

# Thomas Merton as a Catalyst for Friendship?

## A Conversation between Rowan Williams and Bonnie Thurston

*Friendship is not so much a matter of two people exploring  
friendship but of two people exploring other things as friends.*

Rowan Williams

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*SJ:* We're here to talk about Thomas Merton and the concept of him as a 'catalyst for friendship'. Then we'll let the conversation flow. So, I think probably a good first question is: how might Thomas Merton have been a catalyst for your own friendship with one another? If indeed he was ...

*BT:* . . or if indeed we are. Shall I start Rowan? Yes, I think that we met primarily through Merton meetings, although we have mutual friends that introduced us – Stevie and James Coots of blessed memory. And we're both Welsh or of Welsh extraction and have several things in common, scholars and poets for the sake of Christ's church. But I think we met at Merton meetings, and largely that's a community of people who have not only Merton, but Merton's view of life and of the world in common. So, it's easier to make friends. I think when we have these kinds of things in common and also because the Merton view of life and thoughts and solitude and *New Seeds of Contemplation* is hardly the mainstream one. So, when I find somebody who shares this view, it's hard to let go because there are very few of us.

*RW:* Absolutely. As a kind of reassurance, if you want to put it a bit unhelpfully, a sort of Freemasonry.

*BT:* Exactly. Yes, indeed.

*RW:* You can take for granted that there's a certain range of perspectives, a certain range of writers even, that you can share, that you know you share. That made me think quite a bit about friendship itself but also about Merton's role, and the idea of friendship as something which creates not simply a face-to-face relationship, but a field in which imaginations roam together. Classically you don't spend time just gazing at each other. In friendship you walk around in that field. Occasionally

you say, 'Look at this.' Occasionally you say, 'Did you notice that?'

BT: That really resonates with me. There's a sort of energy that is created when you have a more interior connection with someone. It's not the kind of friendship that you have to be reassured about all the time. It's sort of a thing that when you can be together, there's a connection that you pick up but you haven't been far away in the field. I think that's a great image actually

RW: Well, it certainly means a lot to me because it's often struck me that the friendships that matter most are not the ones you have to spend a great deal of time maintaining but the ones you pick up because you know you inhabit the same territory and the same things matter. Because so much matters to Merton, it means that friendship with Merton in it can range over a very wide territory indeed.

BT: That's right.

RW: Certainly I think my own original encounter with Merton had most to do initially with his approach to the contemplative life but then, as I got more into him, realising, well goodness, this is a larger mind than I thought – realising he's a poet, realising he's involved in quite demanding political and social critique. And then, of course, coming to see how all that connects up which to me is the greatest thing about him. I remember spending - I think it was 42 Shillings which was a lot of money in the 1960s - on *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* when it first appeared, and just turning the pages with such enthusiasm thinking, Well, yes - I hadn't realised it - this is where I live and this is where I want to spend time living because that, to me, above all his major collections was where the connection of the contemplative, of the imaginative, of the poetic, the theological, and the political...

BT: And his ability to move among different religion his openness to Buddhism and especially Islam. That was most extraordinary in those days especially for a Christian monk.

RW: Yes, it really was, wasn't it? I think his correspondence with Muslims and Jews - we all know about the Buddhist and Oriental side because of where he died - but that relationship with Abraham Heschel, for instance, in the United States. I was recently sent a copy, a volume of Merton's letters to a Jewish friend. I was really rather overcome by the fact that here was somebody, in the 1960s, following the Vatican Council's debates on anti-Semitism, and then actually engaging with Heschel.

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SJ: Do you have any thoughts on what Merton called an 'apostolate of friendship'?

BT: Rowan, you go first while I think what I might think.

RW: I think it's writ large on almost every page he wrote, really. First of all, there's his fidelity to the friends he made as a student. That's no small thing because these are people who went in quite different and rather remarkable directions, Bob Lax above all, I suppose. He remains faithful to them, he remains in touch - mutual respect, mutual communication continues. So, there's that. At the next level up, you might say, there's the friendships with perhaps slightly more predictable people - Jean Leclerc, Jean Danielou, the theological heavyweights with whom he corresponds not as an equal in purely scholarly terms, but certainly somebody who has a right to be heard and also a freedom to listen. But that's fascinating in itself. And then, of course, there's the whole, the rest of the picture, the enormous picture of the friendships that he creates through his letters, the friendships he opens up just by the hospitality of his writing, the hospitality of his mind but also increasingly, it was the hospitality of the hermitage. I've always been very struck by the welcome he offered to Joan Baez.

BT: Just thinking of that - my first thought as well. It was very naughty too, by the way.

RW: Oh, yes. Yes. Well, we know that, but it's part of the ...

BT: Here's to naughty. Well, a range of friendships, too - from a teenager in California to Mrs. Kennedy. I mean it was just extraordinary, the range of people with whom he not only either initiated or responded to friendship, but then, as you say, remained faithful to them. 'Apostolate' is a word I trip over just a wee bit because, you know, maybe it's right - but for me it makes me wonder if there wasn't also an undercurrent in Merton of taking a message someplace, of bringing good news. So maybe apostolate *is* a good word, actually?

RW: Maybe. It can be a wee bit self-conscious, I suppose, of what he thought he was doing, but I think also there's another side which is Merton's need for friendship.

BT: Exactly. I really think that part of his epistolary friendships were really because he was a very wounded human being and he needed to have contact with lots of people and he needed that sense of being, as we all do, of being loved, of being cared for, I think that all those connections were in a way solving a kind of primal woundedness.

*RW:* Exactly. There's a kind of deep abandoned child intelligence, with the complication of his relationship with a mother who was a perfectionist, chilly. That comes across in all his relationships with women.

*SJ:* Such a primary relationship, and to think that he learnt that she was going to die by letter. (That's extraordinary, isn't it — *RW*) It actually hurts to read that.

*RW:* And you can see that coming through, then, in his sometimes rather intemperate reactions to challenge or perceived coldness by women as in the correspondence with Rosemary Reuther.

*BT:* Exactly what I was thinking of. Well, I think she was terribly rude to him. I wouldn't have continued the conversation. I was just mortified when I first read that, that she could be so confrontational, I guess. The other part of the thing is, I think Merton was absolutely dreadful to women. I'll leave it at that.

*RW:* I think that's right. I think there was deep confusion in all sorts of ways going on there, and hurtful confusion. And to say that he can be a good friend to some women is not true for all the muddle that is going on. I don't know - what do you think, Bonnie? - our sense is that his relationship with Naomi Burton Stone was the nearest he got to a . . .

*BT:* I absolutely agree wholeheartedly. She was really the primary and most important woman in his life, I think. And she was obviously, or apparently, a very healthy sort of person, and well-grounded herself and so she could roll with the aspects of Merton that were less salubrious.

*RW:* That's a good word. Absolutely. But again, even when we have said all that about the complexity of the relationship with Rosemary Reuther and others, or with Dorothy Day for that matter, he will still at work at it. You said, Bonnie, that if you'd had a letter like that from Rosemary Reuther, you would have put the phone down for good. And I'd be tempted to do the same, but he keeps working.

*BT:* Yeah. I really thought her tone was just . . . (*RW:* So '60s.) Yes, so '60s," but then you and I are sort of products of the Sixties.

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*SJ:* Do you think he grew through that confrontation that he had with Reuther, the fact that he did come back to the conversation and that sometimes you need hard truths and you need an argumentative friend who isn't going massage your ego, so to speak?

*BT:* Well, I don't know about boys but all girls need a friend to take when



she buys to dress that will tell her - don't buy it, it makes your *derrière* look big. That gives you the unvarnished truth occasionally.

RW: In a way, to me, the interesting confrontation is with Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker and the Catholic Peace Movement where Roger LaPorte burns himself in public as a protest about the Vietnam War, and Merton immediately rushes off this letter saying he wishes to be dissociated from the movement. And then he has these really quite weighty letters from Dorothy Day and others basically saying, you know, we really can do without this at this particular moment. We need your solidarity rather than your hand washing. And I see him learning a bit through that because not too far from the surface in some of this correspondence - there's always a lot of anxiety in Merton. He longs to be approved of - when he's suddenly pushed into a position where something rather terrible has happened. In that instance, he does run for the hills. Jim Forest and Dorothy gently, but very firmly, pull him back and say, No. Stick with us. This is not good, but we need you.

BT: And this flip side - I was just thinking if we can sort of turn the coin to the complete opposite side, is how well he got along with the women at the Redwoods, such as [the Mother Superior] Myriam Dardenne. He was so at ease with that foundation. They were Europeans. They were French and Belgian. My feeling is that you don't understand Merton if you don't understand he's a European. He's not an American. He was raised and educated in Europe. I just think that you miss it, and it's really, really important. Well, that's enough to say about it. But I think there is a real saving grace in the correspondence with Mother Myriam [and] his desire, I think, to go back there - that's another side of the issue of friendship and who he responded positively to. But I think it's because he got them. He was European made, you know?

RW: That's right. That is overlooked. It comes through, I suppose, in that very rich seam in his work which often people miss out. He's even in some ways the very best kind of pre-Vatican II Roman Catholic. He belongs in that world of *ressourcement*, the recovery of a really rich tradition, so that French Catholic writers are utterly congenial to him. He's not particularly fussed about reforming the liturgy as such.

BT: Exactly. I mean I always have one toe in the Tiber, when it comes to this kind of thing. So, I think that's absolutely right, Rowan. I agree. You know, this is not going to be fun if his nibs and I agree on everything.

RW: We'll have to find something to argue about.

*SJ:* That's an interesting point.

*BT:* It is an interesting point and it isn't. I think that's part of the way one maintains a long friendship. You do it because there are so many commonalities that you can then step back into.

*SJ:* And do you need a surfeit of commonalities in order to weather the storms of friendship? Or do you need a certain element of argumentativeness in a friendship?

*BT:* I don't because I find it very uncomfortable. I'm not very good at confrontation. I was formed by women, Victorian great aunties and women who had been taught to be very ... Mind you, it didn't always take, but women who were very agreeable.

*RW:* A lot of this is temperament. I know some people with friendships with lots of abrasion, lots of disagreement. Temperamentally, I suppose, I've never found myself very comfortable with that. But there are relationships I enjoy with people with whom I disagree quite fundamentally. Again, it's a challenge, isn't it, to think about that in terms of the field we're in. There are bits of that field where there are potholes and brambles and all sorts of things. That's all right, that's liveable, that's not going to kill you.

*SJ:* I think you have to have built up a certain amount of trust, though, don't you?

*RW:* Trust is the key word.

*BT:* Indeed. That's a keyword. But having - I don't know whether I can articulate this very well - but having a kind of respect for the mystery of the other, or an honouring of the mystery of human personality that even our spouses and the people that we're most close to, there has to be an allowance for a certain distancing that leaves the mystery of human identity alone. Do you know what I'm trying to get at here? I think that's very important, especially as we get to know people better and especially with our closest friends and spouses and so forth.

*RW:* That's right. And I've always rather treasured the language that Simone Weil sometimes uses. She talks about hesitating at the frontier, at the front door of somebody else's life. There's a deep interior. And it's only right to pause before you go barging in. You don't sort of fling the door open and say, 'Honey, I'm home!'

*BT:* Well, I think you almost have to be invited in otherwise, you know, I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow your house down. It's not the best approach.

*RW:* Not an ideal model, is it? And the capacity to be surprised by a friend, that's important. Going back to Merton, I think one of the life-giving intriguing things about Merton is that he never stopped being surprising to people. You think you've got him, or did he think he got himself? He surprises himself, because that's what I often note reading the journals, I think I've written about this somewhere, he will spend a few pages rattling on about something and you think, 'Oh dear, oh dear. What is he getting himself into?' And then you turn the page, and it says, 'Well, that was a load of rubbish.' And something else has come up and something's completely reshuffled the perspective for him.

*BT:* Yes, he has the freedom to change his mind, as opposed to folks who sort of have blinders on their minds and a certain trajectory in which they can think and then, 'But please don't push me out of that.' And he had a completely wonderful ability to say, 'Oops. Well, no.' (Yes, exactly – *RW*) Or maybe something else. That's a remarkable quality, especially in my country these days

*RW:* But it also relates to me, to the way in which he goes on willing to make new friends. Somebody like Suzanne Butorovich writes to him from California, an eighteen-year-old from California or younger than that. (She's 16 or 17 – *BT*) You can suddenly see Merton saying, 'Oh my goodness, what does this person have to say to me? How do I speak her language? How do I get to her world?' He's willing to learn as well as to teach. He's willing to let somebody else help him discover bits of himself, that have to emerge. And that's something in friendship as well. You make a friend subconsciously in part, I suspect, because you wonder what bit of you they're going to bring out that you haven't met, if that makes sense.

*SJ:* It does make sense.

*BT:* And also, Merton had this amazing quality to allow people in. I mean, when you get to be as famous a writer as he was by the end of his life, to just continue to allow people in rather than just sort of think consciously or operate unconsciously with this attitudinal: 'Now, I'm a famous person and a big writer and so I don't need to . . .' And I don't have any sense of that in Merton.

*RW:* No. And I think you see that again in the correspondence, don't you? He will take his correspondence seriously. He won't patronise or very seldom, occasionally, but on the whole, he won't patronise them. He will let them know that they're taken seriously. And that's an enormous thing,

as you say, for somebody of his reputation. I just cannot imagine how he coped with the sheer material weight of the letters he had to write.

*BT:* Well, he also had three secretaries at the monastery that helped with the texts of the letters, but the substance of the letters was always Merton.

*RW:* Always Merton. He doesn't want a representative on earth to sort things out for him, does he? He does that himself.

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*SJ:* In a sense, he rather grew into himself. Do you think that these friendships helped him to become who he was?

*RW:* Really, they did, I think. And that of course has something to say about the stresses of his later life, because of so many friendships, so many things coming through, so many things of real importance and interest coming alive in him. I don't know how anybody could quite contain all that. You know, people sometimes say that of St Francis of Assisi. But his problem was that he was too committed to too many things. He was a great contemplative, a great preacher, a great missionary, and he sort of expected all his friars to be rather like that. And if Merton had ever founded a religious order I'd have been very, very sorry for the people who were in it.

*BT:* Like [Charles de] Foucauld who wrote orders that nobody could . . . nobody would be able to follow.

*RW:* Exactly. So, I can understand the discomfort. There's a slightly hectic quality of those last two years where, to put it rather harshly, he's struggling to keep up with the expectations people are flinging at him. To put it more bluntly, bits of him are flowering in different directions.

*BT:* No, I think your first response is the correct one. He was almost losing, you know, magnetic north, or losing a sense of what was the very central thing because there was so much going on. And I think his writing shows that at the end. (Oh, it does, yes – *RW*) A good deal of it is much less, to my way of reading, much less focused, and has much less depth than some of the earlier writing. But there were so many expectations.

*RW:* Yes. How in that light do you see the last journey? Is that when he recovers some depth, in some ways, recovers a bit of breathing space, or just where even more pressures pile on, or both? I can see something in the Asian Journal of a recovery of a bit of that magnetic north maybe.

*BT:* I've written a lot on Merton and Buddhism and edited the book

*Merton and Buddhism.* Actually, I was - speaking of friendship - great friends for many years with Harold Talbot. Harold had a lot of close contact with Merton, [and] in fact made the arrangements for him to see the Dalai Lama. I think that Merton was looking for a place that he could go to try to resettle again and to re-find that centre. And that was also what the Redwoods connection was about. David Odorosio's book on that is very good, by the way. It's just come out. And I think that was part of the Asian journey. Part of it also was, you know, going back to Mother Asia, balancing the masculine, and the feminine, and even at, sort of the archetypal level, I think that was part of it. I also think that Merton would probably, had he lived, gone back to Asia for a long stint I think he really wanted to spend time with one of the Tibetan Masters or several of the Tibetan Masters. He found something there that was the alternative to the kind of frantic life and the many things that he'd been drawn into. But I do have a sense that the boy was losing his way a bit at the end, losing his focus a bit at the end.

*RW:* Yes, I think that's a very plausible analysis because it does strike me that one of the things that's going on in the Asian journey and in the Asian Journal is he's got to a point where he's asking who's going to teach me now?

*BT:* Yes, [that's] exactly it. Yes. Some of us find where we are. We're the one who's often the teacher. And then, if you're sensible, you begin to say, 'Well now, who shall I go to now, to whom shall I go?' And that's, I think, sort of where Merton was at the end of his life. There's no evidence for me that he was leaving the Catholic church or leaving his [abbey] ... That's just junkie thinking, in my view. That's somebody who hasn't read the corpus and prayed with it and met people who knew him. No evidence for that. But I do think that the way you put it is exactly right. He was really looking - Who will teach me? And I think that he found possibilities in Tibet, in particular, the Tibetan community in exile. They are very impressive people, if you've ever had the opportunity to spend any time with any of those folks there because they're extremely impressive people.

*RW:* I agree. Absolutely. To me it's not surprising. It's as if a lot of people are saying to him [in] those last years - and people of spiritual insight seem to be saying to him - Look, you might be on the edge of something quite transformative and he is saying to himself, 'But what do I do about that? How do I find a way forward?'

*BT:* Here's a little footnote to underline what you're saying and support

the idea. Merton in the journal, when he comes back from the meeting with the Dalai Lama where the Dalai Lama is giving him the teachings about the afterlife, and Merton says he didn't get it at all. Well, Harold Talbot was with him for that and what the Dalai Lama was doing was giving him the instructions of how to move through the bardo [*a Tibetan word meaning what we experience in the period between death and rebirth*] quickly. I think probably the Dalai Lama in his prescience probably knew what was ahead for Merton and was trying to be helpful to him.

*RW:* But I think it also suggests, coming back to the friendship theme, that in Asia he's looking for something more than just friendship. He is looking for orientation, a refit of some sort. So, he doesn't just want to have politenesses with the Dalai Lama. He wants to see something . . .

*BT:* No. He's not looking just for experiences, new experiences. I think it is a genuine spiritual quest on Merton's part.

*RW:* I think so, yes. And I agree. I don't think that he's contemplating any kind of future outside the Catholic Church because he already knows that the Catholic Church for him is a very large room indeed. It's not that that liturgical, theological, contemplative tradition is proving to be too small for him. On the contrary. He's finding out more and more how much room there is in that.

*BT:* I mean, after Harold Talbot became Roman Catholic and spoke to Merton in Gethsemani and was wondering about whether he'd done the right thing, Merton actually said to him - It's a big church. There's room for a lot of people in it.

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*SJ:* What are your thoughts about - I'm just talking about Merton's Asian journey - when he saw those giant Buddhas, and his response to that, because I attended a day a long time ago at Heythrop. And one of the speakers was an Italian nun who was in charge of a Buddhist-Catholic centre in Japan, and she thought that that moment signified Merton's dharma. That that was the end of the road, so to speak.

*BT:* 'But now I've seen what I was looking for' is what he wrote after (everything made sense - SJ) but he didn't know what he was seeing. I mean, he didn't understand that that was the dead Buddha with his disciples around him. You go, Rowan, and then I may say some more things, but there's nothing to me that indicates that he really understood what those figures represented.



*RW:* Something is really happening there. I'm very sceptical of those who pinned down Merton's development to dramatic moments of conversion, Fourth and Walnut and all the clichés that surround that. (Hear, hear – BT) But the same with this, yet that passage, for all that we know it was considerably worked up from his first notes and therefore it is, in some ways, a self-conscious composition, nonetheless something happened which was just a little bit to do with enlightenment. Something fell away, some level of scale on the eyes fell away. What sense you make of that, what you do about it, that's another question. But yes, I'd be wary of saying that was it, that was the dharma moment, in quite that sense. Yet I'd just love to know what he would have made of it, done with it, sat with it, another four or five years. There is so much about that last period way where we would want know what would have happened in the next four or five years.

*BT:* I agree. When it comes to people's inner lives, I want to let them have the last word, not an interpreter's, not an outside person. And I agree that the notes were worked up. But I also think that there was some very profound insight, very profound, the scales taken off his eyes. And it's interesting, isn't it, how sometimes that can happen in an environment that isn't one's own? Or one can see things - if you have the opportunity to dwell at somebody else's house, whether it's the house of the Buddha or Muhammad, whatever, sometimes it helps us to see more clearly the spiritual root, or the spiritual home that we have chosen and flourished in.

*RW:* Yes. That's very illuminating to me because I think part of what's going on in that moment, Polonnaruwa, he sees a truth which is not making a claim on him. But by not making a claim on him makes the most absolute claim possible, to be a bit boringly paradoxical. But it's because these images that are not shouting at him or grabbing at his emotions in perhaps a classically Christian way with certain kinds of traditional imagery. Nobody is out to recruit him, co-opt him. It was there, and that's the greatest claim of all.

*BT:* And of course, if I can interject, I mean, this is one of the things poetry can do for us is to give us eyes to see, baptised eyes, eyes that are clearer than they might be. The quality of being invited rather than instructed or reprimanded, that quality of being invited in by the new situation or the new way of looking or the new metaphor - Oh, what a good one that was, you sometimes think. Wish I'd written that. I think it's important when we think about Merton never to get too far from the fact that he was a

poet. I mean, he was often a really bad poet and he needed a really good editor, you know, like the little girl with the curl: When she was good, she was really good. And when she was bad, she was really awful. But the poetic imagination was very active, I think, in all of Merton's writings, and probably in his friendships as well. But when you think about how many of his colleagues from Columbia, for example, or all those letters to the South American poets and the beat poets in California, he had a huge correspondence with contemporary poets, his contemporary poets.

*RW:* That's right. And I think probably had more of a reputation among Latin American poets than in the United States, obviously through Cardenal and others, but the whole new solidarity movement in Mexico in the 1960s. That's so much part of his world, and he became so much part of it. And poetry is nothing if it's not invitation.

*BT:* It's not poetry if it isn't invitation, if it begins to be, you know, something else.

*RW:* It's very much a matter of saying, 'Well, stand here and see if you can see what I see.' And that's something to do with what I was trying to say about images that do make a claim.

*BT:* I love that. That's a wonderful - I mean that puts a lot of things into perspective for me.

*RW:* Well, you'll know as a writer that when you are making claims on the metre, it's not going to be a good poem.

*BT:* No, it's not going to be a good poem. It has to be for itself and not for some other hidden or even nefarious motive. Which is why, I think, there's a sense in which poetry is given rather than created. The image or the idea is given, it's not manufactured. I don't know, that's my experience. (Yes. Mine, too — *RW*) That's why every poem is the last one you're ever going to write.

*RW:* Yes, and people say, 'So what are you going to write next?' I've no idea because who knows when things will just come into alignment. And when you just happen to be, like, fiddling on an old-fashioned radio you suddenly get a frequency where something is coming through.

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*SJ:* One of the things I'm interested in is what you were saying about the hospitality that Merton elicited in his hermitage years. And juxtaposed against that is that his most common form of communication was obviously through letters. I listened to an online conversation with

Timothy Radcliffe [OP] recently and he was saying that you can communicate through letters and emails and so on but it pales alongside the physicality of being face to face with a friend. Do you agree with that?

*RW:* Bonnie, you have a go at that.

*BT:* It's a very complicated question, and it's a complicated question that wouldn't have been so complicated for me 10 years ago. But now that we communicate on Zoom, for example, which I resisted for years, and then, you know, now here I am. This is a bit on the witchy side, but I know a lot about a person by being physically with them. There's something about the energy of the way they're sitting or the cast of the head. I mean, ideally, I like to be with my friends physically from time to time. It's a renewal of something. And at the same time, I'm extremely grateful for a conversation like this. It's the next best thing, so to speak, since we've quit writing letters. I'm a great letter writer, always have been, and I have been in the terrible process of cleaning out thousands of letters in the files in my library, but realising, for example, you know, dozens of letters from [Mother] Mary Jean [SSC] at Tymawr and the pleasure that, you know, other people that I've had an epistolary conversation with. I can't imagine what Merton would have done with a computer or Zoom. It would have made it totally impossible for him. Sorry, I'm starting to rattle away. I think it's a complex question. I think, ideally, I prefer from time to time to be with someone.

*RW:* So do I, in the sense that, like you Bonnie, I depend quite a lot on the signals I'm getting. I believe that our bodies do communicate, not just through gesture but also through presence. (Absolutely, absolutely – BT) When I've shared a long period of silence with somebody on a retreat, I've sensed something that is genuinely communicated by that physicality. And others have said the same on the other side, as it were. Yes, I take that very seriously, and I think that when people share silence, even within a conversation face to face, it's different from everything else. So, I wouldn't at all sideline or downgrade that importance of actual physical presence. But there is something about letters, and I'm sorry about the demise of the letter really (Me too! – BT) because, certainly when I was, I think in my 20s, I wrote a lot of letters, I had a lot of letters. I depended a lot on that. All sorts of friends here and abroad, and the anticipation and the sheer physical pleasure of opening an envelope. And you see the familiar handwriting, and yes, something happens. It's not quite the same as clicking on an email, is it?

*BT:* No. I have had decades of correspondence. I loved looking, hoping

[that] in the mail, there'd be a letter. But the other side of that is, there's something that's communicated when we're with each other. That is the reality.

RW: It's a different kind of communication because, of course, if you're writing, you're much more in control of circumstances than when you are communicating face to face. I think that explains a bit about Merton as a correspondent.

BT: You can be revealed and hiding yourself at the same time.

RW: He does a lot of that, but also, I've often been struck by the way in which he can ventriloquise another person's style to some extent. When he writes to Bob Lax it's very different from how he writes to Abdul Aziz or Suzanne Butorovich or Jean Danielou.

BT: It makes you wonder who - will the real Merton please stand up. And it also makes me wonder, because I have a sort of nasty turn of mind from time to time, is he sort of sucking up, is he the little boy that's trying to be liked, the person who needs . . . I mean, I do it sometimes. I think we all do it.

RW: I think it's a real element in his letter writing.

BT: But I think it's an unusually strong element. The voice of the letters is really different depending upon to whom he's writing.

RW: That's right. And I don't think it's a conscious thing. It's as if he automatically slips into what is going to make sense to that particular correspondent. Yes, I recognise that child wanting to be approved of element in it. I don't think it vitiates it. I just think it's something to be aware of, isn't it, so that you don't just canonise or absolutise one of his voices, and think that's the real one.

SJ: Yes, I think that's really interesting about adapting himself to the individual which rather reminds me of 'A Little Cloud' in James Joyce's *Dubliners*.

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SJ: When I was delving into each of your writings, I came across something you wrote about some time ago in *The Way*, Bonnie, in which you quoted Thomas Merton on the necessity of silence. And it was what Rowan was saying about being with somebody in silence and its power to communicate something terribly strong and powerful. And you wrote that we 'forget language is power, and the power and beauty and mystery are dependant upon the presence of silence.' And then you referred to

Merton. And he said that 'for language to have meaning, there must be intervals of silence somewhere, for the mercy of God is not heard in words unless it is heard both before and after the words were spoken in silence.' And I just think that's a beautiful expression of the power of silence. And delving through *A Silent Action*, Rowan, I've liked what you said about what Merton meant to you. You said, 'he's seeing and then he's stepping back, and he's telling us what he saw. He's connecting us with the divine.' Do either of you want to say any more about those two passages?

RW: I think once again it's the invitation thing. A good piece of writing doesn't tell you to be quiet. It impels you to be quiet, to listen and to look. And I suppose part of what I was saying about Merton was yes, that's what's going on there. You're being impelled to look and that can be looking at all sorts of things. It can be looking at, or listening to – I was struck by this again reading one of the volumes of the journals recently – and what it sounds like, feels like, looks like, in the middle of the night in the woods at the hermitage. Sounds of planes overhead, distant shots, deer breaking through the fence somewhere, and all of that physicality, you're taken to that place and allowed to look and listen quietly there. That's very powerful. And quite apart from all his reflections on issues, writers, topics, I think what I'm really arrested by repeatedly when I go back to the journals is that dimension of physicality – This is what the weather's like. This is what the foliage smells like. The sound of a deer in the garden at the back. This is the feel of the bed or the table, the cold and so on.

BT: I really resonate biographically – autobiographically – with that. I live on six acres on a little side road and three-quarters of it is wooded and I'm aware that a good portion of my day is – I wouldn't have used the word physicality but that's absolutely spot on – you know, the sounds of the birds, Oh, there's a new one, big mother of a snake on the hill yesterday evening which I was not happy about, the small animals that share the hill with me and their comings and goings. I hadn't recognised [it] actually until you just spoke about that in Merton's writing, which is so prevalent. It's one of the primary spiritual practices, if you will, where I live. It's just being attentive to the place that I live [in] and what it offers in sight and sound and touch and taste. You know, nature red and tooth and claw, too. You don't get very far away from that if you live in a place where you don't try to domesticate wild animals, you just let them be wild animals. Really awful things. I wouldn't have thought about it in

those terms. So, thank you, yes, I think that's true. Well Merton grew up as the city boy. I grew up in the woods so to me it's a natural environment. I'm staying where I live. People say to me, "Why don't you go someplace real?" And I say, "Well, this feels like real to me." But, you know, he was an urban person and to be dropped in the middle of the Knobs of Kentucky, these experiences and seeing all kinds of things he hasn't experienced or seen before except maybe peripherally when he was at the Franciscan College for those 18 months or two, three semesters, whatever it was.

RW: That's a different level, isn't it?

BT: Yes, but he wouldn't have found a snake in the loo, you know, as he did.

## END OF PART I

**Dr Rowan Williams** is a theologian, writer and poet. Until his retirement in 2020 he was Master of Magdalene College, Cambridge. He spent much of his earlier career as an academic at the universities of Oxford & Cambridge. After serving as Bishop of Monmouth and subsequently Archbishop of Wales, he was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury, serving from 2002 until 2012. He has a keen interest in Thomas Merton, having been a keynote speaker at the Society's 1998 residential conference and the principal speaker at our meeting in London in 2008 on the 40th anniversary of Merton's death. He has published a collection of his talks & writings on Merton - *A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton*.

**Bonnie Thurston** resigned a Chair and Professorship to live quietly in her home state of West Virginia, USA. She is author or editor of 24 theological and 8 books of poetry, most recently *Not Sonnets: Observations from an Ordinary Life* (Cinnamon Press, 2022) and *From Darkness to Eastering* (Wild Goose, 2017). She is particularly interested in Merton's poetry and his inter-religious thought. She was a founding member of the ITMS, and served as its third president. She has written many articles on Merton and given retreats and lectured on Merton widely in the U.S., Canada, the UK and Europe. She has edited several books of Merton's writings, and has written *Shaped by the End You Live For: Thomas Merton's Monastic Spirituality* (2020). Her work on Merton has been translated into Dutch, German, Italian, and Spanish.