Eyes to See and Ears to Hear: Dancing in Paradise with Merton and Cockburn

By **Paul Pynkoski**

Thomas Merton and Bruce Cockburn have, individually, been my partners in dialogue for many years. Both offered a more generous view of life, humanity and God than the fundamentalist religious worldview that framed my childhood and youth. Each assisted me to see a path out of fundamentalism, towards a more grounded, contemplative faith, and motivated an interest in exploring the intersection of art, faith and politics. Recently, through reading Cockburn's memoir, I discovered there was a link between them.

Canadian folk-rock icon Bruce Cockburn[1] was raised in a home that could be described, at best, as nominally Christian.[2] Early in the nineteen-seventies he had a series of experiences that moved him towards fully embracing a fundamentalist variety of Christian faith. He lingered there only a few years, ultimately moving "beyond fundamentalism towards mystery" (Cockburn, *Rumours* 150). When asked over the years about the shift and growth in his faith he has often made reference to Thomas Merton.[3] Cockburn writes in his memoir *Rumours of Glory*, "My friend Alan Whatmough turned me on to Thomas Merton, the famous Trappist monk, writer, social justice advocate, and jazz lover who wrote more than seventy books. . . . I found a trail of Christian mysticism I had not known existed" (Cockburn, *Rumours* 161-62). At another point he notes, "The Buddhists are great technicians of the sacred, to use Thomas Merton's term" (Cockburn, *Rumours* 118). Cockburn is never more explicit than this, never naming a particular book or insight of Merton's. From the little he has said, though, I surmise Cockburn read some of Merton's writing on inter-religious dialogue (the Buddhism comment), some parts of the journals (where Merton often makes reference to jazz), some of the contemplative writings and portions of his nineteen-sixties writings on violence and racism.

The trajectories of Cockburn's and Merton's life journeys move in different directions. Merton left New York City for a monastery in Kentucky, leaving dreams of a literary and academic career to seek anonymity and solitude. Cockburn left the rural Ottawa Valley for the music scene of Toronto, Canada's largest city, and as his fame grew, performed in the USA and Europe. He travelled as an observer for Oxfam to Guatemala and Chile, and later visited Mozambique, Cambodia and Iraq.

Cockburn's encounter with Merton is significant. Examining it helps to illustrate Merton's

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continuing influence in contemporary culture. More significantly though, it allows us the opportunity to place side by side two persons who have worn the mantles of poet, prophet and contemplative. Merton's poetry, essays and art, and Cockburn's lyrics, music and writing, touch on similar themes: the wonder and beauty of creation, the inner workings of the human heart, the revelation of the divine in the everyday, the idolatry of human greed, the toll of violence and power politics on the common person, the primacy of love. In the process, they ask again and again whether we have eyes to see and ears to hear. They neither treat these themes nor raise these questions identically. The experiences from their divergent paths allow each a unique approach.

Our Point of Contact

Merton, in "The General Dance," the final chapter of *New Seeds of Contemplation*,[4] explores creation, incarnation and God's self-disclosure using metaphors of play and dance. Cockburn, in his songs "Creation Dream"[5] and "Everywhere Dance,"[6] also uses the metaphor of dance to explore the divine presence in the world. Exploring these three works will assist us to appreciate both the commonality and the uniqueness of their voices.

Merton's meditation is grounded in his theological vision. He begins by offering that "God made the world as a garden in which He himself took delight" (*NSC* 291), noting that God's original intention was to "descend into the world, that He Himself might become Man" (*NSC* 290). He draws from Proverbs 8 to speak of Christ at play before God,[7] and from the Genesis stories, emphasizing Adam's role in naming creatures and sharing intimate walks with God in the garden. The creation narrative, in Merton's hands, becomes a story of love, intimacy and play. The incarnation and cross are at the heart of Merton's meditation. He stresses the humility of Christ, referring to him as servant, as friend, as the hidden one, unremarkable and vulnerable. Christ has taken on our suffering, weakness and defenselessness, and in his resurrection, transcends those things and seeks to raise us also.

Key to this meditation is Merton's insight that "Appearances are to be accepted for what they are. The accidents of a poor and transient existence have, nevertheless, an ineffable value. They can be transparent media in which we apprehend the presence of God in the world" (*NSC* 295-96). He is not reflecting on nature only, as he concludes this section by insisting, "there should be no one on earth in whom we are not prepared to see, in mystery, the presence of Christ" (*NSC* 296). These themes appear also in his prose poem *Hagia Sophia*.[8] Merton laments that "we do not hear . . . we do not see" (*ESF* 63). Sophia, the "silent one, who speaks everywhere" (*ESF* 63), is "playing in the world, obvious and unseen" (*ESF* 66) and the incarnate God is found in the guise of "A vagrant, a destitute wanderer . . . a frail expendable exile" (*ESF* 69).

Merton returns, after asserting the revelatory character of creation and of human persons, to the metaphors of dance and play. "At any rate the Lord plays and diverts Himself in the garden of His creation, and if we could let go of our own obsession with what we think is the meaning of it all, we might be able to hear His call and follow Him in His mysterious, cosmic dance" (*NSC* 296). He goes on to evoke for us portions of his dawn experience on the grounds of the abbey. Merton recorded in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* what he discerned as the creation of a new day – the presence of paradise emerging from the sights and sounds of an ordinary day as it moved from night to dawn.[9] Now, in "The General Dance," encounters with the sounds of a frog, the movement of birds and the night sky unveil for us God's ongoing creative energy, pulsing like music through all that is. But this

time, unlike the dawn experience in *Conjectures*, he does not end by using nature to critique how business and technology distract humanity from paradise. Rather, he points to the play of children and the human experience of love as being revelatory of the divine, "a glimpse of the cosmic dance" (*NSC* 297). Merton does not entice us to merely watch this dance. Instead, he suggests there is music to be heard: "The silence of the spheres is the music of a wedding feast" – and invites us to "join in the general dance" (*NSC* 297).

Merton, in a few pages, has brought us from the creation of the world, through incarnation and redemption, to the eschatological banquet. He does so by alluding to those questions that run through so much of his writing: "Do you have eyes to see and ears to hear?" We get in the way of this seeing and hearing, and need to "let go of our own obsession with what we think is the meaning of it all" (*NSC* 296). If we can stop "misunderstanding the phenomena of life" and the distraction of the "complex purposes of our own" making, if we can truly pay attention to what is in front of us, then perhaps we will get out of the way long enough to find there is music to hear and an invitation to dance, one that we will come to understand "is in the midst of us, for it beats in our very blood" (*NSC* 297).

Some of the themes in "The General Dance" can also be found in the music of Bruce Cockburn. It is possible to discuss Cockburn's lyrics as though they were poetry. However, after listening to his albums for forty years and hearing him live on many occasions, I am convinced that doing so misses the full effect of the careful craftmanship he brings to each song. Unlike many songwriters, Cockburn creates the lyrics first, drawing from notebooks where he records impressions and experiences. The music is composed to support the lyrics, and instrumentation arranged in a manner that draws the listener into the experience he seeks to convey. (I supply links to the music and lyrics discussed below, and encourage listening to them before reading about them.) I have found myself enticed to listen over and over, engaged in a sort of *musica divina*, drawn into the music and immersing myself in the experience.

Cockburn calls "Creation Dream"[10] "a fictional rendering of the creation, not to be confused with Genesis . . . a sort of vision of Christ singing the universe into being – dawn before the parting of the waters."[11] The lyrics suggest the wisdom figure of Proverbs, or Christ at the dawn of all things, so although he uses the term "fictional rendering," it might be more appropriate to think in terms of Merton's framing of Genesis as "a poetic and symbolic revelation, a completely true, though not literal, revelation" (*NSC* 290). "Creation Dream" begins with Cockburn's pulsing guitar rhythm and a splash of cymbals; they are soon overlaid with the dancing sounds of a marimba. Just before Cockburn begins to sing, the bass guitar and kick drum begin to pound, grounding and driving the rhythm and energy. "Centred on silence / counting on nothing / I saw you standing on the sea / and everything was / dark except for / sparks in the wind struck from your hair." Darkness, silence, wind and sparks of light: Cockburn reimagines the origins of all that is. The energy sparks swirl around Wisdom/Christ, causing the emergence of birds and angels. The energy won't stop: "fields of motion / surging outward / questions that contain their own replies." From darkness and silence the divine energy emerges; questions arise, but in the same moment all questions are answered. It is a dream that is as contemplative as it is imaginative. Cockburn's brilliant guitar work carries the energy forward, drawing us in. The Wisdom/Christ figure cannot stay still. There is dance and there is song. "You were dancing / I saw you dancing / throwing your arms towards the sky / fingers opening like

flares / stars were shooting everywhere." When the dancing figure begins to sing, the sea dances, and there are "shots of silver in the shell pink dawn." We have moved from darkness and silence to the edge of dawn. The lyrics cease, but the music continues as it did from the beginning. We are told nothing more of creation, but the surging energy of the instrumentals leave no doubt that the dance and the music continue, in Merton's words, to beat "in our very blood, whether we want it to or not" (*NSC* 297).

Merton opens our imaginations to discern the cosmic music and dance; Cockburn adds the rhythm and energy of actual music and creates an entire scene, enticing us to see and feel Wisdom/Christ dancing. We don't have time to be obsessed or distracted with "the meaning of it all," because the dance is its own invitation, and the minute we hear the music, our feet can't help but move.

"The General Dance" moves through creation, incarnation and redemption before arriving at the actual created things (birds, frogs) and human experiences (playing children, love) that reveal to us the divine presence and invite us to hear the music of the spheres and enter into the cosmic dance. Cockburn's "Everywhere Dance"[12] starts with created things, and without speaking of creation, incarnation or redemption, draws us towards intimacy with the divine, into the dance that "beats in our very blood." Cockburn's slow opening guitar chords are interspersed with the sounds of frogs and windchimes. Piano chords, as sparse as the guitar, are woven in. We sense, before the lyrics begin, that we are outside on a warm evening. "Moon of plenty, moon of mischance / It'll be what you want but you can't stop the dance / Try to count the steps and they change while you stare / And the translucent moon floats in waves of blue air." Our perceptions of the moon, our attempts to explain and define it, distract us from the dance that is going on. Even if we somehow catch a glimpse of the dance, if we try to organize it into our familiar pattern of steps, we will lose it, as it is constantly changing with the flow of the music. Cockburn underscores this with a musical time signature that departs from standard dance rhythms. Unlike "Creation Dream," there is no bass drum or bass guitar grounding the music, so when Cockburn's unaccompanied voice offers "the translucent moon floats on waves of blue air," the lyrics themselves are floating over the slow merging of piano and guitar chords. There is a sense of longing in the music and in Cockburn's voice; it is no surprise that "we cry out for grace to lay truth bare." We shift from night to dusk. "Pas de deux in stark silhouette / pulsing against a clear orange sunset / As the distance shifts from skin unto skin / Look at how bodies shape the spaces they're in." Cockburn invites us to see the beauty of a couple dancing slowly on a beach at sunset. "See the limbs slide smooth through unresisting air / The dance is the truth and it's everywhere." Like the steps in a dance, guitar and piano play slowly off one another; first one, then the other; then both together. The lyrics fade, and over top of the piano and guitar a slow harmonica solo evolves. The harmonica intensifies the sense of longing; note by note the listener feels it growing. One can almost see the silhouettes of the couple dancing slowly as the sun sets. The loving intimacy of their movements points towards the transcendent, revealing the dance that is the truth underlying all things. The longing created by the floating moon and dancing couple is echoed throughout the universe. We find it "In grains of sand and Galaxies / in plasma flow and rain in trees." There is no place in creation where it is not to be found. It is in the smallest grain of sand and in the largest galaxy, it is in the beating of our hearts, the movement of oceans, and the "ebb and the flow of dying and birth." Cockburn offers no discussion of creation, redemption or incarnation. The crying out at the beauty of the moon, the desire for truth, and the

intimacy of the dance open us to the need for grace. But for Cockburn, the longing, the pulsing of the dance, is found beyond beauty, "in wounded streets" and in the prayers that we are unable to give voice to. There is no circumstance that is incapable of revealing the divine presence and the depth of our longing for that presence.

There is great significance in Cockburn's mention of "wounded streets." It is far more than a poetic turn of phrase. It is the distillation of Cockburn's experience of the world, his presence in the city and places of conflict. There are wounds from the "bullet hole in Peggy's kitchen wall"[13] in Toronto, and the "scar on a wall" from a bullet in Managua that represents a "loved one's memory."[14] There are wounds from the plight of homeless people in a Santiago shantytown resisting "military thugs with dogs and guns,"[15] and wounds in Baghdad where he found "Uranium dust and the smell of decay / Sewage in the street where the kids run and play."[16] Yet in the midst of wounded streets, hope emerges in that inarticulate "whispered prayer." In those same city streets is found a strange beauty, a "World of Wonders:"[17] "There's a rainbow shining in a bead of spittle / Falling diamonds in rattling rain," and he finds himself standing, "dazzled with my heart in flames." Twenty years after recording "World of Wonders," he could still write, "You can't tell me there is no mystery / It's everywhere I turn / Moon over junk yard where the snow lies bright / Can set my heart to burn."[18]

For Cockburn, then, the invitation to discern the dance that is the truth is presented to us again and again. "Do we have eyes to see and ears to hear?" This is as much a recurring theme in Cockburn's art as it is in Merton's. Cockburn suggests, "Maybe to those who love is given sight / To pierce the wall of seeming night / And know it pure beyond all imagining . . . Maybe to those who love it's given to hear / Music too high for the human ear / And clear as hydrogen to go singing." It is love that opens our eyes and ears. "I'm blown like smoke and blind as wind / Except for when your love breaks in."[19] And if love is at the heart of revelation, then revelation is deeply relational.

Paying Attention

Merton suggests that "Every moment and every event of every man's life on earth plants something in his soul" (*NSC* 14) and "that the love of God seeks us in every situation, and . . . . seeks our awakening" (*NSC* 15). Most of those seeds perish, but some spring up in the good soil of our lives. They are seeds "of *my own identity* . . . *my own sanctity*" (*NSC* 33). We are "to work together with God in the creation of our own life . . . . a labor that requires sacrifice and anguish, risk and many tears" (*NSC* 32) as God is revealed to us in the mystery of each situation.

For Merton and Cockburn some of these seeds come through God seeking us in our experiences of beauty and love. We miss seeing the cosmic dance or hearing the music of the spheres when our distractions and obsessions keep us from paying attention. Our lack of humility, our arrogance in thinking we can "dictate terms" and "are in touch with the hidden inner laws" focuses our attention on "Lights . . . Clocks . . . Thermostats" and the stuff of business and technology. We miss the "unspeakable secret" that "paradise is all around us" (*CGB* 118). Cockburn finds himself humbled by "Rhododendrons in bloom, sharp against / Spring snow [and] a single orange blossom / At the wrong time of year." His intellectual vision crumbles in the face of it. "All these years of thinking / Ended up like this in front of all this beauty / Understanding nothing"[20]

Our ability to pay attention to these seeds is cultivated in contemplative solitude. Solitude "clears away the smoke-screen of words that man has laid down between his mind and things,"[21] allowing for "the awakening and attuning of the heart to the voice of God."[22] Merton's attentiveness

led him to the monastery, to solitude, and eventually to the revelation that his solitude did not mean separateness, but rather engagement with the world. Cockburn shares with Merton this attentiveness. The "seeds" sown in his life, including the seeds from Merton's writings, moved him off one path and towards a road less travelled. His openness to the contemplative path led him not to a monastery but into the city and to places of conflict. The seeds of those experiences shaped his music and vision.

Merton from the margins, and Cockburn in the center of activity, developed a sense of the divine presence revealed in creation, human experience and scripture. The creative nature of their engagement allowed them to tease out new metaphors and revitalize existing ones in a way that stimulates in us "a yearning or a restlessness for further revelation," pushing us to "strain ahead to what may yet be."[23] This opening up of our imagination, this straining ahead, is where poetry bumps up against prophecy. For Cockburn and Merton, once the invitation to the cosmic dance has been accepted, once the loving intimacy for which we are created is even dimly realized, there arises an equally urgent need to speak to those situations that quell the music, deface creation, or through violence and oppression seek to erase the image of God in humanity. Merton recognized the need for "poets who are also seers," and for "prophetic songs" to be sung in places "where men suffer oppression, where they are deprived of identity, where their lives are robbed of meaning."[24]

It is precisely at this point that they encountered sacrifice and anguish, risk and many tears. Bruce Cockburn wrote "Creation Dream" prior to going to Latin America. His direct encounters with violence against impoverished refugees led to literal tears, inspiring "Rocket Launcher" and "Call It Democracy," songs that were censored, refused air play, and ultimately caused the loss of his evangelical following (see Cockburn, *Rumours* 220-26, 299-304). Merton's passionate essays and poetry on war and violence led to him being silenced by his Order, and a ban placed on further publication.[25]

Concluding Thoughts

Cockburn has become an example of Merton's ongoing legacy in two ways. First, Merton nudged Cockburn onto the contemplative path, a nudge that moved him away from simply being a Canadian folk singer and towards being a citizen of the world; away from a narrow fundamentalism towards a larger vision of solidarity with humanity, a solidarity rooted in the incarnate presence of Christ in all things. Cockburn, with Merton as his initial inspiration, takes up the mantles of artist, prophet and contemplative. Second, Cockburn becomes an example of how the seeds and experiences planted in our lives give a unique shape to our vocation. As an artist, contemplative and prophet firmly planted in the city, his attentiveness to the divine presence and to the circumstances of his time allows him to both stand in continuity with the past and to develop a contemporary voice that invites the world into the music of the cosmic dance.

Merton and Cockburn are unique and public figures. Most of us are not called to the public stage, nor asked to take up the mantles of artist, contemplative or prophet. But the public nature of their witness should prompt us to ask how, in our particular and less public circumstances, we can be attentive to the seeds sown at every moment in our own lives. Their witness suggests that each of us can respond to the seeds in our current social, political and personal circumstances in a manner that opens us to the presence of the divine and allows us to not only to join in the dance, but illuminate others so that they too might hear the music, join in the cosmic dance and speak to the urgent needs of our times. But only if we have eyes to see and ears to hear can this happen.

1. Cockburn has recorded thirty-five albums, produced a film score, and authored a memoir. He has received thirteen Junos (Canadian equivalent of the Grammy) and been inducted into the Order of Canada (equivalent of the Presidential Medal of Freedom). Nine universities have awarded him honorary degrees. For the complete list of honors, see http://brucecockburn.com/about/awards.
2. See Bruce Cockburn, *Rumours of Glory* (New York: Harper Collins, 2014) 17-18; subsequent references will be cited as "Cockburn, *Rumours*" parenthetically in the text.
3. See www.cockburnproject.net: "Issues: Spirituality/Christianity."
4. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 290-97; subsequent references will be cited as "*NSC*" parenthetically in the text.
5. "Creation Dream," *Dancing in the Dragon's Jaws* (1979).
6. "Everywhere Dance," *You've Never Seen Everything* (2003).
7. Proverbs 8:30-31. In the Proverbs text the Wisdom figure is female, but in this meditation Merton casts the figure as male, identified with Christ.
8. Thomas Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963) 61-69; subsequent references will be cited as "*ESF*" parenthetically in the text.
9. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 117-18; subsequent references will be cited as "*CGB*" parenthetically in the text. See also the original journal entry in Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 7 [6/5/1960]. For a comparison of the two versions see Monica Weis, *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011) 58-63.
10. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOYKDIJPYiU; lyrics: https://www.lyrics.com/lyric/22439498/Bruce+Cockburn/Creation+Dream.
11. See www.cockburnproject.net: "Songs: C – 'Creation Dream'" for comments made by Cockburn on the song's composition.
12. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QYzVc2vJdqo; lyrics: https://www.lyrics.com/lyric/6178498/Bruce+Cockburn/Everywhere+Dance.
13. "Peggy's Kitchen Wall," *Stealing Fire* (1984): https://genius.com/Bruce-cockburn-peggys-kitchen-wall-lyrics.
14. "Nicaragua," *Stealing* Fire (1984): https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/brucecockburn/nicaragua.html.
15. "Santiago Dawn," *World of Wonders* (1986): https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/brucecockburn/santiagodawn.html.
16. "This is Baghdad," *Life Short Call Now* (2006): https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/brucecockburn/thisisbaghdad.html.
17. "World of Wonders," *World of Wonders* (1986): https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/brucecockburn/worldofwonders.html.
18. "Mystery," *Life Short Call Now* (2006): https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/brucecockburn/mystery.html.
19. "After the Rain," *Dancing in the Dragon's Jaws* (1979): https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/brucecockburn/aftertherain.html.
20. "Understanding Nothing," *Big Circumstance* (1988); lyrics: https://genius.com/Bruce-cockburn-understanding-nothing-lyrics.
21. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1958) 85.
22. 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) 254 [6/8/1965].
23. Andrew Rumsey, "Through Poetry: Particularity and the Call to Attention," in Jeremy Begbie, ed., *Beholding the Glory: Incarnation through the Arts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000) 46.
24. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964) 72-73.
25. See Merton's April 29, 1962 letter to Jim Forest in which he discusses this censorship (Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon [New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985] 266-68).