

Of Merton, Main and Mantras

By **Don Myrick**

It is remarkable that even more than fifty years after Thomas Merton's death, his writings still seem to retain their freshness and vitality. Of course since his passing much has come to light about his life – his personal struggles, temperament, foibles, vulnerabilities – all of which seem to make him even more endearing as his real humanity is brought more into the light. For many of us who were in early adulthood during his later years – those wacky, wonderful '60s – and trying to swim upstream in order to hold on to whatever faith we may have had during those heady days, Merton was our man.

For the current generation, although Merton may not have the same emotional hold, he is still widely read, his vast written output still has a major influence on modern Catholic thinking, inter-religious dialogue and contemporary monasticism – and it has manifested itself at times in unexpected spinoffs.

One of those certainly influenced by Merton was the Benedictine John Main (1926-1982), one the founders of the contemplative renewal that is taking place in today's church (the term "church" here being used in its broadest sense). Even though John Main doesn't have the profile Merton does, his work nonetheless is significant. The two men had much in common – many complementarities, and a couple of major differences. Both were monks, and both felt very strongly about the need for monastic renewal. Both men had strong and charismatic personalities and were noted for their own unique sense of humor. John Main was also a great storyteller and could also at times be a bit of a prankster and leg-puller. Both men were authentic, deeply spiritual, and both died in their mid-fifties – Thomas Merton in 1968 and John Main in 1982. Thomas Merton was primarily a writer and left behind an enormous legacy of written material. John Main on the other hand was a teacher, who wrote very little (his only written work in fact is a compilation of quarterly spiritual letters he wrote while he was superior of the Benedictine Priory of Montreal¹). The other writings attributed to him are in fact transcripts of talks he gave on the subject of meditation. The biweekly talks he gave to meditators in Montreal were recorded and the CDs of these talks form the main body of his work. They are still widely used today as a teaching source by groups and individuals and are the foundational teaching tool used in groups affiliated with the World Community for Christian Meditation around the world. Many were also published in book form.



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Thomas Merton's contemplative journey came to an abrupt and unfortunate end while on a visit to Asia. John Main's actually began in Asia when, as a junior diplomat with the British Colonial Service in 1955, he was taught to meditate using a mantra by a Hindu swami in Kuala Lumpur.

Don Myrick grew up in Newfoundland and spent his entire adult life in Ontario, where he worked as a cartographic technician for the Canadian Government in Ottawa. He developed a close association with John Main during Main's years in Montreal and has been practicing meditation as taught by him for over forty years.

The Benedictines however were not John Main's first stab at religious life. Born in London of Irish parents into a large, devoutly Catholic family, Douglas Main received much of his early education from the Jesuits in England and would spend his summers at the family ancestral home in Ballinskelligs in County Kerry – practically in the shadow of Skellig Michael. It was a place he loved and would return to for happy visits throughout his life. Following his early schooling, in 1943 he enlisted in the Royal Corps of Signals where he served in Belgium and France, operating behind enemy lines, identifying their radio signals and passing the intelligence on to the Allies. Following the war he made his first foray into religious life, joining the Canons Regular in Cornwall. Despite being sent to Rome for his studies, it became apparent to Main that the Canons were not the right fit for him, so in 1949 he left and enrolled in the faculty of law at Trinity College in Dublin. Upon graduation from Trinity he joined the British Colonial Service and following his initial training was posted to Malaya. It was while conducting some routine embassy business in Kuala Lumpur that he met Swami Satyananda. The two men hit it off right away and soon Main was making weekly visits to the orphanage that the swami ran for instructions on the practice of meditation.

Following his posting in Malaya, John Main left the Colonial Service and took a position teaching law at his alma mater, Trinity College. During this time he continued with his meditation practice. A couple of years later he joined the Benedictines at Ealing Abbey in London and was given the name John. His intention was to make meditation the foundational practice of his spiritual life. Ironically, it wasn't long before his novice master at Ealing informed him that he'd have to give up this form of meditation; after all this was Eastern, and had absolutely no place in a Christian monastery. Accordingly, in keeping with monastic obedience Main complied and got on with his monastic career as a teacher, though it was a dry and unsatisfactory period for him from a spiritual perspective.

In the spring of 1969, due to disagreements over school policy and other issues, divisions were forming within the monastic community at Ealing, and being no shrinking violet, John Main found himself right in the thick of it all.

As a result he was sent to St. Anselm's Abbey in Washington, DC, where he was to undertake doctoral studies in theology. His initial reception from the St. Anselm's community was cool – no doubt due to his having a reputation as a disrupter before he arrived. It was a difficult time for Main – ostracized by his home community and treated with suspicion by his new one. Fortunately it didn't take long for the monks at St. Anselm's to warm to him, and as it turned out they were having issues of their own. Within six months of his arrival they invited him to be headmaster of their school. For John Main it was a fresh start and he took on his new role with relish and enthusiasm. He worked on improving morale,



John Main, OSB

raising academic standards, initiating a new religious education program which he taught himself and did fund raising for a new science wing.

It was during his time at St. Anselm's that a series of circumstances led him back to the writings of the seventeenth-century English Benedictine Augustine Baker, which in turn brought him back to John Cassian – spiritual masters who were in fact also familiar to Merton.² It was in chapter ten of Cassian's *Conferences* that he came across the story of how Cassian and his companion Germanus travelled to the deserts of Egypt in search of an authentic teaching on prayer. Their search eventually led them to Abba Isaac, one of the old spiritual masters of the desert, who taught them how to pray using a short sacred phrase, a practice that is summed up in the following passage: "The mind thus casts out and represses the rich and ample matter of all thoughts and restricts itself to the poverty of a single verse."³ This discovery turned out to be a eureka moment for John Main. He was overjoyed at this discovery and once again began to meditate, now using a Christian mantra. After five years as headmaster of St. Anselm's he was recalled to his home community of Ealing.

As it turned out, things at Ealing were still not completely resolved. However, it was during this period that a remarkable, perhaps even providential, series of events happened. In November 1976 he was invited to address the monks of Gethsemani Abbey on the subject of prayer. During his few days at Gethsemani he stayed at Merton's hermitage and wrote the following to a close personal friend in London: "I am here staying in Merton's hermitage out in the woods beyond Gethsemani. It is quite extraordinary how solitude brings everyone so close. I have just celebrated the most loving Mass of my life in Merton's little chapel. . . . My purpose in coming here was to talk to the community about prayer, but in fact I have learnt so much myself while I have been here."⁴ There can be no doubt that John Main felt a deep affinity for Merton, and in all likelihood it was during his brief stay at Gethsemani that he saw things with a new clarity and realized that Ealing was no longer the place for him. Within days of leaving Gethsemani, he had met with the auxiliary bishop of Montreal (there had been some previous contact) and some months later, after much discussion, he was given permission to leave Ealing along with Laurence Freeman, a younger member of the community not yet ordained, and to found a new Benedictine community in Montreal. At the new foundation, the practice and teaching of meditation would be given the highest priority. Also, the three talks he gave at Gethsemani were recorded and subsequently published as a series in *Cistercian Studies*.⁵ Some time later they were republished in book form entitled *Christian Meditation – The Gethsemani Talks*⁶ which today remains his foundational teaching on meditation in the apophatic tradition.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the relationship between Merton and Main revolves around the whole business of contemplative prayer. In their respective writings both men certainly held common views on the theology, the necessary disposition, and indeed the very nature of the contemplative experience. In all likelihood Main's understanding of prayer was influenced by Merton. Yet in another sense the way each approached the contemplative experience was quite different. Thomas Merton wrote extensively about contemplative prayer from a broad perspective – the mindset, the disposition, the interior ethos. His own journey to contemplation had been long and often arduous. Somewhat surprisingly, he was in fact reticent about sharing his own way of praying with others: surprising – as he was a monastic and was usually quite open concerning his

personal thoughts and feeling about things – especially things relating to the spiritual life. In a letter to his Pakistani Muslim friend Abdul Aziz he describes his somewhat convoluted approach to achieving a state of deep interior silence. Then he goes on to say: “I do not ordinarily write about such things and I ask you therefore to be discreet about it.”⁷

On the other hand, John Main’s teaching was very specific and narrowly focused on the actual practice. While basically being on the same page with most of what Merton wrote, there were two aspects of his teaching that really set him apart from Merton – and other monastic writers of his era – and at the same time make him an important spiritual voice for people of our own generation. The first was his emphasis on inclusiveness: he was convinced that contemplative prayer was for everyone – construction workers, computer geeks, jocks, housewives – everyone. Not only did he believe it was for everyone, but he believed that the contemplative experience was foundational for a fully integrated and harmonious personhood. He wrote: “I think that what we have to understand is that returning to our centre, discovering our own centre, is the first task and the first responsibility of every life that is to become fully human.”⁸ The second thing that he said was: here’s how you do it – and gave this very clear, simple, concise teaching on meditation. In fact he once quipped that his teaching on meditation could be written on the back of a postage stamp – perhaps not quite true, but close to it. In his own words, the essence of his teaching is as follows:

The important aim in Christian Meditation is to allow God’s mysterious and silent presence within us to become more and more not only a reality but *the* Reality which gives meaning, shape and purpose to everything we do, everything we are. Sit down. Sit still and upright. Close your eyes lightly. Sit relaxed but alert. Silently, interiorly, begin to say a single word. We recommend the prayer-phrase *Ma-ra-na-tha*. Recite it as four syllables of equal length. Listen to it as you say it, gently but continuously. Do not think or imagine anything spiritual or otherwise. If thoughts and images come, these are distractions at the time of meditation, so keep returning to simply saying the word. Meditate each morning and evening for between twenty and thirty minutes.⁹

The differences of each man’s approach to contemplative prayer are understandable. Thomas Merton was the groundbreaker; his spiritual quest was lifelong and hard-won and really seemed to come to full fruition only after having encountered the spiritual teaching of the East. John Main, on the other hand, learned meditation as a layman – in the East – and this is in fact what led him to the monastic life.

When John Main founded the Benedictine Priory of Montreal in 1977, what no one foresaw was his untimely death from cancer in 1982 – a mere five years after moving to Montreal. His early passing resulted in a difficult time for the fledgling monastic community, as well as for the small and fragile lay community that was beginning to form around his teaching. In retrospect however we are reminded of the passage from John’s Gospel: “Unless the grain of wheat falls on the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest” (Jn. 12:24). In the early nineties, the World Community for Christian Meditation,¹⁰ inspired by John Main, came into being under the leadership of Dom Laurence Freeman. As of now the community has a presence in more than 120 countries. It recently purchased the ancient monastic

site of Bonnevaux in France which, following extensive renovations, has become the community headquarters for the WCCM, with the administrative headquarters still located in London.

Merton and Main: two old monastic war-horses who fought the good fight – each in his own way, both of whom died (relatively) young. It is too bad they could not have met. Undoubtedly there would have been some good stories to share – all the while enjoying a whiskey or three – and if geography has anything to do with it, that would most likely mean bourbon and Bushmills.¹¹

1. John Main, *Monastery without Walls* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2006).
2. See “Self-Knowledge in Gertrude More and Augustine Baker,” in Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967) 154-77; Thomas Merton, *Cassian and the Fathers: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition*, ed. Patrick F. O’Connell (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2005) 97-259, and Thomas Merton, *Pre-Benedictine Monasticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 2*, ed. Patrick F. O’Connell (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2006) 40-72.
3. John Cassian, *Conference* 10, c. 11.1; while Merton does not provide formal instruction on this method of prayer, he does discuss the pertinent passage from Cassian in some detail: see *Cassian and the Fathers* 253-54.
4. Neil McKenty, *In the Stillness Dancing: The Journey of John Main* (London: Darton, Longman, Todd, 1986) 97.
5. John Main, “Prayer in the Tradition of Cassian,” *Cistercian Studies* 12.3 (1977) 184-90; 12.4 (1977) 272-81; 13.1 (1978) 75-83.
6. John Main, *Christian Meditation – The Gethsemani Talks* (Singapore: Medio Media, 2007).
7. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 63.
8. John Main, *Moment of Christ* (London: Darton, Longman, Todd, 1984) 2.
9. John Main, *Word into Silence* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980) 3.
10. Additional information about the WCCM, John Main and Christian meditation may be found on the WCCM website: wccm.org.
11. For an earlier discussion of these two figures, see Gregory J. Ryan, “Merton, Main, and the New Monasticism,” *Monastic Studies* 18 (Christmas 1988) 109-22.