

FOREWORD

In the final years of his life, Thomas Merton had a brief but intense exchange of correspondence with the theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether, who had recently joined the faculty of Howard University in Washington, having completed her graduate work at Claremont Graduate School. Over the course of their correspondence, as Ruether writes, they were like “two ships that happened to pass each other on our respective journeys. For a brief moment we turned our search lights on each other with blazing intensity” and dialogued with an “existential urgency.”¹ Central to their exchange was Ruether’s probing of Thomas Merton concerning his position in the monastery at Gethsemani, and even within the Catholic Church, using, as she writes, Merton as “my ‘test case’ for whether integrity was possible for Catholics” or, to put it another way, “Could Catholics speak the truth and be Catholics?”² As any reader at all familiar with Merton’s journals or correspondence would expect, Thomas Merton took her questions deeply seriously. Her questions really challenged some of the central aspects of Merton’s own perceptions of himself, what he would describe in an introduction to a Japanese edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain* written in 1963 as: “the definitive decisions taken in the course of my life: to be a Christian, to be a monk, to be a priest.”³

Thomas Merton was never afraid to ask difficult questions, such questions would lead to his silencing by the church in 1962 from writing on issues relating to war and the nuclear arms race. Merton did not just ask those questions of other people, or institutions, but of himself and

1. *At Home in the World*, xiv.

2. *Ibid.*, xvii.

3. Merton, *Reflections on My Work*, 71.

his own community, including the Abbot, at Gethsemani. This relentless and intensive questioning, combined with one of the finest intellects of his generation, enabled Merton to become a prophetic figure in so many of the areas that were, remain, and will remain, central to the genuine spiritual search—writing about the human quest for God and opening up the contemplative way in an accessible manner for twentieth- and twenty-first-century seekers; the need for this contemplative life to overflow in love to other people, especially those suffering, and seeking to change the sources of oppression through non-violent means; the relationship between Christians of different denominations and, ultimately, relations with people of other faiths or of no faith at all; and lastly, questioning the institution of the church, in particular the Catholic Church and, closer to home, questioning the monastic life he himself was living and the place of the monastery in, and its relationship to, the post-Christian world.

Ruether's questions, her challenges to Merton, were not new to him. But rarely had he been challenged so directly and by a young woman on the cutting edge of theology in the first years after the Second Vatican Council. Put in the starkest of terms, her challenge to Merton was to get out of the monastery and to get involved with the real world, challenging him as the saying goes, to put his money where his mouth was. However, Thomas Merton, frequently acknowledged as the greatest Catholic writer of the twentieth century, chose to stay in the monastery.

Merton's choice begs the question for his readers of whether it is possible for a voice from the monastic enclosure to speak to us here in the new millennium? Can Merton's voice still speak to us? Can he still be heard over the ever-growing technological babble, the degradation of human language, and the breakdown of communication and communion between people that seems to mark our current age? Does monasticism have a message in our time, a time described by Morris Berman as *The Twilight of American Culture* and as *Dark Ages America*?

Thomas Merton was certainly not afraid to challenge the darkness of his time. He saw its pervasiveness, and in his book *The Inner Experience*, Merton went as far as to suggest that the dark night, so long associated with the apophatic mystical tradition, was no longer limited to a spiritual minority.

The contemplative life in our time is . . . necessarily modified by the sins of our age. They bring down upon us a cloud of darkness

far more terrible than the innocent night of unknowing. It is the dark night of the soul which has descended on the whole world . . . In our contemplation, God must often seem to be absent, as though dead. But the truth of our contemplation is in this: that never more than today has [God] made [the divine] presence felt by “being absent.”⁴

Merton could certainly see the darkness in our world, but he was also fully aware of our possibilities, of our potential to allow Christ to “Easter in us” and to, in the words of the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, “be a day-spring to the dimness of us, be a crimson-cresseted east.”⁵ Nonetheless, Merton could see that the horrors of the twentieth century, the cruelty of human life, was making manifest the darkness within each and every one of us, and Merton through his writings on war and violence, his prose, poetry, and art work of this period, was trying to stand and face the darkness and encouraging others to do the same. As he wrote in his introduction to *Raids on the Unspeakable*:

Christian hope begins where every other hope stands frozen stiff before the face of the Unspeakable . . . The goodness of the world, stricken or not, is incontestable and definitive. If it is stricken, it is also healed in Christ. But nevertheless one of the awful facts of our age is the evidence that it is stricken indeed, stricken to the very core of its being by the presence of the Unspeakable.

Against this background Merton can speak words of hope to us: “Be human in this most inhuman of ages; guard the human image for it is the image of God.”⁶

In *Thomas Merton: Twentieth-Century Wisdom for Twenty-First-Century Living*, Paul Dekar demonstrates in numerous practical examples the myriad ways that Merton’s vision of monasticism is also a vision of hope that is being lived out in our world today, guarding the human image and kindling the spark of God in the human spirit. Dekar explores all the major themes that Merton was addressing and suggests that Merton was overall working to lay the foundations for a new monastic vision, one that would enable the building of communities of love.

4. Merton, *Inner Experience*, 121–22.

5. Hopkins, “Wreck of the Deutschland.”

6. Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, 5–6.

In facing the darkness of the bomb, our ecological degradation of the planet, our unbridled, rampant technology, the breakdown of community and ultimately of communion between people, Merton continually stresses that the Christian vision is greater than the darkness which all too frequently seems ready to overwhelm us. As the great Benedictine and Cistercian monasteries of earlier centuries served as a remnant and a preserving glimmer of light through the period of the dark ages, so perhaps the new monastics will serve a similar function in our own era.

It is most timely to be reminded of the power of love, of the share we have been given in God's creation, the task to which we are continually called anew, to build, in Paul Dekar's words, communities of love. This vision is at the core of Merton's writing, as he himself suggests, "Whatever I may have written, I think it all can be reduced in the end to this one root truth: that God calls human persons to union with Himself and with one another in Christ,"⁷ and it is both the message of hope and the challenge that Dekar presents to each and every one of us in this book.

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The Feast of St. Benedict, July 2010

7. Merton, "Concerning the Collection," in *Thomas Merton Studies Center*, 15.