

Pax Heraclitus: Heraclitus, *Hagia Sophia* and a Hard Night's Peace

By **Don Christopher Nugent**

“Dogs bark at a person whom they do not know.”

Heraclitus, *Fragment 90*¹

“I am Joseph, your brother.”

Genesis 45:5

“Pax Heraclitus,” is, like Thomas Merton, something of a stretch: an archeology of an all-but-unexplored vein of Merton’s philosophy of peace, a pondering of its roots in the remote past and of its potential for the human future; a strong medicine for all manner of “barking dogs”; essentially, a meditation on the wisdom of a synthesis of mystical theology and peacemaking.

Let us provide a little prelude. The center of our reflection is, perhaps inevitably, the all-embracing balm of the coincidence of opposites. Like, let us say, the Cross, it can be a stretch. Such a balm can be bittersweet, serio-comic, the way, to enlist the ancient Irenaeus, of a man or woman “fully alive”² – like Merton. Merton’s almost archetypal wholeness is such that years ago the author ventured to characterize him as an incarnation of the coincidence of opposites.³ The present effort would be to extend that incarnation. Such an incarnation would have it, again with Irenaeus, and against every dualism, that in some sense everything is to be saved – even Heraclitus.

Heraclitus⁴ of Ephesus (540?-475? BCE) would appear to be, like Peter in another guise, an inauspicious cornerstone for a philosophy of peace. His thought survives only in disparate fragments, and enjoys, with relatively few exceptions, a decidedly mixed reputation. If he has been claimed as a pre-Christian saint – an exceptional view of the apostolic father Justin Martyr⁵ – he has also been declaimed as a post-modern fascist. The incorrigible Heraclitus eventuated as a solitary exile, too critical of the Ephesian crowd, and too oracular – not impossibly, too original – for the more social philosophers, the professoriate of that day. He was effectively a bitter outcast, his story the stuff of Greek tragedy.

Be that as it may, I doubt that Merton ever met a lost cause that he did not like. After all, he had some experience in this area. And so the monk would pick up, almost two thousand years later, where St. Justin Martyr had left off. He leaves us, I think, a new opening to one of the least known and most interesting of men.

We have been previewing, and now proceed through, one of Merton’s most fertile and yet unharvested of essays, “Herakleitos the

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Obscure.”⁶ He is detached, and therefore discerning, and unearths from the raw ore of the remains of the old pagan flashes or intuitions and insights of the “mystic” and “prophet.” From the parched wellsprings of the failed philosopher rises a kind of ur-theologian such as the more speculative of Renaissance men espied in the most sublime of the ancients.

The mind of Heraclitus was more than socially constructed. Contrary to time-honored (and time-bound) convention, he was the voluntary captive to reality – not, with the involuntary autonomy of the false self, to appearances, the “illusory autonomy” found here and there in Merton. And I dare say, as is implicit in Merton, that the mind of Heraclitus was structured, or “restructured,” by the “gods,” that is, by the God beyond the “gods.”

The dark vision or “in-seeing”⁷ of Heraclitus presupposes an “awakening” somewhere along his way. “Awakening” is one of his essential metaphors. Alas, no text of an experience survives, but “Fourth and Walnut” is everywhere, and one can readily infer that *his* “pure diamond, blazing”⁸ was nothing less than an effulgence or eruption of his fiery “Logos.” The Logos of Heraclitus was all the same “blazing” at the center of our being unto the extremities of the cosmos. Merton elucidates this as a “divine” fire and alludes to one “far greater than Herakleitos” who “came to cast fire on the earth” (*BT* 91) — “far greater,” but still not a diminutive association. But to his flatlander critics, the fire of Heraclitus only hatched the sobriquet of the flame- or “fire-dancer,” assuredly understood unflatteringly. One can envisage the old philosopher in their minds as a sideshow of a circus, like the shamed professor of the old Marlene Dietrich movie *The Blue Angel*. But more immortal and irresistible is his retort, like the wisdom of a desert father on holiday: “May you have plenty of wealth, you men of Ephesus, in order that you may be punished for your evil ways!” ([#96] Wheelwright 84).

A better title for our “fire-dancer” would be, I submit, “Patriarch of Paradox.” Here paradox was not confectioned or closed, but flows, it would seem, from an opening to the infinity of That Which Is – from the master who simply announced, without any show of self-complacency, “Before Abraham was, I AM” (Jn. 8:58). Such paradox established holy ground and, if we could stand aside to see it, the ground of peace.

The paradox of Heraclitus, of course, cannot be so sublime. But it is sophianic. Its premise is that, despite apparent chaos, there subsists a real and gentling “hidden harmony” ([#116] Wheelwright 102). This is reinforced by the postulate that, since what is unmanifest is deeper or higher than what is, “Nature loves to hide” ([#17] Wheelwright 20), a poetic and endearing stroke. The poetic can condition us to trust in this mind-stretching and disarming “that which is at variance with itself agrees with itself” ([#117] Wheelwright 102). This is simply thinking big, inclusively. And it is not just the logic of child’s play, but of peace play. Peace in this dispensation unfolds from paradox, lived paradox.

Let Merton explicate the more implicate Heraclitus: “True peace,” he writes, is the fruit of a “hidden attunement of opposite tensions” (*BT* 76). Heraclitus is possessed of an endowment of opposition-friendly logic, of harmony-in-tension. And tension *is* a vital sign, unknown to a corpse. Heraclitus can fly in the face of the therapeutic society: “It is the opposite which is good for us” (*BT* 102). *Seen whole*, this is holistic healing. More poet than political philosopher, Heraclitus enshrines his vision in a splendid figure: “There is a harmony in the bending back, as in the case of the bow and the lyre” ([#117] Wheelwright 102).

Like yoga, either figure would amount to a pretty good stretch, but peace would vote for the lyre. From tension, peace, and we might well speak of the way of the Ephesian fire-dancer as the way of the lyre: a winsome image indeed, but apparently sparingly little in Heraclitus was winsome in the comfortable groves of Plato. Even though the way of the lyre seems effectively to anticipate the philosophy of education enshrined in his *Republic*, Plato had it that Heraclitus was begotten by the “more severe muses” (*BT* 85). Perhaps Merton was too! And perhaps Plato was a better metaphysician than psychologist.

Let us pause from our pursuit of a mystical peace that can surpass understanding for several considerations concerning the mystery of personality, itself no less nocturnal. By night, borders are evanescent. And by night, accordingly, it is easier to see a muse-driven “child of wrath” (Eph. 2:3) and a “prisoner of” his “own violence” – to allude to the second sentence of his celebrated autobiography⁹ – con-spire for the cause of peace and invert Babel, as it were, into “one holy temple” (Eph. 2:21).

Severities might well have predisposed Merton’s singular empathy for Heraclitus. There was, of course, severity in the paternal tragedies of the child and the youth. And there followed in time a second birthing under the “severe muses” of the old masters of La Trappe – but a healing severity. And Merton was predisposed to the peculiar thought patterns of Heraclitus. The monks, after all, simply *lived*¹⁰ the paradoxes of the coincidence of opposites (e.g. “less is more”) that the more sophisticated and discarnate intellectuals wrote books about. And the venerable *Tao Te Ching* does open with the storied aphorism rendered variously as those who talk don’t know; those who know don’t talk. The Cistercians were men of few words. From the compression of the *Fragments* one might venture the same of the old philosopher. The circumstances of Merton’s first real encounter were a favorable omen. Heraclitus was mediated to the young dandy of Oakham in reading the poetry of none other than Gerard Manley Hopkins, and one can well imagine a lad, with an already low tolerance for sugary Victorian pieties, picking up an even jivey signal from a title such as: “That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection.”¹¹ “Fire” – perhaps the foremost symbol of mystical theology and of Merton, the familiar of the company of “the burnt men” (*SSM* 423) of Christ (concluding Merton’s purgatorial life), and most like a death by fire (electrocution), and deliverance *in paradisum*. One last card, some might say the joker – we are told that the exile of Ephesus retired “to live alone in the mountains, ‘feeding on grass and plants’” (*BT* 87). Was our patriarch a forerunner of John the Baptist, of St. Anthony of the Desert, not so much a monk in the world as a monk-at-large – dare one say it: “family”? Whatever – understanding Heraclitus, which perhaps no one has like Merton, may help us understand Merton, and maybe even ourselves.

The problem is that Heraclitus had no family. That is, there was no viable Heraclitean heritage, no humane part of paradox to, as it were, monitor his integrity. Therefore, the cultural orphan was liable to adoption, appropriation, even dragooning, by some “rough beast,” slouching toward Berlin “to be born.”¹² We allude to the rising Prussia school of politics. It may be fateful that the first edition of the scattered leaves of Heraclitus – essentially quotations culled from the classics – did not appear until Schopenhauer in 1817. The Ephesian’s putative unreason appealed especially to the mutants of the German romantics, eager for an alternative to the alien and now wilting Rationalism of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment was too Francophone, or Anglophile.

The disintegral fire of Heraclitus would warm the hearts of philosophers of war such as Heinrich von Treitsche, or philosophers of will such as Friedrich Nietzsche. But we must concede one or two of the one hundred twenty-four Fragments, inconsonant with the corpus, were susceptible – above all: “War is both father and king of all: some he has shown forth as gods and others as men, some he has made slaves and others free” ([#25] Wheelwright 29). From such, the anachronistic murmurs concerning the “fascist” (see *BT* 90).

The discernment of Merton was such that he was undaunted by any moral ambivalence. As a very distinguished Merton scholar confided to me in another context: Merton could “smell a rat.” He was heir of a tradition of Catholic “recapitulation” that goes back to Irenaeus and might even have been anticipated by the Apostle Paul at the Areopagus. As Gregory of Nyssa quaintly put it, the pagan philosophers simply had to be circumcised – we might say, warts excised. Merton would contain the fire, not douse it – render it “Brother Fire.” The foregoing “war” quote he simply rendered by the more generic “strife” (*BT* 102). Thus, it was incorporated more as spiritual warfare, the ancient *gladius spiritualis*. In sum, Merton, as much as might be, embraced any discordant intuitions of the sometimes acerbic as well as ludic fire-dancer and “sang a new song.” And the author, if I may so put it, has not attempted to re-dress Heraclitus as Dorothy Day, or even, as some “barking dogs” would have it, as the “naked” Gandhi. The point is that Heraclitus was pregnant with peace, and two and a half millennia is a long enough pregnancy. And in all of peace literature, there are few more immediately ponderable voices than his barking dogs. I would let them be his logo.

We might best make explicit the religious irenicism latent in Heraclitus. By Merton’s visionary standards he was Catholic: “My Catholicism is all the world and all ages. It dates from the beginning of the world. The first man was the image of Christ.”¹³ If this sounds presumptuous, does not the Bishop of Rome address *orbis* as well as *urbs*?

Let us recur to the diamond of the Logos. At the center of the cosmology of Heraclitus is a symbolic “fire” – a fire convertible to all things and to which all things are convertible. This Logos, as Merton observes, is in spirit more oriental than western, coextensive, as it were, with the Tao of Lao-tse and the prologue of the Gospel of St. John. He notes that it “comes *before* Aristotle’s principle of identity and contradiction” (*BT* 78). We might add that it is more dynamic than static: fire *does* dance. Brother Fire is even playful in the simply magnificent canticle of St. Francis. This Logos is pulsive, like the breath, and in some sense contains all possibilities. The conventionally received Logos as “Word” or “Reason” might well be enriched by Brother Fire, and yes, by Brother Heraclitus.

Let us briefly retire a weary Heraclitus for at least a cameo appearance of the also largely unknown Nicholas of Cusa. Cusa, after all, coined our coincidence of opposites and would even place above the portal of paradise: “*coincidencia oppositorum*.”¹⁴ A speculative thinker of the highest order, this fifteenth-century bishop, scientist *and* mystical theologian can be dubbed another embodiment of this mysterious construct. Apparently Cusa had no direct knowledge of the *Fragments*, but beginning with his version of negative theology, *Learned Ignorance*, he effectively transmuted their raw discordant concord, or concordant discord, into a full-blown mystical theology.

Merton found confirmation in Cusa. He not only translated one of his dialogues, “On the Hidden God,”¹⁵ but gathered Cusa into one of his most striking statements on mystical experience:

This realization at the apex is a coincidence of all opposites (as Nicholas of Cusa

might say), a fusion of freedom and unfreedom, being and unbeing, life and death, self and non-self, man and God. The “spark” is not so much a stable entity which one finds but an event, an explosion which happens as all opposites clash within oneself.¹⁶

I like so much that Merton characterizes the experience as an “event,” reinforcing that his is a prophetic mysticism, not an asocial experience, such as the still winsome words of Plotinus, “the alone with the Alone.”¹⁷ Not the least parts of the coincidence of opposites are heaven and earth. The synthesis is no antiseptic abstraction, but inseparable from the messiness of history, while echatologically speaking it is the end of history.

And the *Hagia Sophia* (CP 363-71) can take us to the end of our pilgrimage of paradox. I would consider this rather myterious prose poem – so layered, seamless and polysemous – one of Merton’s finest achievements. Keenly paradoxical, I see it as a surreal drama, mostly about “awakening,” a synoptic salvation history. (For its hardly inconsiderable theological relevance, one must see the recently published and already acclaimed depth study of Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton*.¹⁸)

Merton’s “Nature loves to hide” (BT 97). If Heraclitus provides the diamonds in the rough, he is residually present; Cusa refines that ore and renders it theological; and Merton balances the overly “masculine” cast of both with the dearly needed healing touch of the feminine – and adorns his basilica with the aesthetic. Merton softens the severely bred, returning the favor of the first diamond. He is “confronting reality,” as he puts it, “and finding it to be gentleness” (CP 364). This alone is enough to make his song a peace poem – as though Merton ever wrote a word that was not peace. “The cool hand of the nurse” (CP 364) is no mere token, and the “sweet yielding consent of Sophia” (CP 370) more than an allusion to the Annunciation, but elemental models of the birthing of peace. Lest I forget, let me pass on a word of the late and assuredly great Benedictine Godfrey Diekmann, lightheartedly offered in a lecture: just maybe the primal sacrament is “the touch.” And is that what Michelangelo whimsically had in mind in the birth of Adam? And isn’t the sophianic imagination sacramental?

But now awakening is a serious matter, a reason the alarm clock is the most mean-spirited of contraptions. All the same, without awakening, mystical literature is likely to issue in a pretty soggy fire, smoke rather than light, perhaps an “interesting hypothesis” of a benighted age before the revelation of computers – in a word, diversion. But awakening is there from Merton, where it intrudes upon his dream, to Christ awakening from his tomb. Awakening is big in Heraclitus, who was perhaps more than a bullish insomniac. Awakening would be bigger in Merton, and the ghost of the restless dancer may be behind it. I find it suggestive that in Merton’s (even) partial translation of the *Fragments* he somehow twice includes a most pertinent aphorism: “The waking have one common world, but the sleeping turn aside each into a world of his own” (BT 96, 105). Mind you, I think it is worth an encore. Awakening, of course, is an essential motif of the mystic universally.

The close of *Hagia Sophia* seems anti-climactic: Christ falls asleep! You call this an example? Yes, assuredly. But alas, I can be so emphatic only after pondering over this peculiar ending for several decades – being a slow learner. I have wished that it were not there, wished that the poet had left us another exit, one like the marvelous *Cable* that opens:

Slowly, slowly
Comes Christ through the garden
Speaking to the sacred trees

but “the disciple” only

Turns over in his sleep
And murmurs:
“My regret!”

The poem ends:

The Lord of History
Weeps into the fire. (CP 449)

I don't think that this Gethsemani moment is too sentimental, but a gentling Jesus of Nazareth would not rain on Merton's parade. And I have come – with a little reminder from St. Francis – to see Merton's closing all but perfect. Merton, of course, had first applied for admission to the Franciscans, but when he confessed his wayward ways of old, was unceremoniously sent away. But the monk's heart was large enough to be Franciscan as well as Cistercian, Taoist as well as Catholic, and subliminally might have emerged what is considered the final pronouncement of the dying Francis: “I have done what was mine to do. May Christ teach you what you are to do.”¹⁹ Merton's twist at the end may be as close as he came to his testament.

And this gentle awakening was not by alarm clock. The more courteous giants always leave something undone.

Nature loves to hide – in order that we might the better see.

Let us try, at the end, to center our thoughts and sharpen their signification. At the center, alas, is the still mysterious coincidence of opposites. But mysterious *and* ubiquitous. Let us simply appeal to human experience and suggest that the best things in life are expressions of this mystery: the magic of a rainbow, a mixture of rain and shine; the interdependence of humankind, not least that of the feminine and masculine; the implosions of love and love's coitus; the joy and travail of birthing; the way of the lyre, quite literally: music, with its alternations of sound and silence; poetry, which Coleridge himself, writing of poetic fusion, characterized as a “balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities”;²⁰ and not least peace, as the composure of clanging swords and their conversion into plowshares; justice, as the right ordering of conflicting suitors and societies; and all too rare “great emotion,” as in “tears of joy.” There is a magnetism of polar forces in the universe which has instructive analogies for humankind.

At the same time, I believe that the *coincidencia*, if you will, is ubiquitous enough to coincide with a “God's-eye view.” Cusa, no doubt with a wink, deemed it “the least imperfect definition of God.” And would not Christ Himself seem to be an exemplar or even archetype of paradox – Son of God and Son of Man, wholly human and wholly divine, Alpha and Omega, Triune – all scandals to Paul's “wisdom of the world” (1 Cor. 1:21).

The Prince of Peace not only willed concord, but offered his life to it, and the *coincidencia*, with its mutually conditioning convergence, should be put in its service. The coincidence of opposites is an essential alternative to a collision, better, clash of opposites. I am minded of the last line of the great and tragic vision of Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach," with its "darkling plain, / Where ignorant armies clash by night."²¹

Likewise, we have suggested, with our excursion into intellectual warlords of Prussia, misappropriating Heraclitus, that a genuine mysticism is an essential alternative to a perverse mystique. This also comes of religion in large part reduced to pietism. Demons rush in where pietism fears to tread. And so Hitler was taken by many to be a mystic!

Merton himself writes insightfully of a pseudo-mystical "summons." The passage is one of his finest and worth of quotation:

The great danger of war is precisely this universal need for *mass immorality*, which the game of war so completely satisfies. The satisfaction is all the greater when the suspension of conscience can be seen as a charismatic response to a higher, more mystical summons: to destroy the devil by a delicious recourse to the devil's own methods. (CGB 208)

The passage compels me to drop the pen.

I have tried to say that the *Fragments* of Heraclitus, seen whole, are food for a fragmented world. Call it communion if you care to. As communion, it might taste of cactus, "Night-flowering Cactus" (CP 351-52), if you will, to bend to that exquisitely mysterious poem of Merton. This is to suggest that ours is, I guess, more of a desert spirituality, a place of wide open spaces, of exodus from our self-captivity. Its goal is harmony, its way is friction. I wish I could claim for it the image raised by the title of Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*.²² Its God is big, but not necessarily our "good buddy." Let God be God. And did we not begin in the desert?

1. Philip Wheelwright, *Heraclitus* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959) 83; subsequent references will be cited with *Fragment* number as "Wheelwright" parenthetically in the text. See also Thomas Merton, "Herakleitos the Obscure," in *The Behavior of Titans* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 104; subsequent references will be cited as "BT" parenthetically in the text.
2. St. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 4.20.7.
3. Christopher Nugent, "Merton, the Coincidence of Opposites and the Archeology of Catholicity," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 26.3 (1991) 257-70.
4. The author must apologize to Herakleitos posthumously for latinizing his name; it is more conventional and also more congruent with "pax."
5. "St. Justin Martyr refers to him, along with Socrates, as a 'Saint' of pre-Christian paganism" (BT 77).
6. The essay with selected excerpts was first published in *Jubilee* 8.5 (September 1960) 24-31; the essay ("Herakleitos: A Study" [BT 73-94]) without the translated excerpts ("The Legacy of Herakleitos" [BT 95-106]) is also found in *A Thomas Merton Reader*, ed. Thomas P. McDonnell (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1962) 273-84; rev. ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Image, 1974) 258-71. The excerpts are included without the essay in Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 767-75; subsequent references will be cited as "CP" parenthetically in the text.
7. Merton uses this expression in relation to Rilke in Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967) 245.
8. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 142; subsequent references will be cited as "CGB" parenthetically in the text.

9. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 3; subsequent references will be cited as “SSM” parenthetically in the text.
10. See Esther de Waal, *Living with Contradiction: Reflections on the Rule of St. Benedict* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989).
11. Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems and Prose*, selected and edited by W. H. Gardner (Baltimore: Penguin, 1953) 65-66; see BT 91-92 for Merton’s comments.
12. William Butler Yeats, “The Second Coming,” in *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1956) 184-85.
13. Thomas Merton, “Honorable Reader”: *Reflections on My Work*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 41.
14. Nicholas of Cusa, *The Vision of God*, trans. Emma Gurney Salter (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1928, 1978) 46.
15. Nicholas of Cusa, *Dialogue on the Hidden God*, trans. Thomas Merton (New York: Dim Gray Bar Press, 1989); first published in *Lugano Review* 1 (Summer 1966) 67-70.
16. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979) 10.
17. Plotinus, *Enneads* VI.9.11.51.
18. Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009).
19. Thomas of Celano, *Second Life of St. Francis* #214 (*St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis*, ed. Marion Habig, OFM, third ed. [Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1973] 534).
20. S. T. Coleridge, quoted in Cleanth Brooks, *The Well-wrought Urn* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1947) 17.
21. Matthew Arnold, *Poetical Works*, ed. C. B. Tinker & H. F. Lowry (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966) 212.
22. Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).