

'Thomas Merton, my Brother': The Impact of Thomas Merton on my Life and Thought

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It is probably presumptuous of me to think that others might be interested in the impact of Thomas Merton on *my* life and thought. But I will blush a bit and make bold to speak on this subject anyway on the hunch that my reflections may help others see more clearly how Merton has contributed to all of us. Because Merton engages us so personally through his writings, moreover, my musings about his gifts to me may register more deeply than an academic paper on some obscure point in his thought.

I must confess that at first glance Merton as monk and I as a Baptist seminary professor do seem to make a strange pair. When I took the first group of students I taught church history at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary to the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1960, I knew Merton's name only in connection with vague references I had heard or seen concerning *The Seven Storey Mountain*, which I had not read. My purpose in taking students was to expose them to the Middle Ages. Merton was our bonus.

That stange and wonderful place where hardly anyone except Merton talked made us all a little nervous. Merton put us at ease. He spoke about life in the monastery. When he finished and asked if there were questions, one of the students asked what I feared one of them would ask, 'What is a smart fellow like you doing throwing his life away in a place like this?' I waited for Merton to open his mouth and eat this guy alive. But he didn't. He just let love flow out, and he replied, 'I am here because this is my vocation. I could not be here if it wasn't. I believe in prayer'.

That response overwhelmed *me*. It overwhelmed all of us. We had never met anyone who believed in prayer enough to consider it a vocation. Most of us had grown up hearing exhortations to prayer

qualified with reminders that 'God has no hands but our hands, no feet but our feet, no voice but our voice'. All the way back to Louisville that day Merton's words kept pounding in my ears and in my heart, and before we arrived I was praying mightily that Merton would be right. For I realized that, if 'God has no hands but our hands, no feet but our feet, no voice but our voice', our world and our lives are in one heck of a mess. I realized that we had better hope not only that God's love energies would pour into our lives to form and inform and transform but also that those same love energies would flow through us to get some things done we can never do with our hands and feet and voices.

What I propose to do in this article, then, is to tell you why I am attracted to Thomas Merton and how he has impacted my life and thought. Early on, as I pondered topics I might address, I thought I would survey Protestant writings about Merton and review perceptions of other Protestants. However, I soon discovered that to be a daunting task I had better leave to real Merton specialists, which, after all, I am not. I am only a dilettante who appreciates and loves Merton, has read most of his writings and has gained an incalculable amount from him. Knowing my limitations, therefore, I can shed more light on the subject by personal testimony than by trying to tell experts what others have said about him.

Why I Am Attracted to Merton

I will begin by telling you why I am attracted to Thomas Merton. In part I am drawn to Merton for the same reasons others have been drawn to him. One reason is timing. Merton wrote in the apocalyptic and ecumenical era which followed World War II. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, published in 1948, gave eloquent expression to the deep pain millions of us have experienced and, with its powerful Augustinian emphasis on grace, cast a ray of hope in a war-wracked world. As that work made Merton an international celebrity, it whetted the appetites of people hungry to learn more about the contemplative life which had cast a spell on this brilliant man of the world and got him to wed her. Thereafter, people read virtually everything Merton wrote, even when he addressed only monks.

At the same time as he was addressing those who wanted to learn more about contemplation, Merton was taking part in a critical phase of an ecumenical revolution set in motion by Pope John XXIII (1958–63). As a recent convert in the forties when he wrote *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton was far from ready for this revolution. But after

what he called his 'submarine earthquake' in 1949 and 1950, he lent himself in a remarkable way to it. He embodied it in his own personality and outlook and, in his commitment to Catholic tradition, gave it an anchor to which others could hold. He helped them to see that true ecumenism must occur at the deepest levels of human experience if it is to be unafraid.

So timing is one of the factors which has brought me with many others to Merton. By itself, however, timing will not explain why Merton and not other monks who wrote a lot caught our attention. To timing, I think, we must add a word about his gifts and skills in communication. He could communicate.

I tell the story with some embarrassment, but it illustrates my point. Once Tom sent me a postcard inviting me and my wife to an exhibition of his charcoal sketches at Spalding College. Afterwards I wrote him a thank-you note giving my appraisal of his artwork, which I liked, and so on. He zipped off a terse reply. 'Dummy! The object was not for you to go and praise bad art but to buy one of those sketches so some poor girl could have a scholarship.' He could make his point!

That, however, is the surface. In *Thoughts in Solitude* he has written, 'Books can speak to us like God, like men or like the noise of the city we live in'.¹ Merton was very critical of his own writings. In a scheme he drew up he ranged them across a spectrum from 'Awful' to 'Best' and listed at least one (*What Are These Wounds?*) as 'Awful'. He counted several 'Better' but none 'Best'. Nevertheless, I doubt whether anything he wrote was only 'the noise of the city'. Merton had a gift for engaging you, tuning in exactly on your wavelength. Many are those who on first meeting could honestly say, 'I feel like I've known him all my life'. He did that in person and does that also in his writings. I like my students to read Merton because I have noticed that those who study Merton improve markedly in their ability to write.

More important than his style, however, was Merton's message, a message about contemplation in a world of action. There was nothing brand new or startling in his message. Merton was traditional, though not conventional. He opposed 'convention', by which he meant the externals, the husk. But he held steadfastly to 'tradition', what he thought of as the essence of something. I would call him an 'unconventional traditionalist'. What he did was to feed the vast

1. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956), p. 61.

contemplative tradition through his own heart and mind and let it speak to our present human condition in such a way that, 'Mertonized', it appeared new and fresh as the flowers in the springtime.

Many heard Thomas Merton's assurance that 'in a broad sense every life can be dedicated to some extent to contemplation, and even the most active of lives can and should be balanced by a contemplative element—leavened by the peace and order and clarity that can be provided by meditation, interior prayer, and the deep penetration of the most fundamental truths of human existence'.²

This prophet, poet, artist and contemplative all rolled into one helped many to realize that they needed to seek wisdom for its own sake, the Ground of Being, God. He helped us to recognize that we needed love and compassion generated by contemplation. A statement John Bunyan once made about Luther's *Commentary on Galatians* expresses well what many can say of Thomas Merton's writings: 'I found my condition in his experience, so largely and profoundly handled, [I felt] as if it had been written out of my heart.' Bunyan went on to add, 'I do prefer this book of Martin Luther upon the Galatians, excepting the Holy Bible, before all the books that ever I had seen, as most fit for a wounded conscience'.³

Why Merton Could Impact my Life and Thought So Deeply

What I have said thus far will probably elicit knowing nods, for you have experienced the same thing. I want now to explain how Merton impacted my life and thought to such a degree, especially considering a Baptist and a Catholic, especially a monk in the Trappist order, might seem so unlike one another. My reasoning here will probably turn your needs into expressions of puzzlement and perhaps laughter. Merton's impact was strong and deep, I think, because of the congruity of his tradition and my tradition. We both belong to the contemplative tradition—he the one going directly from La Trappe to Citeaux to Monte Cassino and from there to the desert fathers and mothers; I the one early Baptists inherited from the Puritans who deliberately returned to the medieval contemplative tradition to find help in effecting the 'further reformation' they sought for the church in the seventeenth century.

2. Thomas Merton, 'The Contemplative Life: Its Meaning and Necessity', *The Dublin Review* 223 (Winter 1949), pp. 26-35 (27).

3. John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding* (ed. E. Glenn Hinson; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978), p. 251 §§129, 130.

By way of the Puritans Baptists are the heirs of the medieval contemplative tradition. Like the ascetics and contemplatives, the Puritans were concerned, above all, about heart religion manifested in transformed lives and, from that, the transformation of society. They considered the Church of England only 'halfly' reformed and wanted to attain in England what Calvin had attained in Geneva. With that goal in mind they went back to the writings of the contemplatives to recover methods of prayer and meditation. In two essays I have written⁴ I have shown how much the Baptist tradition owes to the medieval contemplative tradition to which Merton belonged. Although Baptists seldom knew where their ideas came from, they inbibed deeply from that stream. John Bunyan's perceptions about prayer, for instance, reflect an amazing likeness to those of the desert fathers and mothers. Both, for instance, emphasized sincerity, spontaneity and the role of the Holy Spirit in prayer, and looked with suspicion on forms. Both were, in fact, essentially 'charismatic' in the broad sense. Baptist hymnals, moreover, offer evidence of 'surprising similarities' between the Baptist tradition and the medieval, especially the English, contemplative tradition. They share a concern for experiential religion and use much the same romantic imagery. The piety of both is Jesus-centered, which is remarkable when you remember that the Protestant reformers insisted on addressing the Father in prayer. Both exult in the name of Jesus. Both emphasize grace. Both know the world is not home and that the way of the cross leads home.

Shocking as it may seem, therefore, I am arguing that Merton and I belong to the same tradition, that we are 'cousins' once or twice removed, but not nearly as distant as many think. Let me press the issue at a couple of points which Baptists will insist are basic for their tradition: conversion and freedom.

Baptists will relate readily to Merton's account of his 'conversions' in *The Seven Storey Mountain* and in *The Sign of Jonas* and to Merton's interpretation of the monastic vocation as essentially a call to radical transformation. You will not see very radical things happening among Baptists any longer, but we still sing, 'The whole world was lost in the darkness of sin .../The light of the world is Jesus. O come to that light,/ 'Tis shining today'. We appeal for repentance and turning from sin to grasp the saving hand of Jesus. 'I was sinking deep in sin, Far from the peaceful shore,/Very deeply stained within,/'

4. E. Glenn Hinson, 'Prayer in John Bunyan and the Early Monastic Tradition', *Cistercian Studies* 18 (1983), pp. 217-30; and 'Southern Baptist and Medieval Spirituality: Surprising Similarities', *Cistercian Studies* 20 (1985), pp. 224-36.

Sinking to rise no more; But the Master of the sea/Heard my despairing cry/From the waters lifted me,/Now safe am I!'

Merton as a 'twice born', therefore, we understand well. He did not feel comfortable with Teilhard de Chardin's optimism, for he knew too well the power of sin in his own life. His story paralleled Augustine's and Bunyan's, not Teilhard's. Although the parochialism of *The Seven Storey Mountain* will offend many, most will find the conversion theme fits well the Baptist stereotype, reported many times in testimonies. Still more gripping, however, will be Merton's account of a second 'conversion' in *The Sign of Jonas* which will also ring true in Baptist ears, for it sounds a lot like John Bunyan's account of the working of grace in both his spiritual autobiography and, in metaphorical style, in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Bunyan battled severe depression until he overcame the Giant Despair at Doubting Castle with the help of grace. Had Merton chosen to use another piece of literature as he did Augustine's *Confessions* in order to tell the story of his first conversion, he might have settled on Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, and Bunyan could have used the story of Jonah to interpret his experience much as Merton did in *The Sign of Jonas*.

If you study Merton's message and the Baptist message in some of its best representatives, such as Martin Luther King, Jr, and Clarence Jordan in Merton's era, you will find an amazing amount of congruence. At the center of the Baptist tradition is a concern for voluntariness of faith. 'To be authentic and responsible', our Baptist forebears said again and again, 'faith must be free. Obedience must be voluntary or else it is not obedience'. Merton chimed that message in his day. He sounded it in the monastery and echoed it on the hills. Indeed, Jim Forest has fingered freedom as Merton's central concern. 'Merton's message', he observed, 'was one of freedom, freedom from cultures and mind-styles that have been driven mad with acceleration (he would have been happy to wear a Speed Kills button), freedom to see and hear without self-imposed biases. He hoped for de-nationalization of the head'.⁵

Connected with concern for voluntary religion is a conviction that each individual must accept responsibility for his or her relationship with God. Baptists rejected baptism of infants because infants could not choose and thus, later on, could not be held accountable for a commitment they did not make personally. At Bangkok in the last address he ever gave Merton interpreted the monastic tradition pre-

5. James H. Forest, 'The Gift of Merton', *Commonweal* (10 January 1969), p. 465.

cisely on those lines. The monk is one who stands on his/her own feet over against the 'world', that is, the world of illusion and 'collective unreason'. As Merton understood the monastic vocation, the individual call is not peripheral but central. The monk offers a witness to the radical transformation God is effecting among humankind. At heart, monasticism is 'a commitment to total inner transformation of one sort or another—a commitment to become a completely new [person]'.⁶

Even in ecumenism Merton reflected the highly individualistic and personalistic approach one will find among Baptists. Rearranging structures will do little to bring our divided worlds together. Such a strategy is essentially political and thus destined to fail. On the contrary, we must unite all divided worlds in ourselves and transcend them in Christ.

Interwoven into these central issues for both Baptists and Merton—conversion, freedom, individual responsibility—is a driving desire for authenticity and wholeness which, both agree, only God's transforming love can effect. Baptists cannot claim the sophisticated knowledge of the contemplative tradition Merton obviously possessed, but they have shared his conviction that the key to human transformation lies in opening ourselves to God's love like a flower opening to the morning sunshine. 'Let Jesus come into your heart', a favorite invitational hymn pleads. 'Your sins he'll wash away,/Your night he'll turn to day. Your life he'll make it over anew'. The words sound amazingly like some of Merton's on the crux of monastic transformation, of course, with significant adjustments in language.

Merton's Most Important Gift to Me

As a Baptist, I am drawn to Thomas Merton, therefore, because of his ability to communicate a life-giving message with clarity and cogency in an age when such a word is desperately needed. I have been impacted deeply by his life and thought because of the congruity of my tradition with his. If you ask me what it is, above all, that I have learned from Merton, I will probably surprise you once more by saying, 'I have learned the importance of tradition for a denomination that has always eschewed, or claimed to eschew, and spoken disparagingly or even contemptuously of, tradition'.

6. Thomas Merton, 'Marxism and Monastic Perspectives', in Naomi Burton, James Laughlin and Patrick Hart (eds.), *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1973), p. 337.

To be quite blunt, Southern Baptists have already ceased to be Baptist. By that I mean they have relinquished the elements of their tradition which have, in the past, characterized Baptists: voluntariness, religious liberty, separation of church and state, and voluntary association to discharge the world mission of Christ. We have become 'the Catholic Church of the South', by which I mean nothing pejorative but simply that we have become so numerically dominant that we no longer think like Baptists. To think like Baptists is to think like a minority, which we were when we began in England or the American colonies in the seventeenth century, concerned to protect freedom at all costs. Now that we have become numerically dominant in virtually every county east of Texas and south of the Mason-Dixon line, we think like an established church for which the voluntary principle is not advantageous.

Southern Baptists, all except a remnant, therefore, have abandoned their tradition of voluntarism. If you range denominations across a spectrum from voluntarism, in which the Holy Spirit is believed to act through the individual will to effect obedience, to corporatism, in which the Holy Spirit is believed to act through the church to effect obedience, in the seventeenth century my Baptist forebears would have stood at the extreme voluntarist end of the spectrum alongside Quakers and the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches at the extreme corporatist end. At the Second Vatican Council Roman Catholics began sidling toward the voluntarist end, as a Concilium volume on *Christian Obedience*⁷ demonstrates. No more slavish obeisance to religious superiors or spiritual directors. Spiritual directors must pay full heed to the personality and individuality of each person receiving instruction and guidance. Meantime, Southern Baptists have zipped past Roman Catholics going the other way. Many, if they could, would impose a stereotyped spirituality, an essentially dogmatic one drawn from Fundamentalism, on all. What I would pray is that powerful ecumenical currents of our day might pull us all more toward the center.

What I have learned from Thomas Merton is the importance of holding on to the essence of my tradition. Early on in my ecumenical pilgrimage, I found myself so fascinated with other traditions I could hardly find anything good about the Baptist tradition. Our worship, for instance, seemed arid and superficial by comparison with the richness of Roman Catholic, Anglican or Orthodox liturgical worship.

7. Christian Duquoc and Casiano Floristán (eds.), *Christian Obedience*, (Concilium, 139; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark; New York: Seabury, 1980).

Somewhere along the way, however, I began to realize that my forebears had an important point to make when they simplified the liturgy. If, as Merton suggested, I could recover the rationale for what they did, I could distinguish the essential from the conventional. It was convention and not tradition which I needed to divest myself of.

In this ecumenical era I think all of us need to return to the catholic (little c) mainstream. However, we cannot simply run and jump into that stream. Neither can we abandon our tradition, for it contains something of the essence, else it would not have survived until now. We would be wise, rather, to hoist our pants' legs and wade back through our own stream toward where it joins the mainstream. Thanks to what we have experienced together since John XXIII became pope, especially through the gift of Thomas Merton, we are all able to own the whole tradition of Christian spirituality as our tradition.

If my experience gives any clue to what has happened on a larger scale, it shows that God has wrought something utterly remarkable in the past three decades. Just after I took the first group of students to Gethsemani, Merton sent me copies of the manuals he used for training novices consisting chiefly of sources drawn from the contemplative tradition and, a little later, a copy of *Spiritual Direction and Meditation*.⁸ I perused the manuals and read *Spiritual Direction and Meditation*. All of that rolled off me like water off a duck's back. Not for a moment did it occur to me that those materials had any relevance for the training of ministers at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Today, 35 years later, I incorporate insights drawn from those manuals to introduce students to spirituality and encourage students to read *Spiritual Direction and Meditation* in a required course I teach entitled 'Ministers as Spiritual Guides'. Merton has guided me and hundreds of ministers I have taught toward the contemplative mainstream.

Simultaneously he has taught us all that tradition is not the dead hand of the past which holds us back. Rather, if we will drink from its ever-flowing streams, it can actually give vitality and direction to our individual and corporate quest for a richer and fuller life on this edge of a new millennium. Thank God for this gift! Thank God for Thomas Merton!

8. Thomas Merton, *Spiritual Direction and Meditation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1960).