
Why Merton?

IT WOULD BE EASY for someone unfamiliar with Thomas Merton to dismiss him as being irrelevant to Christians today. What can we learn about our world from a monk who lived most of his adult life in the woods of Kentucky and died over a half century ago? In the rest of this book I hope to show that the answer to that is—plenty! People of all faiths are drawn to Merton's work for its insights about God and the human condition. Furthermore, a close look at his life reveals his humanity, his triumphs, and his disappointments, and makes him an eminently relatable figure. In this chapter I introduce Thomas Merton and begin to show why he is indeed a compelling and relevant model for Christians today.

Thomas Merton is one of the most influential Catholic writers of the twentieth century. This is due not only to the quality of his work but also his prodigious output, having written over 60 books, dozens of articles and essays, as well as poetry. This productivity is even more impressive when one considers that for most of Merton's life as a monk his time to write competed with the other regimented obligations of his daily life. He first came to prominence in 1948 with the publication of his autobiography, with new generations of readers discovering his wisdom and insights about contemplation and ways to better know God. In fact, it has been argued that his extensive writings about contemplation helped modernize the practice in the Christian tradition.¹

While Merton's earlier writings focused on the interior experience of knowing God, in the last years of his life he wrote more about the exterior

1. Park, *Thomas Merton's Encounter*, 51–52.

world and the problems in it. These writings helped shape the conversation about a host of spiritual and social issues, including racism, war, the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and ways our consumeristic society distracts and prevents us from pursuing those things that can provide true happiness and fulfillment. Finally, during this period Merton wrote about his exploration of Zen and Buddhism and helped establish an important bridge between Western Christianity and Eastern thought.

Many readers report that after discovering Merton they feel a kind of kinship with him. One reason many cite is his ability to grasp and convey profound insights about the human experience and God. As one biographer writes:

He had the ability to articulate, often with brilliance and astounding perceptiveness, the vagaries of the human condition: hope vying with despair, love with hatred, communion with alienation. He could reach deep into the human heart and surface questions for his readers that, till they read him, lay hidden and unasked, struggling for expression. Unique synthesizer that he was, he could put things together that no one had seen as one before. He knew how to raise to a new level of understanding people's perception of God and prayer and human life. He was able to show that life was for the living in that in this living we find God and self and meaning and purpose.²

In addition, Merton was able to assimilate information and identify trends earlier than other writers or social critics. One of his friends described it this way:

He was as capacious a mind as I've ever encountered. He took everything in, tied it together, and somehow it came out always in an orderly way. It was a good thing that he chose the essay as his way of dealing with the world. He was a monk and he just had little hunks of time to write. But in two or three hours it's amazing the cogent gems he could turn out. He was an exceptionally sensitive man, as well as an exceptionally religious man. The race situation, the bomb—he saw the consequences clearly and early, and from a place so far out of the mainstream. He was years ahead of almost everybody in his concern that the machines were going to take over—the whole business of dehumanization. And he was quite right.³

2. Shannon, *Silent Lamp*, 5–6.

3. Wilkes, *Merton*, 88.

WHY MERTON?

No one familiar with Merton's life story would confuse him for being any kind of, to use one of his own terms, pseudoangel. He never claimed to be perfect, and was thoroughly human, filled with the same conflicting instincts that live in all of us. Merton's life as a cloistered monk did not shield him from conflict, pettiness, worry, or self-doubt. For example, many biographers point to the fact that Merton was restless. Once he attained one thing, he wanted another. As one friend of his puts it:

He loved people, he really loved people. But at the same time as he loved them he wanted his distance from them. People would often say to me that they found it odd, if not slightly scandalous, that a monk could share a few beers with you, just call from the monastery and arrange for a picnic, and yet I think this was a lifeline for him. He didn't want the secular life but he needed the reassurance that came by being with people. He was a fusser and a complainer to tell you the truth and when you read his journals you see that when he is here he wants to be there: if he's in the hermitage, he needs to get out; if he is following one diet maybe he should be really following another. He was, with all these contradictions, just plain human.⁴

While Merton's reputation for profundity draws people to his writings, I contend it is his ordinary humanness that makes him so appealing. In his personal writings, his journals and innumerable letters, we are able to glimpse Merton the person. This allows us to move beyond the categories of "monk" and "writer" to get to know Thomas Merton the man. What we find in these writings is a mix of the mundane and the sublime. Profound insights about God's grace in the world are mixed with complaints about life that are recognizable to everyone, both inside and outside the monastery walls. Merton chronicles his struggles with authority, the annoyance of living and working with others, and the inevitable aches and pains that accompany middle age. Merton was, just like the rest of us, a flawed work in progress.

MERTON—A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

There are a number of excellent Merton biographies that thoroughly explore every aspect of his life. The following narrative is intended for those returning to Merton after a long break or meeting him for the first time.

4. Higgins, *Thomas Merton*, 73–74.

Childhood

Thomas Merton was born during a snowstorm in Prades, France on January 31, 1915. His parents had met in 1911, while enrolled as art students at the Tudor-Hart Academy in Paris. His father, Owen, was an artist and musician, and his mother, Ruth, was a dancer and painter.⁵ Within a year of Thomas's birth the family had moved to America to be near Ruth's family and so that Owen could avoid conscription into the Great War. Ruth's parents, Samuel "Pop" and Martha "Bonnemaman" Jenkins, would play an important role in Merton's upbringing. Owen and Ruth led a largely hand-to-mouth existence while living in America. They had vowed not to accept any money from Ruth's parents, except when they needed medicine for young Thomas.⁶ Owen was always able to keep the family afloat financially, if just barely, by working a series of odd jobs, including church organist, playing piano at a local theater, and working as a landscaper.⁷

Young Thomas was observed to be a bright and curious child. His mother chronicled his every activity, even organizing these observations and sending what she called, "Tom's Book" to Owen's family in New Zealand. By all accounts Thomas was the center of his mother's world, but that dynamic changed in November 1918 with the birth of his brother, John Paul. Ruth could be cold, and was not reluctant to discipline a headstrong Thomas. In his autobiography, Merton recounts a time that he was sent to bed early, "for stubbornly spelling 'which' without the first 'h': 'w-i-c-h.' I remember brooding about this as an injustice. 'What do they think I am, anyway?' After all, I was still only five years old."⁸ As biographer Michael Mott points out, after the birth of his brother, "Love, with both encouragement and correction, had been replaced by cold, intellectual criticism."⁹

Merton's young life was about to face a major crisis when his mother discovered she had stomach cancer. He never knew exactly how long she struggled with her diagnosis while still living at home, but when she was finally admitted to a nearby hospital, the family moved in with Ruth's parents in Douglaston, New York. Thomas would never see his mother again. He was not allowed to see her in the hospital, and sadly Merton always believed

5. Mott, *Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 5–6.

6. Mott, *Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 15–16.

7. Mott, *Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 16.

8. Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 10.

9. Mott, *Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 17.

that this was at his mother's request. While Merton knew his mother was sick in the hospital, the six-year-old was not aware how dire the situation actually was until his father handed him a letter from his mother. This note informed the young boy about the grim news. As Merton recalled:

Then one day Father gave me a note to read. I was very surprised. It was for me personally, and it was in my mother's handwriting. I don't think she had ever written to me before—there had never been any occasion for it. Then I understood what was happening, although, as I remember, the language of the letter was confusing to me. Nevertheless, one thing was quite evident. My mother was informing me, by mail, that she was about to die, and would never see me again.¹⁰

Sadly, for the rest of his life Merton would think that his mother had decided to deliver this news in a letter, rather than in person. It is now known that Bellevue Hospital had a policy that prevented children from visiting the general wards, and this was Ruth's only way to communicate with her son.¹¹ Ruth died October 3, 1921. Merton would reflect on this, and other early childhood memories, with the lingering belief that his mother was more cerebral, and less caring and loving, as a parent.¹²

Within a year of Ruth's death Owen decided he needed to make a change and rededicate himself to his painting. He made the decision to move to Bermuda, and took young Thomas with him, leaving his other son John Paul in the care of Ruth's parents in New York. Thomas, now age seven, and his father left for Bermuda in the fall of 1922. While there, Owen met aspiring novelist Evelyn Scott. The two fell in love, despite the fact that Evelyn was married, and they had a tempestuous relationship. Young Thomas did not care for Evelyn at all, and was not bashful in voicing his displeasure to the couple. During this time Owen wrote to a friend stating that "Tom's jealousy and irreconcilableness are perfectly enormous."¹³ It appears there was no love lost from Evelyn either. In fact, she confided to a friend that, "Tom is a morbid and possessive kid and Owen is made morbid about Tom

10. Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 14.

11. Horan, *Franciscan Heart of Thomas Merton*, 37.

12. In a letter to theologian Rosemary Reuther, whom he had been quarreling with in previous correspondence, Merton wrote, "I promise I won't get up in the air again. I don't know why you frightened me so. ('Cerebral' probably because I resented my mother's intellectuality) (or what I later interpreted as that)" (Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 509).

13. Mott, *Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 33.

through various things that occurred in connection with Ruth. Tom is, and will be until he is big enough to be set adrift, a constant obstacle to piece [sic] of mind.¹⁴ This period was made even more unsettling for Thomas by the fact that Owen would occasionally leave young Thomas with friends so that he could go on trips to sell his art.¹⁵

After a couple of years in Bermuda, the father and son returned to America so that Owen could exhibit and sell some of his paintings. Flush with money, Owen made plans to return to France to resume his painting with old friends. This time, the eight-year-old Thomas would stay in America with his maternal grandparents, Pop and Bonnemaman. While he was happy to reunite with his grandparents and brother, he missed his father and felt abandoned during this time. Thomas was elated when in July 1925 his father returned to America to fetch him and take him back to France. Many years later Merton reflected on this time in his life, describing that “I realized today after mass what a desperate, despairing childhood I had. Around the age of 7-9-10, when mother was dead and father was in France and Algeria. How much it meant when he came to take me to France. It really saved me.”¹⁶ While Thomas was reunited with his father, his younger brother John Paul would once again stay in New York with their grandparents.

In August 1925, Owen and Thomas left for St Antonin, France. Once they arrived and were settled, Thomas attended the Lycée Ingress in Montauban. He lived at the school and took a train on the weekends to spend one day a week with his father.¹⁷ That first summer in France, Thomas faced his first major health crisis, being treated for what was believed to be tuberculosis.¹⁸ Merton was miserable at the Lycée, and in June 1928 his father came to take him out of the school. Merton described his joy and relief to leave, “I looked around me like a man that has had the chains struck from his hands. How the light sang on the brick walls of the prison whose gates had just burst open before me, sprung by some invisible and beneficent power: my escape from the Lycée was, I believe, providential.”¹⁹

14. Mott, *Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 24.

15. Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 19–20.

16. Merton, *Learning to Love*, 6:11–12.

17. Mott, *Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 37.

18. Mott, *Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 37–38

19. Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 60.

Thomas and his father continued to roam, and in 1929 moved to England. There Merton attended a boarding school in Oakham. Owen was still struggling financially, so Thomas's grandfather Pop once again stepped in to help his grandson by paying his tuition.²⁰ In the summer of 1930, Pop came to visit, and brought news that would have a significant impact on Merton's life. During his stay, Pop took Thomas aside and informed him that he had made arrangements to financially provide for him and his brother for the rest of their lives. Pop²¹ had created a trust that contained a diversified portfolio of assets. Thomas and John Paul would own shares of various stocks, as well as property on Long Island and in Coral Gables, Florida. In fact, the Merton brothers would even own an island, Stone Island, off Machiasport, Maine. Thomas would receive an allowance until he turned twenty-one, but Pop would not be administering the trust from New York. Instead, Thomas's godfather, Tom Bennett, would watch over his ward from his London home.²²

Later, in 1930, tragedy once again visited Merton's life when his father was hospitalized for a brain tumor. In January 1931, one week after Thomas returned to school from Christmas break, his father passed away.²³ At the age of fifteen, Thomas Merton was an orphan. Despite this setback he excelled at school. He corresponded frequently with his grandparents in America, and would spend summers with them. At age seventeen, Thomas faced another health crisis. This time, he became seriously ill after developing blood poisoning from an infected toe, actually coming close to death.²⁴

The College Years

After successfully finishing school at Oakham, Merton was accepted into Clare College at Cambridge in 1933. His plan at that time was to complete his education and then enter the diplomatic corps. Unfortunately, his time at Cambridge would prove to be a disaster. Merton quickly took up with

20. Mott, *Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 51.

21. Samuel "Pop" Jenkins worked for a New York publisher, but made his fortune by inventing a kind of picture book that would tell the story of a popular film, using stills from the movie (Mott, *Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 12).

22. Mott, *Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 53.

23. Mott, *Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 55.

24. Mott, *Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 62.