

Thomas Merton and the Shakers

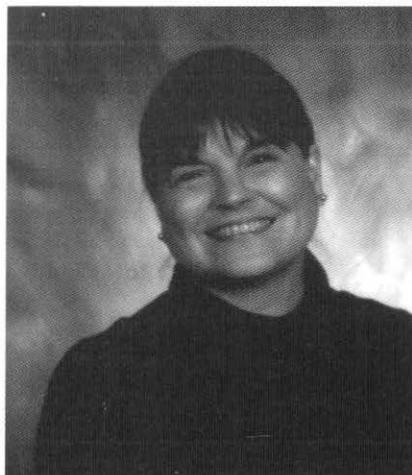
by Judith Flournoy

When his interest was enkindled, Thomas Merton would leave no stone unturned in his desire to learn all he could about a particular subject. His research often resulted in writing which expressed his thoughts and feelings about what he had discovered. This is true in his study of the Shakers, the mystical, nineteenth-century American religious sect. Eventually Merton would correspond and form a friendship with Edward Deming Andrews, a noted authority on the Shakers and his wife, Faith. Andrews ultimately requested that Merton write an introduction to his book on Shaker furniture, *Religion in Wood*, to which Merton complied.

Merton wrote an essay on the Shakers published in *Jubilee* magazine in January, 1964. Included with the article are some photographs Merton had personally taken at Pleasant Hill, a defunct Shaker colony located near Lexington, Kentucky. This same essay reappears in a section of his book, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, under the chapter heading, "Pleasant Hill." In addition to his writing and research on the Shakers, Merton aligned himself with friends at the University of Kentucky in Lexington who were interested in promoting the preservation of the Shaker communities as museums and study centers.

One cannot meaningfully discuss the varied reasons why Thomas Merton, the Catholic Trappist monk, was so attracted to this mysterious Christian sect without examining a little of the history and doctrine of the Shakers. The official name of the sect was the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing. The group was founded in about 1772 in Manchester, England, by a thirty-eight-year-old visionary named Ann Lee. Called "Mother Ann" by her followers, she was the leader of a small band of people who had broken away from a dissident group of Quakers. Their worship was characterized by fits of shaking and violent behavior, which earned them the somewhat derogatory name of the "Shaking Quakers," a name which was later shortened to the Shakers.

The basic values of the sect included virgin purity, love, peace and justice. They expressed these values through the practice of celibacy, universal brotherhood, the traditional Quaker beliefs in pacifism and equality of the sexes and in the sharing of all property and goods through communal living. They also believed that God is both male and female and that "Mother Ann" was the reincarnation of Jesus Christ. Their theology focused on their belief in millennial renewal in preparation for the imminent coming of the Kingdom of God.



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In 1774, Ann Lee and eight of her followers emigrated from England and settled in upstate New York. Through their missionary work, based on Lee's teachings, they were successful in attracting many converts and establishing several religious communities throughout New England and as far west as Kentucky. The Shaker communities became most noted for their worship and for the way in which they integrated their spirituality into their daily lives. They also earned much recognition for their contribution to American culture for their numerous practical inventions and their simple, functional, yet beautiful furniture and buildings.

They enjoyed approximately 100 years of prosperity and self-sufficiency with their numbers reaching about 6,000 scattered throughout communities stretching from Maine to Kentucky. After the Civil War, the sect began its decline and has become virtually extinct with the exception of a small group of seven people remaining in the Sabbathday Lake, Maine community to this day.

Anyone who is familiar with Thomas Merton and his writings would find it easy to understand why he was drawn to this unique religious sect. With Merton's interests in religious philosophy, art and music and his participative sympathy with mystical traditions, there was much about the Shakers that he could relate to in his own experience and background in the early 1960's.

Merton was familiar with the Shaker's style of worship. In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he wrote of having visited a Quaker meeting at least once with his father when his mother was hospitalized. He had made a second visit during a summer vacation at home in New York while he was still a student at Cambridge. Quaker worship was similar to that of the Shakers: the members would sit in silence until they were seized by the Holy Spirit, who would inspire and move them to express their prayers aloud. Even as he was nearing his conversion to Catholicism during his frantic soul-searching days after having graduated from Columbia, he wrote:

At first, I had vaguely thought I might try to find some Quakers and go with them. There still remained in me something of the favorable notion about Quakers that I had picked up as a child and which the reading of William Penn had not been able to overcome (Merton, *Seven Storey* 206).

Merton's mature interest in the Shakers began with a visit he made on a winter's afternoon in 1960 to the defunct Shaker colony, Pleasant Hill, not far from his monastery. As he walked through one of the large, bare rooms in one of the abandoned buildings, he experienced a sense of exhilaration:

Everything stressed plainness — a more than Cistercian plainness which would have been cold, which should have left him chill with a sense of the "cold and cerebral," and which had the opposite effect . . . Some of the quality of the handworked wood and the proportions created an atmosphere that was, at the same time, warm, human — and yet visionary, clear, sane, supernatural. Merton found himself thinking of Blake . . . (Mott 343).

He had been deeply moved by what he had seen and experienced alone in that Shaker village that winter day. Upon returning to the monastery he felt inspired to begin his study by ordering books on the Shakers. Edward Andrews became one of his main sources for information, as well as a newfound friend. As time went on, his enthusiasm even led to his considering the possibility of writing a book on the sect, although he would only succeed in publishing two essays on the subject.

As Merton grew in his knowledge of the Shakers, he also came to love and revere them for their ideals of “simplicity, honesty, and good work for a spiritual motive” (Merton, *Hidden Ground* 32). He felt akin to them because his own Cistercian Order had been originally formulated with similar ideals. The Shakers, like the Cistercians, were celibates living in a religious communal setting separated from the secular world for the purpose of perfecting their souls. Both communities had a tradition of practicing hospitality and welcoming those who made pilgrimages to their doors.

Many Shaker beliefs coincided with Merton’s personal beliefs. The Shakers were pacifists and non-violent. Merton, too, was a strong believer in peace and promoted the use of nonviolence for settling disputes. Merton also admired the Shakers for their belief in universal brotherhood and views against slavery. The Shakers would welcome entire Negro families into their communities to share equally with them as their own “brethren,” the term they used in referring to each other. Merton’s essay, “Letters to a White Liberal,” as it appeared in his book, *Seeds of Destruction*, published in 1964, reveals similar sympathies toward the plight of the Negroes and the racial injustices that they were subjected to during the Civil Rights Movement in the sixties.

While Merton was not enthralled by the Shakers’ gnostic theology and doctrine, he was genuinely touched by their spirit and their mysticism, especially as evidenced in their lifestyle and craftsmanship. Their art, work and worship were inspired by mystical trances and visions. The Shakers believed that they received the patterns and designs for their furniture and inventions directly from the Holy Spirit, Mother Ann (after her death), or from angels through mystical visions. They also believed that their ritual songs and dances of worship were received as “gifts” of inspiration in the same manner. The mysterious way in which the Shakers integrated the spiritual and the physical in their work Merton especially related to Blake.

The Shakers were passionate about their work. “Put your hands to work and your hearts to God” was a popular Shaker saying, as was Mother Ann’s admonition to her followers, “Do all your work as though you had a thousand years to live, and as you would if you knew you must die tomorrow” (Hudson 27, 29). Work well done was considered a form of worship; everyone in the Shaker communities had different skills and jobs to perform for the common good and the glory of God. Merton was deeply moved by the purity, simplicity, and honesty that came through their work. He wrote,

There is, in the work of the Shakers, a beauty that is unrivaled because of its genuine spiritual purity — a quality for which there can be no adequate explanation, but which can be accounted for in part by the doctrine of the Shakers themselves and their monastic view of manual work as an essential part of the Christian life (Merton, “Shakers” 40).

Merton went so far as to bring this spiritual and work concept into his training of the novices at the monastery:

‘A monk should have a good feeling towards any kind of nice work. It should be a monastic characteristic that a monk should appreciate anything that’s well done. Why should a monk appreciate anything that’s well done? Well, first of all, anything that’s decently done gives glory to God.’ (Mott 372)

Earlier Merton had expressed a Shaker-sympathetic approach to work in *New Seeds of Contemplation*:

The requirements of a work to be done can be understood as the will of God. If I am supposed to hoe a garden or make a table, then I will be obeying God if I am true to the task I am performing. To do the work carefully and well, with love and respect for the nature of my task and with due attention to its purpose, is to unite myself to God's will in my work. (19)

Merton loved the Shakers and all that they had left to America's culture. In one of his letters to Edward Andrews he wrote, "I feel deeply related to them in some kind of obscure communion . . ." (Merton, *Hidden Ground* 36). His essay on the Shakers gives a fairly detailed history of the sect and an explanation of their doctrine based on his extensive research. He also expounds on the virtue of their ideals of "simplicity, honesty, and good work for a spiritual motive." In his article in *Jubilee*, titled "The Shakers," Merton suggests that their contribution to American culture in "science, religion and inspiration," was a unique spiritual phenomenon that went, for the most part, unrecognized and was tragically misunderstood until long after nearly all of their communities were dissolved.

The introduction he wrote for Edward Andrews' book on Shaker furniture, titled *Religion in Wood*, is a rather lengthy essay. In this writing, Merton interpreted the religious creativity of the Shakers' communal craftsmanship in the light of William Blake's work. The Shakers, he points out, believed their furniture was designed by angels, and Blake believed his ideas for poems and engraving came from heavenly spirits. According to Merton, Blake also believed that the "creative and religious imagination plays an extremely important part in the life of man" (Merton, *Religion* xiii), and that it is through one's imagination that one is able to enter into ultimate reality and the mystery of religion. This idea of Blake's, Merton felt, serves to explain that "the peculiar grace of a Shaker chair is due to the fact that it was made by someone capable of believing that an angel might come and sit on it" (Merton, *Religion* xiii). Merton also emphasized that Shaker creativity was due to the faith of the entire community rather than the individual inspiration of the craftsman. In other words, their inspiration was communal and a "witness to their common faith" (Merton, *Religion* vii). The individual craftsman or workman became an instrument of God's loving care for the entire community. God's Spirit worked through them to lovingly create beautiful forms (furniture) out of wood for communal use; thus Andrews' term, "religion in wood," is appropriate.

In Merton's letters to Andrews he referred to the joy he personally received from singing their little songs while he spent time alone in his hermitage. He would go so far as to request the music for certain lyrics that appealed to him as he discovered them in his research. He also arranged to have a carpenter friend build him a reproduction of a Shaker schoolboy desk for the hermitage. On his kitchen wall he displayed a colored print of a famous Shaker painting and symbol, the *Tree of Life*.

What speaks loudly above everything else concerning Merton and his interest in the Shakers was his true spirit of desiring to share in that "hidden ground of love" that he believed all of humankind held in common, regardless of the way they expressed it through their various religious traditions. Merton knew how to breathe freely within his own religious tradition as a practicing Catholic. He certainly exemplified the Church's teaching regarding the proper attitude toward other religions, both Christian and Non-Christian, as was outlined by the Second Vatican Council:

' . . . the Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions. She looks with sincere respect upon those ways of conduct and of life, those rules and teachings which, though differing in many particulars from what she holds forth, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men . . . ' The Council further adds that in addition to respecting these other traditions, the Catholic scholar must 'acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral

goods found among these men as well as the values in their society and culture.’
(Merton, *Mystics* ix)

Merton truly reached out and embraced humanity. By his example, he not only contributed greatly to his Church but touched the lives of many in his lifetime by sharing his own spiritual experiences, one of them was his discovered kinship with the Shakers.

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