in to the dance of life that seeks fresh ways for the future of our planet.

Next Steps

I have been suggesting that as we journey with Merton through California so we see the need to develop an ecological imagination adequate to the environmental crisis we face. This requires us to commit to spiritual practices such as solitude and awareness. However, human effort alone and changes to structures are not sufficient to meet the depth of the challenge and so we need a deep renewal in the Holy Spirit. Such a renewal connects us more deeply with those taking steps to address the crisis from many different angles. Merton brings clarity to the heart of our motivations and the presence and action of God in the world. In this he draws on those involved in social and environmental action although from a monastic distance. The shared concerns for the loss of redwood trees and the rapid urban development in California appear a number of times through his journals and conferences, as well as a wider discussion about the disappearance of wilderness places.²⁹

This article has sought to stimulate our imaginations, spiritual practices and prayer but there is always more! Douglas Christie has extended Merton's monastic practices through a deeper engagement with nature writers, from his Californian base.³⁰ A greater appreciation of the landscape in conversation with a variety of historic Christian (and other) writers can be found in the writings of Beldan Lane.³¹ Merton's own thinking developed over time and the outline above can be deepened in conversation with the excellent work of Monica Weis.³³ My own travels to California and Arizona continue to nurture my imagination and stimulate a more challenging engagement with the crisis we share. May we join with the Spirit and others in the renewal of creation.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton in California: The Redwoods Conferences and Letters*, ed. David M. Odorisio (Notra Dame, IN: Liturgical Press, 2024). The book is reviewed in this issue of *The Merton Journal*. See page 36.
2. Thomas Merton, *Woods, Shore, Desert: A Notebook* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1982), p.11. Also contained in Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: 1967-68*, ed. Patrick Hart, *Journals of Thomas Merton* 7 (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 1999).
3. I am grateful to the Diocese of Oxford and a number of charities that supported this sabbatical journey to California and Arizona and for time as a visiting scholar at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena.
4. Ross Labrie, *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination* (Columbia, SC: University of Missouri Press, 2001).
5. Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967); Thomas Merton, 'The Wild Places', in *Thomas Merton: Selected Essays*, ed. Patrick O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013), p. 450.
6. <https://www.redwoodsabbey.org/>
7. Merton, *Woods*, p. 12.
8. Monica Weis, *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), pp. 9-20.
9. Merton, *Merton in California*, pp. 73-74.
10. Merton, p. 106.
11. Merton, pp. 215-24.
12. Merton, p. 262.
13. Merton, p. 97.
14. Merton, p. 84.
15. Merton, pp. 267, 66, 372.
16. Merton, *Woods*, p. 16.
17. Merton, p. 24. quoted from Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (London: Burns & Oates, 1962), p. 328. See also Robert Waldron, *Thomas Merton: Master of Attention* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2007).
18. My own writing on the theme of renewal includes Andy Lord, *Transforming Renewal: Charismatic Renewal Meets Thomas Merton* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015); Andy Lord, *River of the Spirit: The Spirituality of Simon Barrington-Ward*, 189 (Oxford: SLG Press, 2021).
19. There is also mention of the Spirit striking his Abbot to finally allow him to be a hermit! Merton, *Merton in California*, p. 277. See also John Eudes Bamberger, *Thomas Merton: Prophet of Renewal*, Monastic Wisdom Series 4 (Collegetown, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2005).
20. Merton, *Merton in California*, p. 299.
21. Merton, pp. 299, 313.

22. For example, in his teaching published in *Liturgy* volumes 30 and 31 in 1996, *Sanctity in the Epistles of St Paul*. See also the summary of Bamberger, *Thomas Merton*, pp. 119–21.
23. e.g. Merton, *Merton in California*, p. 276.
24. Merton, pp. 314–15.
25. Merton, p. 39.
26. Merton, pp. 38–39.
27. Merton, p. 297.
28. I explore this theme in relation to Pentecostalism in ‘Ecological Imagination After Pentecost’, in *Pentecostal Missiology and Environmental Degradation*, ed. Amos Yong and Eugene Baron (Langham Press, 2024).
29. Merton, *Merton in California*, p. 122.
30. Douglas Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).
31. For example. Belden C. Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality. 1988* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).
32. Weis, *Environmental vision*; Monica Weis, *Thomas Merton and the Celts: A New World Opening Up* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016).

Andy Lord is an Anglican priest in the Diocese of Oxford, UK. He is the author of *Transforming Renewal: Charismatic Renewal meets Thomas Merton* (Pickwick, 2015) as well as articles on aspects of Merton’s theology. He holds a PhD from the University of Birmingham, UK, in Pentecostal theology published as *Network Church: A Pentecostal Ecclesiology Shaped by Mission* (Brill, 2012).