

The Tree of Life for the Healing of the Nations

Review of

Seeking Paradise: The Spirit of the Shakers

By Thomas Merton

Edited with an Introduction by Paul M. Pearson

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Reviewed by **Walt Chura, SFO**

Thomas Merton is among the few Christian seekers, as opposed to collectors, artisans and historians, who treasure the simple gifts of the Shaker way. I am delighted that Paul Pearson and Orbis Books have given us this simple, beautiful collection of Merton's appreciations of that way, enhanced by Merton's own photographs. My hope is that it will be read widely and will encourage more Christians, especially Catholics, to pluck spiritual fruits from the Shaker tree of life, not only by reading primary and other secondary Shaker sources, by learning Shaker songs and gazing upon Shaker spirit drawings, but also by becoming acquainted with the living Shakers of Sabbathday Lake, Maine. Yes, Virginia, there are still Shakers, and you can even become one!

Dr. Pearson's introduction to the collection examines both the context and the scope of Merton's writings on the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, to use the church's proper name. Merton mentions the Shakers as early as 1949 in *The Waters of Siloe*. He notes that the first Trappists, who eventually returned to France, and the first Shakers, who stayed at Pleasant Hill, arrived in Kentucky in the same year (1805) and provides a brief description, not especially appreciative or accurate, of the origins and practices of the sect. The passage, quoted in the introduction, does demonstrate Merton's awareness somewhat early in his monastic career of the relative proximity of Gethsemani to a homegrown American Christian sect with structures similar to monasticism.

The introduction proceeds with the story of Thomas Merton's visits to Pleasant Hill, beginning in 1959 when it had been long abandoned and yet to be restored, through 1968, months before his death. Pearson describes Merton's various essays on the Shakers and his correspondence concerning the United Society, most notably with Edward Deming Andrews, and provides excerpts from journal entries which indicate facets of Merton's understanding of and affinity for the Shaker way. He identifies two foundations on which Merton's attraction for the Shaker way rests: his dedication to monasticism and his "paradise consciousness." He succinctly rehearses the roots of Christian monasticism and Merton's concern for exploring these virgin springs for the benefit of monastic life in the contemporary world. He then illustrates parallels which Merton recognized between Catholic,

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specifically Cistercian, monasticism and the Shaker way.

Essential to the Shaker “creed,” if I may be excused this most un-Shakerly word, is, to paraphrase one of the Eucharistic acclamations: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ *HAS* come again. They are after all “Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing.” Dr. Pearson gives a splendid précis of how this creed was lived out among the Shakers in the daily round and how this practice of realized eschatology converged with Merton’s own “pursuit of paradise consciousness.” Of course, Shaker commitment to pacifism, social justice, equality, and reverence for Creation appealed to Merton, as Dr. Pearson demonstrates. The introduction ends with remarks on Shaker dance and music, concluding perfectly with a quotation from the last chapter of *New Seeds of Contemplation*, “The General Dance.”

This is a slim anthology. Merton’s writings on the Shakers include only: an essay originally published in Ed Rice’s *Jubilee* magazine (slightly revised and reprinted in *Mystics and Zen Masters*) entitled “Pleasant Hill: A Shaker Village in Kentucky”; an “Introduction” to Andrews’ *Religion in Wood: A Book of Shaker Furniture*; the transcript of a conference on the Shaker way at the Abbey; and selected correspondence. Yet the fact that one of the foremost “spiritual masters” of the twentieth century recognized the lasting significance of the Shaker way ought to encourage twenty-first century seekers to examine it more closely.

Readers of this collection, coming fresh to the Shakers, however, need to be cautioned. Thomas Merton was remarkable in his ability to extract gold from shallow pools. Nevertheless he had limited access to resources for his studies. Even for those resources he depended on the good offices of friends “in the world,” as the Shakers say. Most of these friends were well versed in the subject area with which they aided him, and he was able to gain significant illumination from their material. Yet, Merton sometimes had no means to recognize, let alone critique, the bias, limitations or accuracy of his sources.

In his writing on the Shakers, for example, his guru was Edward Deming Andrews, who was certainly the pioneer in modern Shaker studies but who suffered the biases of a collector and a deficiency of theological insight. Additionally, because of Andrews’ prejudices, Merton was initially unaware of the existence of the Shaker community in Sabbathday Lake, Maine. He never knew Brother Theodore Johnson, Ph.D., who brought a fresh spirit as well as theological and historical insight to that community beginning in the early 1960s which has contributed to its survival into our own day. On the theological point of the nature of the “second coming” in Shaker theology, unfortunately, the controverted notion that Mother Ann Lee singularly represented Christ come again is simply repeated without nuance. He seems to have been unaware of Mother Ann’s teaching that “The second coming of Christ is in his church.” Merton seems unaware of the evolution of Shaker theology and practice, the more Catholic than Protestant approaches to the place of Scripture and Tradition in the church and the diversity of theologies among communities.

Merton’s own enthusiasm for discovering “connections” could also lead to misstatements. He credits nineteenth-century Shaker author, John Dunlavy, with a favorable comparison between Shakers and Catholic monks and with viewing monks with “a certain approval” for “professing greater sanctity than the Church in general” (69). Perhaps if Merton had read Dunlavy’s *Manifesto* instead of Andrews’ selective quotation he might have recognized the critical tone of the Shaker’s comparison and his jab at the “church” (no cap) for having but a select few celibate members!

These and other problems with Merton’s Shaker pieces will be harder for readers of this volume

to detect because of the one editorial deficit I must mention. Paul Pearson's bibliography cites only Andrews as a substantial source on the Shakers. He includes Susan Skee's dubiously valuable memoir *God among the Shakers*, which one commentator remarked ought to have been titled *Susan among the Shakers*. The citation of Stephen Stein's historically superior and theologically informed work *The Shaker Experience in America* (Yale University Press, 1992) and Flo Morse's edition of primary sources, *The Shakers and the World's People* (Dodd and Mead, 1980), as well as ITMS member Kathleen Deignan's *Christ Spirit: The Eschatology of Shaker Christianity* (Scarecrow Press, 1992) would have been invaluable inclusions. After all, Merton's work on the Shakers, like all of his work, is meant not simply to inform but to help transform the reader. Thomas Merton is a finger pointing at the moon. If he were writing on the Shakers today, he would want to read Stein and Morse and Deignan, not to mention the myriad primary sources now relatively easily available. We have yet much to learn from the Shakers. As Merton warned: "At a time like the present when we are witnessing the moral disintegration of our society under the pressure of enormous and perhaps demonic forces of the mind, we can ill afford to neglect the simplicity and dedication to truth of [the Shaker way]" (120).