

thought, and that of countless others, is his commitment to constructive interreligious encounter. In an era of religious diversity and plurality, the need for voices crying out for this from all religious traditions is great. Merton modeled a way of encounter that has come to be widely accepted by those working in the area of interreligious and interfaith encounter. This is the idea of remaining rooted in one's own tradition (which Merton most certainly was) while continually making the effort energetically and actively to engage others outside your own tradition. Further, he provides a simple way of fostering interfaith friendship and the deepening of one's own Catholic practice. This does not call for the refutation of every form of Protestantism, Hinduism, Islam, and so on, but rather is a call to find and affirm the truth one finds within those traditions. This simple starting point, which can be crucial, encourages us to begin with affirming everything we can in other traditions, because if we reject everything in all other religions, then we will not have much to affirm in our own tradition.² In this manner, interfaith dialogue can commence with affirmation.

Merton's influence continues to reverberate in my life today. I remain a Protestant Christian, but I am currently the associate director of the Jay Phillips Center for Interfaith Learning, an academic center located at two Catholic universities in Minnesota (University of St. Thomas and Saint John's University). I continue to have a deep appreciation for the Catholic tradition, and especially its diverse expressions of spirituality. I also teach courses on world religions and interreligious dialogue at these institutions. Merton has taught me to remain rooted in my tradition (as I continually explore the religious and spiritual roots of my ancestors), yet always striving to engage and learn from the rich religious traditions of the world. I can confidently say that Merton has influenced my scholarly and spiritual thought in a more holistic manner than almost all other thinkers I have encountered. His spirit and influence continue to reverberate and resonate in my life and in so doing, I remain humbly hopeful that I am able to do justice to his life as I strive to introduce him to the young people I work with.

1. Hans Gustafson, "Place, Spiritual Anthropology and Sacramentality in Merton's Later Years." *The Merton Annual* 25 (2013) 74-90.
2. See Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 128-29.

A Seer Interprets the Ministry of the Stars

By Gary Hall



Gary Hall

Because we live in a womb of collective illusion, our freedom remains abortive. Our capacities for joy, peace, and truth are never liberated.¹

Gary Hall teaches Practical Theology at The Queen's Foundation, Birmingham, UK, where Merton's influence is felt in the formation of Anglican and Methodist ministers. He has been editor of *The Merton Journal* and writes and speaks on Merton regularly for conferences, retreats, journals courses and study days.

My son was reading *National Geographic*: “Hey, look at this, Dad. Is this real?” It’s a picture of space junk. Planet earth is shrouded in orbiting metallic debris. During the past half-century humankind has managed to replicate in space the heaps of debris strewn across the planet. If the fact registers at all, we file it as another sad example of careless humanity’s cavalier disregard for consequences, alongside toxic oceans, deep-scarred tar sands, devastated rainforests and the rest. But there is another kind of space junk, not unrelated, which presses in more persistently, and which began to cloak us a couple of decades ago when satellites linking up the Iridium network were switched on. Robin McKie in *The Observer* described how this “flotilla of 66 communication satellites” would connect telephone users “from Antarctica to the Atlantic, and from the Sahara to Sidcup” such that “no place on earth will ever be out of communication. It is a gossip’s dream come true.”²²



We became so quickly dependent on communication technologies that we struggle to remember a world where electronic media were not taken for granted. It took a newspaper columnist to describe the spiritual impact of the technological milestone: the satellites (he anticipated) would “flood the skies with radio waves. Signals that have taken aeons to reach us from distant stars and galaxies will be drowned. A window on the universe is being curtained over.” Beneath the headline is a sub-header which, perhaps inadvertently, speaks to the heart of deeper dreams: “A new satellite network to satisfy our need to keep in touch may mean signals from the heavens cannot get through.” Heaven is no longer open. Listening is obsolete. So is silence. McKie’s article goes on to describe the consequences for radio astronomy of wiping out with mobile phone signals those slices of the spectrum which had been carefully guarded against the onslaught of television, radio and telephone transmissions. Cosmic memory can no longer reach us. Signals from the heavens cannot get through – signals which brought messages from the origins of our universe. Other high-density networks have subsequently been launched to meet the soaring demand for data transmission. Dr James Cohen of Jodrell Bank pointed out in McKie’s article that the radio wavelengths being polluted are those most likely to be used by an alien civilization trying to communicate across the galaxy: “We may be obscuring the one medium by which we could discover worlds with intelligent life on them.” Quite.

Thirty years prior to the Iridium project, Merton described the effects of a culture which works against any instinct or desire for stillness and attention:

We live in a state of constant semi-attention to the sound of voices, music, traffic, or the generalized noise of what goes on around us all the time. This keeps us immersed in a flood of racket and words, a diffuse medium in which our consciousness is half diluted: we are not quite “thinking,” not entirely responding, but we are more or less there. We are not fully *present* and not entirely absent; not fully withdrawn, yet not completely available. It cannot be said that we are really participating in anything and we may, in fact, be half conscious of our alienation

and resentment. Yet we derive a certain comfort from the vague sense that we are “part of” something, although we are not quite able to define what that something is – and probably wouldn’t want to define it even if we could. We just float along in the general noise. Resigned and indifferent, we share semiconsciously in the mindless mind of Muzak and radio commercials which passes for “reality.”³

And so on, attentively watching from the freedom of his enclosure the construction of our own unbidden enclosure, our upgraded Babel, and restoring confidence in the “disquieting presence of our deep self [which] keeps forcing its way to the surface of awareness” (*L&L* 41). Beneath the all-encompassing shell of satellite-suspended radio waves carrying the relentless chatter of a mediated generation, a listener with pen in hand generates a different kind of communication, reminding us and future generations not only of deep-space signals from more primal moments, but of that deeper stillness in which we might come to our senses.

1. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 16-17.
2. Robin McKie, “Mania for Mobiles Crushes Dreams of Science,” *The Observer* (11 October 1998) 17.
3. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979) 40-41; subsequent references will be cited as “*L&L*” parenthetically in the text.

The Next Generation

By **Jeff Kiernan**

Thomas Merton still matters because he continues to be appealing to contemporary audiences. Of course, his appeal is widespread – indeed global. One particular group that continues to be inspired and challenged by Merton is that of teenagers. This stems from Merton’s ability to get down to basics, to cut through the clutter (to use a polite term), and to help others raise meaningful questions about life. In short, he is sincere, therefore not phony – and teens can spot phoniness much more quickly than most. Since Merton continually insists on the (underlying) profound meaning of our paradoxical lives, teens readily relate to him because they thirst for meaning as they grow up in a culture that insists on more and more inanity. It is wondrous that this appeal ranges over a variety of topics teens are interested in: social justice, solitude, race relations, prayer, paradox, Jewish-Christian relations, music of many genres, poetry, war, peace, conscientious objection, advertising’s ill-effects and the use and misuse of technology. This list is not exhaustive. Two brief comments from my students who explored Merton may serve to illustrate Merton’s continuing appeal to their peers: “Although you may not agree with every single thing he says, he makes you think”; “His poetry was a window to his soul.”



Jeff Kiernan

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