

Thomas Merton and E. Glenn Hinson: The *Aggiornamento* of Spiritual Formation among Progressive Baptists

By Wm. Loyd Allen

Thomas Merton's personal contact with certain Baptists had lasting affect on the spiritual formation of progressive Baptists in the South. This manifestation of the ecumenical spirit of Vatican II may be traced in the friendship Merton had with Baptist professor E. Glenn Hinson. I teach church history and spiritual formation at the James and Carolyn McAfee School of Theology, a graduate school of Mercer University. Mercer opened McAfee in 1996 to train progressive Baptist ministers for congregational leadership. Each semester for ten years, I have introduced Pope John XXIII during the second half of my Church History survey class to students who were mostly Baptist and totally Protestant (except for one Roman Catholic). I tell them to listen carefully, because this pope made a big difference in their devotional lives. Having alerted them to the importance of John XXIII for their spiritual formation, I then go on to make the following connections, saying:

In my classes, most of you have been introduced for the first time to the great treasury of classical Christian spiritual disciplines. I want you to know that a Baptist professor named Glenn Hinson opened these resources up for me thirty years ago; and that Hinson learned much of what he taught me from a Cistercian monk named Thomas Merton; and that Merton was free to befriend Hinson because of the ecumenical possibilities created by Vatican II; and that Vatican II was called by Pope John XXIII. So, if your prayers are enriched by the classical Christian traditions you learn here at McAfee, you may want to thank Pope John.

In order to convey what an *aggiornamento* the introduction of disciplines such as *lectio divina*, meditation and the Ignatian *examen* is to the Baptist community, one only need remember that ministerial formation in most Baptist seminaries has for centuries stressed the academic above the experiential, the head more than the heart.

My own seminary education covered spiritual formation, per se, in two sentences uttered by the seminary's president at student orientation. In the first sentence, he told my entering class that our spiritual development was absolutely vital to our ministry. In the second and last sentence, he said he hoped we would each find a local church to nurture us in that essential task.¹



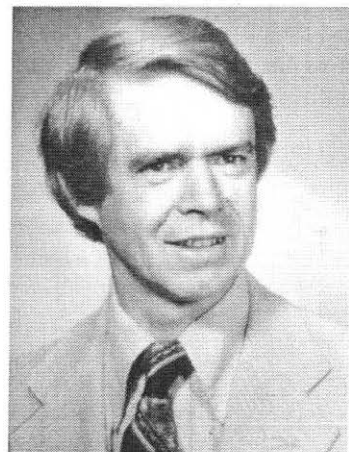
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Hinson and Merton: A Fruitful Friendship

In 2005, things are different in some Baptist academies. A pivotal event in bringing about this change was a visit made by a first-year church history professor and his Baptist seminary class to Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky on November 7, 1960. Southern Seminary professor Glenn Hinson took his introductory church history class to a Catholic monastery to “expose them to the Middle Ages.”² After a tour, a student asked their host, one Thomas Merton, “What’s a smart fellow like you doing throwing his life away in a place like this?” Merton replied, “I am here because I believe in prayer. That is my vocation.” Hinson was bowled over; he realized he “had never met anyone who believed in prayer enough to think of it as a vocation.” On the trip back to his Baptist seminary in Louisville and for days after, Merton’s answer, according to Hinson, “kept drumming in my head alongside the Protestant rubric ‘God has no hands but our hands, no feet but our feet, no voice but our voice.’” Hinson came to the conclusion that Merton’s way offered a peace and tranquility that Baptist ministers needed, which could not be achieved by more achievement. Hinson began to cultivate a catholic (little c), contemplative spirituality within himself and his Baptist tradition.

Thomas Merton had contact at Gethsemani with students from various denominations during the 1960s; in his journal of May 1, 1961, he remarked on the “sweet earnestness” of Methodist students, and the “polish and sophistication” of Episcopalians. He liked the “rather taut fervor of the Baptists,”³ as well, writing of an October 1961 visit: “Glenn Hinson brought his Church History students out from the Baptist seminary and I spoke to them briefly after dinner about peace. We had a good conversation, and felt we understood each other completely. At the end we all said the Our Father together – it was about a year since the first group came from the Southern Baptist Seminary” (*TTW* 175). In 1965, Merton’s abbot ordered an end to the student visits as part of a compromise related to Merton’s move to a hermitage on the monastery grounds. To no avail, Hinson wrote a letter of protest, for which Merton expressed appreciation.⁴



E. Glenn Hinson

In 1961, the monks had built a little cinder block house at Gethsemani where Merton could converse with small groups of Protestants. Glenn Hinson was among those individuals regularly invited to visit.⁵ Though Merton expressed some ambivalence about these contacts – in April 1961, he remarked on the irony of a hermit having so many visitors – on the whole, he seemed to enjoy and benefit from contact with Protestants (see *TTW* 62, 109).⁶ He wrote of the Baptists from Louisville as “good friends,” whose “simplicity and goodness” (*TTW* 129-30) he admired, singling out Hinson as “a good and sincere person” (*TTW* 109) who “knows and loves the Fathers of the Church” (*DWL* 40). Through these visits, Merton wrote that he came more and more to “see the validity of Protestantism and its spirit: though the weaknesses,” he added, “are also enormous” (*TTW* 129). Declaring he was “certainly aware of the reality and life of *the Church* in a contact like this,” Merton wrote that he found in it “a fuller awareness and certainty of *fulfilling my function in the Church*” (*TTW* 130).

For his part, Glenn Hinson, in his friendship with Thomas Merton, developed an abiding personal and vocational commitment to two things: first, the life of contemplation in action, and sec-

ond, the value of holding on to the essence of his own Baptist tradition. Through the years, Hinson came to a central theme of his teaching on prayer that to most seems ludicrous upon first hearing: he concluded that the spiritual tradition Merton followed and the essence of the Baptist tradition are branches on the same contemplative vine. Hinson developed this insight in several of his writings.⁷ In the article, “‘Thomas Merton, My Brother’: The Impact of Thomas Merton on My Life and Thought,” the mature Hinson stated flatly: “Shocking as it may seem . . . 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 some may think.”⁸ He explained: “We both belong to the contemplative tradition – he the one going directly from La Trappe to Cîteaux 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” (Hinson, “TM” 91).

Thomas Merton’s death in 1968 accelerated Glenn Hinson’s contributions to Baptist spiritual formation. After Merton died, Hinson read everything in print by Merton with the intention of making “key ideas of Thomas Merton available to a Protestant audience” (Hinson email). The result was Hinson’s popular – among Baptists at least – 1972 book, *A Serious Call to a Contemplative Lifestyle*.⁹ The term “contemplative” in the title points to the essential Merton message; the entire title is a paraphrase taken from the eighteenth-century Protestant classic, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, by William Law.¹⁰ Catholic and Protestant spiritual traditions interwoven, contemplation in action made current: these are the fruit of the friendship of Hinson and Merton.

Hinson’s bonds with Roman Catholic as well as other contemplative spirituality traditions deepened and widened through the years. Hinson hosted Jesuit faculty and students from West Baden College in Indiana (now at Loyola University in Chicago), at Southern Seminary in 1962. (He recalled one of the students exclaiming after a couple of hours of dialogue: “You really believe in Christ!” [Hinson Interview]). A 1966-1967 sabbatical at Oxford University, during which he wrote *Seekers after Mature Faith* as a guide to devotional classics, introduced him to scholars Kallistos Ware and Henry Chadwick (Hinson Interview). In 1962, he first met contemplative Quaker scholar Douglas Steere by giving Steere a ride to Gethsemani to meet Merton. Steere invited Hinson to join the Ecumenical Institute of Spirituality, which became the single most important group influence on Hinson’s spiritual formation. The Ecumenical Institute is a scholars’ group that meets annually for a four-day retreat and conference. In that setting, through the decades, Hinson developed close relationships with many contemplatives, including Roman Catholics such as Jean Leclercq and Basil Pennington (Allen, “Hinson” 16-17). These networks of relationship provided many opportunities to interact with Catholic academic institutions, including teaching courses at Catholic University and St. John’s University, Collegeville.

Glenn Hinson Teaching Spirituality

Glenn Hinson taught at a seminary, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, where in a century of existence, only one class on prayer had been offered, and apparently it had not been repeated. Contacts with Roman Catholics gave Hinson determination to offer “right away” more in the way of spiritual formation than what he termed the usual Protestant “aperitif” (Hinson Interview). A few weeks after Hinson’s class visited Gethsemani for the first time in November 1960, Thomas Merton sent Hinson the manuals Merton had put together for teaching the

monastic novices spiritual formation. They were designed to teach the novices through exposure to spiritual masters in the history of Christian tradition. A little later Merton sent Hinson *Spiritual Direction and Meditation*. Hinson wrote that much of what they contained, “rolled off me like water off a duck’s back” upon first reading, but he was still using them to teach classes thirty-five years later (Hinson, “TM” 96).

In 1968, they gave Hinson an idea for putting the history of spirituality into his church history curriculum; he offered a class titled Classics of Christian Devotion. Hinson taught the Classics course for the first time to twenty-three students in the spring semester of the 1962-1963 academic year. The next year student interest required he offer two sections of thirty each, and the third year, though he offered three sections of thirty students each, the waiting list reached 157. Hinson recalled that semester with the exclamation, “I knew I had hit on something big!” (Hinson interview). For three decades, Hinson planted the seeds of contemplation in the spiritual formation of Baptist ministers in training at Southern Seminary in Louisville. The soil was fertile, but the conditions were arid (Allen, “Hinson” 18). Not surprisingly, room for a new and relatively unfamiliar discipline in a well-established seminary curriculum was difficult to come by. (My two-sentence spiritual formation experience detailed earlier occurred fully fifteen years after Hinson met Merton.) He had little success lobbying for more attention to personal spiritual formation as classes emphasizing ministerial skills were added in the 1980s. Hinson made more progress by starting a class on spiritual formation to be co-taught with pastoral-care professor Edward Thornton in the late 1980s. The strategy was to have the course co-taught with Hinson or Thornton and another interested professor, who would then co-teach with another faculty member, and so on. The results promised to increase the number of faculty with experience and teaching skills in the area of spiritual formation, but the experiment died a rather sudden death as explained later in this article.

Hinson’s contemplative spirituality connections indirectly influenced another Southern Baptist Convention seminary, Southeastern in North Carolina, during the 1980s in the person of Bill Clemmons. Clemmons was an SBC missionary in Italy during Vatican II. Back in the United States in 1973, he invited Douglas Steere and Hinson to lead a Louisville conference and soon thereafter found himself under spiritual direction at Gethsemani for the next twelve years. After publishing *Discovering the Depths: Guidance in Personal Spiritual Growth*¹¹ in 1976, Clemmons was hired to teach spiritual formation in the Christian Education area at Southeastern Seminary in 1979. When he found himself unwelcome in the fundamentalist atmosphere of Southeastern, Clemmons moved to Chicago and taught spirituality from 1993 until 1999 at American Baptists’ Northern Baptist Theological Seminary. There he initiated a Doctor of Ministry degree in a joint program with The Oratory of St. Philip Neri, Rock Hill, South Carolina, and Duquesne University. In retirement, Clemmons has remained active with the spirituality program at Columbia University and the Contemplative Outreach organization of Thomas Keating.

Back at Southern Seminary in Louisville, denominational controversy within the Southern Baptist Convention resulted in the departure of most of the faculty who participated in the team-teaching of spirituality, or who desired to do so (Allen, “Hinson” 18). The type of spiritual formation Hinson had cultivated among Baptist ministerial students fell from favor with the coming of a new administration chosen by Southern Baptist Convention leadership ignorant of the contemplative Christian tradition.

Diaspora

A diaspora of Southern Baptist academics, the type Thomas Merton had come to know and admire, occurred during what Southern Baptists call the Convention Controversy of the 1980s and '90s. The largest increase in the number of Baptist theological schools in America since the Second Great Awakening occurred as exiled progressive Baptists sought new avenues to educate ministers for their churches. The website of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, or CBF, a kind of network umbrella organization begun by Baptists on the losing side of the Controversy, lists as Education Partners nine such Baptist schools, all founded in the last two decades of the twentieth century.¹³ Another school on the list, Central Seminary in Kansas City, Missouri, has a longer history but explicitly joined ranks with CBF Baptists during this era. The combined student population of these graduate theology schools is more than 2,000. Each one has a spiritual formation component in its mission and curriculum. Glenn Hinson likes to say with a smile, "They are all infected with my heresy." A survey of the programs at these schools reveals the extent of his influence.

When Glenn Hinson's position at Southern became untenable, he moved to the newly formed Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond (BTSR) as Professor of Worship and Spirituality in 1991. (Baptists have not been careful to distinguish spirituality as an academic discipline from spiritual formation. Most Baptist academies considered in this article more or less combine the two in their curriculum and community.) Tom Halbrooks, BTSR's academic vice-president, had been a student in Hinson's first Classics of Christian Devotion class (Allen, "Formation"). In Virginia, Hinson found freedom to make spiritual formation an integral part of Baptist ministerial education, developing two core classes in spirituality and enough electives to make one available every semester. Contemplative retreats were also integrated into the life of the seminary. After Hinson retired in 1999, Stephen Brachlow became Professor of Spirituality. In retirement, Hinson continues to teach as Senior Professor of Church History and Spirituality at the Baptist Seminary of Kentucky, which graduated its first class in 2005.

Central Baptist Seminary's President Molly Marshall came to that faculty as Professor of Theology and Spiritual Formation after having served as Southern Seminary's first female tenured theology faculty member. She did her dissertation work under theologian Dale Moody, one of those Southern Baptist scholars Thomas Merton called "good friends" (*TTW* 129). The Gardner-Webb Divinity School in Buies Creek, North Carolina, requires twelve hours of spiritual formation courses. A Southern graduate, Melanie Greer Nagolski, Assistant Professor of Spiritual Formation, is completing a D.Min. degree in spirituality at Columbia Seminary in Atlanta. Campbell University School of Divinity, also in North Carolina, requires nine hours in Spiritual and Vocational Formation taught by Associate Dean Bruce Powers, who holds two degrees from Southern Seminary. Tim Brock, Assistant Professor of Christian Education, who has worked closely with Hinson, also has two degrees from Southern. The faculty maintains a web page of spiritual formation resources. At Baylor University's Truett Seminary, Betty Talbert is Director of Spiritual Formation; she worked with Glenn Hinson at Wake Forest University in 1982-1984 as he developed an M.A. in Spirituality there. The Logsdon School of Theology at Hardin-Simmons University in Texas offers an M.Div. with courses and a retreat required in the area of spiritual formation; faculty members Dan R. Stiver and Ronnie Prevost served with Hinson at Southern in the 1980s. The Divinity School at Wake Forest University, where Benedictine priest Samuel Weber serves as Associate Professor of Spiritual Formation, has Introduction to Spiritual Life as a core requirement and lists eight spirituality

electives; Fr. Weber was a professor and monk at St. Meinrad, Indiana, before Dean Bill Leonard, who served for many years alongside Glenn Hinson on the church history faculty at Southern, employed him at Wake Forest. The McAfee School of Theology, where I work, requires two courses in spiritual formation, and an annual retreat. Additionally, every syllabus in every discipline comes before the faculty as a whole to show how the class includes spiritual formation. I entered the Ph.D. program at Southern in 1980 to pursue interests provoked by taking Hinson's Devotional Classics class.

Year after year, graduation after graduation, the influence of Thomas Merton and Vatican II upon the spiritual formation of progressive Baptists in the South makes its way into their local congregations through the calling of ministers.

Conclusion

Visiting in the little cinderblock house at Gethsemani, neither Glenn Hinson nor Thomas Merton could have imagined the impact their friendship would have on Baptist spiritual formation. They were aware, however, that their friendship was bolstered by the events surrounding the election of Pope John XXIII and the convening of Vatican II. An early death foreshortened Merton's perspective, but John XXIII's papacy drew the monk, indeed sometimes pushed him, forward into ecumenical dialogue with Baptists. An October 1960 entry in Merton's journal that curtly dismisses John XXIII's approval of dialogue with Protestants as "mak[ing] no difference," is evidence that it probably did. Merton's reluctance was at least partially affected by the spirit of the times (*TTW* 62). He told Hinson in 1960 that before then, the kind of exchange they had could not have happened (Hinson email). Merton had come a long way from the Roman ecclesiastical imperialism of his *Seven Story Mountain* period. He was ready, if initially reluctant, for the "ecumenical revolution" initiated by John XXIII (Hinson, "TM" 89). In many ways he welcomed it, as he welcomed the election of John XXIII from the first, writing: "I cannot help feeling right away that perhaps he is a saint. My kind of a saint – who smokes a cigarette after dinner," adding in parentheses, "(I have got over the idea that this would immediately disqualify him – that went out ten years ago)."¹⁴ Merton found his message concerning contemplation riding a wave of Vatican II-era ecumenism onto and beyond Protestant shores, including Baptist ones.

Glenn Hinson, looking back over the decades at the way many progressive Baptists have embraced contemplative spirituality, simply says, "Insofar as I have had influence toward this, you can trace all of it back to Thomas Merton and the impact he has had on me in this remarkable era which began with John XXIII. By my interpretation a new epoch in Church history began with John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council" (Hinson email). Commenting on his vocation as church historian, Hinson said, "I feel blessed that my career has coincided with John XXIII becoming pope. I can't even imagine what it must have been like to teach church history before John XXIII, anymore. In a day when Protestants didn't say anything good about Catholics and Catholics didn't say anything good about Protestants, John so changed the scene" (Hinson Interview).

In conclusion, perhaps I should offer my Baptist-to-the-bone self as living proof of Hinson's benediction at the end of an article about his friend at Gethsemani: "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" (Hinson, "TM" 96).

1. Wm. Loyd Allen, "Spiritual Formation in the Baptist Academy" (convocation address – McAfee School of Theology, Atlanta, GA, 2001) 3; subsequent references will be cited as "Allen, 'Formation'" in the text.
2. *Interview with E. Glenn Hinson by Wm. Loyd Allen* (20 September 2003) [compact disc], producer and recorder Andrew Rawls (Mars Hill, NC: Advent Spirituality Center, 2004); subsequent references will be cited as "Hinson Interview" parenthetically in the text. This story is told in more detail in Wm. Loyd Allen, "Glenn Hinson: Extraordinary 'Ordinary Saint,'" *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 31.1 (Spring 2004) 13-20; subsequent references will be cited as "Allen, 'Hinson'" parenthetically in the text.
3. Thomas Merton, *Turning toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 114; subsequent references will be cited as "TTW" parenthetically in the text.
4. E. Glenn Hinson, email to Loyd Allen (16 May 2005); subsequent references will be cited as "Hinson email" parenthetically in the text.
5. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 40; subsequent references will be cited as "DWL" parenthetically in the text.
6. The Church authorities were bit uneasy about his Protestant connections. In December of 1961, a letter from the Papal Secretary of State arrived at the monastery urging "a diminution of contacts with Protestant ministers and scholars" (see *TTW* 187).
7. See E. Glenn Hinson, "The Contemplative Roots of Baptist Spirituality," in *Ties That Bind: Life Together in the Baptist Vision*, ed. Gary Furr and Curtis W. Freeman (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 1994).
8. E. Glenn Hinson, "'Thomas Merton, by Brother': The Impact of Thomas Merton on My Life and Thought," *The Merton Annual* 11 (1998) 92; subsequent references will be cited as "Hinson 'TM'" parenthetically in the text.
9. E. Glenn Hinson, *A Serious Call to a Contemplative Life-Style*, revised edition (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 1992); for an overview, see Wm. Loyd Allen, "A Serious Call to a Contemplative Life-Style," in *Classics of Christian Spirituality: The Essential Guide to the Most Influential Spiritual Writings of the Christian Tradition*, ed. Frank N. Magill and Ian P. McGreal (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988) 637-42.
10. William Law, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, with an introduction by G. W. Bromiley, reprint (1728; rpt. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1966).
11. William P. Clemmons, *Discovering the Depths: Guidance in Personal Spiritual Growth*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987).
12. Bill Clemmons, email to Loyd Allen (1 June 2005).
13. Cooperative Baptist Fellowship: see <http://www.thefellowship.info>.
14. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 228-29.