

# Merton, Friend of God and Prophet

Response to  
"Thomas Merton: Prophetic and Poetic Imagination"  
by  
Robert F. Morneau

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## Introduction

Let me begin by thanking Bishop Robert Morneau for his thought-provoking paper on Thomas Merton as cultural critic. His conclusion, that Merton was indeed a cultural critic but that that was not his primary or defining vocation, is one with which I would agree. I also agree that somehow Merton's true vocation had more to do with imagination than with analysis, with writing itself as a creative process and the evocator of creativity than with its use as an informational tool. I think that Bishop Morneau has identified something important about Merton's distinctive mode of cultural criticism in pointing out that it was rooted in a prophetic capacity for imagining an alternative reality that was itself deeply rooted in his contemplative vocation and best expressed in his writing, perhaps at least as effectively in his poetry as in his prose.

My task, to stimulate further discussion, was made a little more challenging by the fact that I did not find myself in sharp disagreement with anything in Bishop Morneau's paper. That being the case, I decided to pursue one point he made but did not develop, which I think bears further reflection and which might find its way into our discussion.

### The Question

At the beginning of his paper Bishop Morneau applied to Merton a poem of Rilke that ends "And the song goes on, beautiful." The question I would like to pursue is *why* does Merton's song go on? What is the secret of his ongoing attractiveness to all kinds of people? Why have serious thinkers speculated that Merton may be the most important spiritual voice of our times? Bishop Morneau made two suggestions toward an answer, both of which are undoubtedly true: that Merton is a mentor and model for many of our contemporaries and that his humility and truthfulness, not only about the world but about himself, make him especially attractive. My question is this: *why* do many find Merton a mentor and model? And does his truthfulness about himself have anything to do with it? If so, what?

### A Suggestion

The thesis, perhaps somewhat naive, I would like to suggest is that the secret of Merton's attractiveness is that he was holy. Frankly, important and interesting as most of Merton's writings are in terms of their content, I doubt that he would have the influence he does, evoke the kind of interest that he evokes, if he were not, as a person, somehow fascinating to his contemporaries. Merton receives the kind of scrutiny, generates the kind of curiosity and devotion in people, that we humans tend to reserve for the very good and the very evil. Obviously, if the theory is valid in regard to Merton, he belongs to the category of the very good, of what we in the Christian community have historically called saints.

If this is true, that the secret of Merton's attractiveness is his holiness, we certainly have to think again about holiness. It is probably a measure of how operative certain stereotypical notions of holiness are, despite our loud disclaimers, that the term is seldom used in regard to Merton, even though he certainly defined his life project in terms of the quest for sanctity. Merton is often referred to as a writer, a poet, a monk, a social critic, a mediator between East and West, a major figure in spirituality—but not usually as a saint.

Merton certainly does not fit the classical picture of the saint. In many ways, especially in his early monastic years, Merton was self-absorbed, arrogant, priggish, clerical, self-important—indeed, as he

says himself in a passage quoted by Bishop Morneau, he was at times a stuffed shirt and a phony. He got over a lot of that as his experience of himself deepened, as he experienced both in prayer and through his numerous contacts with others his real solidarity with the rest of the human race, and as he came to the almost bitter realization that monastic life not only did not make people superior to others but that the form of life itself was not intrinsically superior even in principle and certainly not in fact. Nevertheless, Merton remained to a large extent a restless monk torn between his vocation to write and his call to hiddenness, often rebellious toward his superiors, given to sensual excess when he had the chance. Close to the end of his life he carried on a brief sexual affair not only in violation of his vow of chastity and behind his superior's back, but perhaps even more shockingly, he even kept up his work of preaching to the monastic community while violating both the vows and the discipline of the life itself. And one could go on. The point is that Merton's failings were real and serious, not the charming peccadillos of the saint who is kept humble by occasional harmless slips. Merton raises the question of what is sanctity in a particularly acute way, precisely because of the real failings that were part of his life virtually to the very end.

In recent conversations with friends and colleagues about this question of holiness I have picked up two interesting and important pieces of wisdom, which I think are intrinsically related to each other and illuminating in regard to Merton. One friend, with whom I co-taught a doctoral seminar on saints and holiness, made the accurate observation that there is virtually no trait associated with holiness that some recognized saint has not lacked or violated. Whether we select kindness, prayerfulness, discretion, meekness, faith, joy, hope, zeal, or any other trait, we will find some saint who was rather singularly lacking in it, at least as far as human observation permits us to judge. And no saint had them all. My colleague's conclusion was that all that the saints really have in common, all that can be considered universally characteristic of saints, is that they are friends of God.

Another friend made a very helpful and important distinction between holiness and perfection. Some people are actually quite perfect. They are quiet, respectful, judicious, kind, dutiful, patient, obedient, prayerful, hard-working, self-effacing, humble, and so on. And they might well be, indeed probably are, actually holy. But there are others, especially complex, gifted, and multiply-involved people, who

usually have many ineradicable imperfections that are quite real and even sinful. Such traits as anger, arrogance, self-centeredness, ambition, attachment, competitiveness, intolerance, and so on are likely to be part and parcel of their personalities and seemingly not finally amenable, or at least not totally so, even to deep prayer and serious ascetical effort. These traits seem to be the flip side, the shadow, of the very traits that enable such people to do great things for God and humanity—traits like imagination, courage, drive, magnanimity, self-confidence, breadth of vision, adventuresomeness, zeal, inability to accept the mediocre in themselves, institutions, or others, intolerance of compromise. One has only to think of saints like Moses, Jeremiah, Jerome, Teresa of Avila, or Catherine of Siena, or those who have not made the rolls like Origen, Meister Eckhart, Margery Kempe, or Dorothy Day, to realize that there is a major distinction between sanctity and perfection.

It seems to me that both of these observations throw some light on Merton's appeal. First, Merton was clearly not perfect, not even at the end of his life. He was a complex personality—so complex he made a sometimes tiresome cottage industry out of figuring himself out in public. The breadth of his interests and concerns, his passion for integrity, his lust for life, his genius for friendship, his leadership capacity, his sheer energy, his thirst for knowledge, his burning compassion for his contemporaries, had their shadow side in the very flaws, imperfections, and sins he relentlessly revealed to his readers with that truthfulness, that existential humility which Bishop Morneau pointed out.

But, Merton was, first and foremost, a friend of God. He was, we might say, terminally obsessed with God. Whether he was in the depths of prayer or the depths of sin and self-loathing, the compass needle of his life always pointed due North—toward the mysterious God hidden in the wasteland of contemplative nothingness and whom Merton tenaciously believed would be finally revealed as love. Sometimes that compass needle marked his path as true; sometimes it showed him how badly off course he was; sometimes the instrument itself seemed to get lost in the rubble. But the only thing that made anything in his life or his world interesting enough for him to reflect on it, write about it, fight over it, or even sin for it was its relationship to God. A friend is not someone who is perfect; a friend is someone who cares, passionately and always, and includes the beloved friend

totally in his or her life, even and perhaps especially when that life is particularly unadmirable. Whatever else Merton was, he was a friend of God. When holy Wisdom enters into human souls, Scripture tells us, she makes them friends of God and prophets. Merton is heard by his contemporaries as someone who was both wise and prophetic.

## Conclusion

My tentative conclusion about the attractiveness of Merton is that he responds to a feature of our culture that is rarely overt but that is very deep, namely, a kind of agonized obsession with transcendence. It has often been remarked that the absence of God is a striking feature of our cultural experience, but it is a felt absence, like the cavity of a just-pulled tooth. The meaninglessness of our sated culture, the numbing terror of living too long on the brink of ultimate disaster, the intractable and overwhelming complexity of our problems, the opening on an alternative reality provided to many by drugs, and the encounter with the great mystical traditions of the East are among the features of twentieth-century culture that keep the God issue alive, as an ache if not as an articulated question. Merton thematized the search so many of our contemporaries are on, whether or not they can or choose to name it. Is it not strange that so many people have said about Merton, who had such a profound, even exaggerated, sense of his own uniqueness and specialness, that they are fascinated by Merton because "his story is my story." What makes him so interesting is his single-minded perseverance in the quest that, whether we can name it or not, is ours.

What Merton said with his person as well as in his writing was that our true identity (what every modern is finally looking for) lies in God and that it makes sense to pursue that identity, even with the whole of one's one and only life. It is possible to pursue it, Merton said, no matter who you are or where you are or how imperfect you are by the standards of the world or your own standards or the standards of the institutions of religion. Merton's experience says to his contemporaries that you can pursue it through work you love (like writing) or work you hate (like making cheese), through the people you love (even in the wrong circumstances) and the people you admire (like Suzuki) and the people who drive you crazy (like the abbot), through sin and loneliness and the oppression of others, through

succeeding and failing, through silence and conversation, through involvement and solitude, in the thought-world of your own time and through the classics of the tradition, in your own culture or by crossing over into the culture of others, in labor and leisure and contemplation and teaching and watching for fires, in the monastery or a hermitage or a hospital bed or on an airplane or on the street corner, through your own tenacious weakness and evil and that of others, in the beautiful and the plain and even the ugly.

By his compulsion to record, with the ruthless honesty and humility Bishop Morneau mentioned, details of his everyday life as if every moment he lived had some kind of cosmic significance, Merton makes us all aware that the banalities and the ordinariness as well as the occasional soaring heights of our lives are indeed of cosmic significance, but only insofar as they are related to God, as they relate us to God. Happy is the person who becomes conscious of this, says Merton, not as an abstract idea or even an intellectual conviction but as the very air one breathes. Perhaps Merton is so fascinating, so loved by so many, because he has made us conscious, in the idiom of the twentieth century, not only that our hearts are restless for the Beauty ever ancient, ever new, but that if we can learn, however late or early, to love that restlessness, it will make our lives not less conflictual or confusing, because in the end that does not really matter, but it will give them depth and intensity and significance, and that matters a great deal. The ultimate adventure, Merton says convincingly to a generation that has gone to the moon, is the journey into the vastness of God.