

Thomas Merton

Creation-Centered Mystic, Poet, and Prophet

A Way to God: Thomas Merton's Creation Spirituality Journey

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REVIEW BY CHARLES BURACK

MATTHEW FOX is known as the passionate prophet of Creation Spirituality. For nearly four decades, he has championed the spiritual movements and persons that affirm the sacredness of Creation and unite mysticism with prophecy. In his latest book Fox explores the life of Thomas Merton, the influential 20th-century contemplative, writer, poet, and activist who did much to put Christianity in dialogue with the world's religions and to challenge the social, economic, and political trends of his times. *A Way to God* traces Merton's journey from a conventional "Fall/Redemption" Catholic theology to a nondual Creation Spirituality that is "more ecumenical and more prophetic, more grounded and earthy."

The book can be thought of as a conversation largely involving Fox, Merton, and Meister Eckhart (the medieval Rhineland theologian and mystic who Fox describes as "the spokesperson par excellence for the wisdom-based and nature-based mystical and prophetic tradition called Creation Spirituality"). Meister Eckhart not only deeply influenced Fox's own life but also profoundly affected Merton's transformation. Indeed, Merton called Eckhart "my lifeboat," "a great medieval thinker," and "a great man who was pulled down by a lot of little men." According to Fox, Eckhart "permeates Merton's work and consciousness from 1959 onward." Fox demonstrates that Buddhist teacher and writer D. T. Suzuki, who was in dialogue with Merton from about 1958 to 1968, played a pivotal role not only in catalyzing Merton's new ecumenical orientation but in fostering his reappraisal of Eckhart (twenty eight of Eckhart's theological propositions had been condemned by Pope John XII in 1329). It was Suzuki who wrote that "Eckhart's thoughts come most closely to those of Zen and Shin. . . . Eckhart, Zen, and Shin can be grouped together as belonging to the great school of mysticism."

For readers unfamiliar with Merton, I will briefly synopsise his life: Born in Paris in 1915, the first son of two



artists—an American mother and a New Zealander father—young Tom moved with his family in 1916 to the U.S. where his maternal grandparents lived. His mother died five years later of stomach cancer, and from then on he was largely raised by his itinerant painter father, who tried to make a living by farming, music, and journalism. In 1925 father and son moved back to France, where Tom was initially enrolled in a Catholic school and later, due to his grandparents' insistence, in a secular school. In 1927, he was diagnosed with tuberculosis, from which he slowly recuperated. In 1931 his father died, so his grandparents sent him to public school in London, where he majored in languages and became editor of the literary magazine. Considering a career in the British diplomatic corps, Tom won a scholarship to Cambridge University in 1933 but plunged into a wild life of alcohol and women and fathered at least one child out of wedlock. His grandparents urged him to return to the U.S., where he enrolled in Columbia University. By 1935, he was

extremely focused on the question of the existence of God while continuing to pursue literary and political studies. In addition to completing his undergraduate degree, he completed a Master's degree in English with a special interest in the mystic, poet, and artist William Blake. Influenced by philosopher Jacques Maritain and other Catholic thinkers, he became a Roman Catholic in 1938. In December 1941, after a few years as a college English teacher, he joined the Trappist Monastery in Gethsemani, Kentucky, where he took a vow of silence. His love of both silence and writing created a tension not only in his life but in that of his superiors. His autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948) became an instant success and gave him notoriety in both Catholic and non-Catholic circles because it vividly addressed many of the psychological, economic, political, and religious issues that his contemporaries were grappling with. In 1949 he was ordained a priest. While his writings in the 1950s largely focused on the solitary, contemplative life, those in the 1960s were socially engaged with issues of racism, the Vietnam war, the nuclear bomb, worldwide poverty, and the Holocaust. He also wrote about other religions, especially Buddhism.

Early in Fox's important book we learn that in 1967, shortly after joining the Dominican Order, Fox wrote to Merton requesting advice on where to go to get a doctorate in spirituality. The nearly 52-year-old Merton recommended that Fox study at the Institut Catholique in Paris, where Fox would soon meet his life-changing mentor, Pere Marie-Dominique Chenu, who "named the Creation Spirituality tradition" for him. Ever since studying with Chenu, Fox's vocation has been "to research and teach and preach and make known that much-forgotten and often-maligned tradition." Chenu was also "the grandfather of Liberation Theology and a former worker priest" who helped Fox "reconcile mystical experience with prophetic action."

A central thesis of *A Way to God* is that Merton "lives and writes a Creation Spirituality and [...] dances through the Four Paths back and forth on a regular basis." These four paths contrast with the traditional threefold Christian mystical experience of purgation, illumination, and union. A large portion of the book demonstrates how Merton came to walk each of the four paths of Creation Spirituality. Later chapters discuss Merton's actual or likely views of sexuality, feminism, religion, fundamentalism, empire, and the Cosmic Christ.

The first path of Creation Spirituality is the "*via positiva*," which is the "path of awe and wonder." Fox describes Merton's initial conversion to Catholic monasticism in the 1950s as dominated by the dualistic, ascetic, and anti-creation theology of St. Augustine, which, according to Merton, "escape[s] upward, away from matter." However, by the 1960s, under the influence of Eckhart and Suzuki, Merton embraced earthly existence and reimmersed himself in "incarnation and transformation." This meant that, as a monk,

Merton shifted from "contemplation alone to the vocation of the mystic as prophet." In other words, he took on the integral role of "the contemplative in action."

Much of Merton's poetry extols the sacredness of Creation. In the poem "Grace's House," Merton proclaims, "No blade of grass is not blessed / On this archetypal, cosmic hill," and elsewhere states, "Every blade of grass is an angel singing in a shower of glory." In a prose poem, Merton echoes the Romantic view of the poet as a worshipper and prophet of the spirit of nature: "My worship is a blue sky and ten thousand crickets in the deep wet hay of the field. My vow is the silence under their song." For Merton, the ultimate exultation arises from the realization, during moments of communion with reality, that "we are already one;" in such moments we "recover. . . our original unity." Fox attributes Merton's celebration of nature in part to his Celtic roots and Welsh ancestry.

The second path of Creation Spirituality is the "*via negativa*," which is the "path of letting go and letting be, of solitude and silence, but also of undergoing grief and sorrow; it's an ongoing act of radical trust in the Divine." Like Eckhart who championed the letting go of self, the silencing of the mind, and the stilling of the body so that one could "sink [...] eternally into the One," Merton emphasized the need for "an ever greater surrender" to God. In his poems, he continually praises silence, stillness, and solitude: "Be still / Listen to the stones of the wall / Be silent, they try / to speak your / Name." In another poem, he proclaims, "I Solitude, am your professor! / I go before you into emptiness / [...] / I, Nothingness, am thy All. / I, Silence, am thy Amen!" Contemplation is one of the most important ways Merton communes with silence. He described it as "essentially a listening in silence, in expectancy" and equated the transrational state of the soul with what Zen Buddhists call the silent, enlightened mind.

The third path of Creation Spirituality is the "*via creativa*," which is the "path of celebration and creativity, of cocreating with the work of the Holy Spirit." Creativity is paramount to Merton's spirituality, much as it was to Eckhart, who believed that self-emptying enabled the Godhead (*Gottheit*) to "become fruitful" within us and so make each person a divine "wife." Merton asserted that the Catholic "theology of creativity" necessarily involves "the Holy spirit re-forming us in the likeness of Christ, raising us from death to life with the very same power which raised Christ from the dead." He admired the Hindu tradition that treats all artistic work as Yoga and that "says that your everyday work can lead you to union with God." He was critical of a Western aestheticism that "fails to integrate art with life," and instead praised art that emerges from "the peculiar immediacy of the most direct vision." The prophet-poet seeks to "obey life, and the Spirit of Life that call us to be poets."

Just as Eckhart imagined a feminine divinity who "lies on a maternity bed giving birth" all day long, Merton emphasized

the feminine dimension of sacred creativity. He believed that “God is at once Father and Mother” and affirmed the “feminine principle” in the universe, which he associated with *Hagia Sophia* (Holy Wisdom). This feminine principle is “the dark, nameless *Ousia* [being, essence], of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, the incomprehensible, ‘primordial’ darkness which is infinite light” and is “perfectly” realized in the Blessed Virgin. Echoing Proverbs, Merton saw Holy Wisdom as “the feminine child” playing before God and envisioned the creative artist as a child playing in wonder before the Mystery. More generally, he recognized the power of the creative arts and of ritual to “open up” the contemplative’s inner self to “incorporate the sense and the body in the totality of the self-orientation to God that is necessary for worship and for meditation.”

Merton came to believe that the contemplative life should not be divorced from the active life.

The fourth and final path of Creation Spirituality is the “*via transformativa*,” which is the “path of compassion and justice. . . the way of the prophet who calls us to action.” Under the influence of the social activism of the 1960s and of Eckhart’s stress on the spiritual imperative of social justice, Merton came to believe that the contemplative life should not be divorced from the active life. Rather, the monk should seek “to restore the ancient, harmonious and organic balance between” contemplation and action since “both are necessary.” Deeply affected by reading Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel’s book on *The Prophets*, Merton described “the prophetic struggle with the world” as “the struggle of the Cross against worldly power” and said that “To live prophetically, you’ve got to be questioning and looking at factors behind the facts.”

Refusing to divide the creative life from the socially engaged life, Merton embraced the prophetic vocation of the poet and recognized the poetic dimension of prophesy. He characterized poets as “children of the Unknown” and “ministers of silence” who are “needed to cure all the victims of absurdity” and as “dervishes mad with secret therapeutic love which . . . changes everything.” He defined prophecy not as the power “to predict, but to seize on reality in its moment of highest expectation and tension toward the new. This tension is discovered . . . in the light of everyday existence.” Prophecy seeks to identify, nurture, and support the positive potentials

of humanity and facilitate their birthing and development. In “Message of Poets,” he encourages fellow poets to “Harvest many new fruits for which the world hungers—fruits of hope” that can “calm the resentments and the rage of man.”

Merton was an advocate of responsible freedom and became an outspoken critic of racial injustice, the Holocaust, Vietnam war, the Cold War, fascism, militarism, materialism, consumerism, technologism, eco-destruction, and fundamentalism. In his mind, all of these problems were interconnected since they derived from a mindset divided and deformed by dualism and out of touch with the spirit in all beings. He supported the civil rights movement, praised Martin Luther King, Jr., and admired the “religious and non-violent” character of the “Negro demonstrations.” Echoing William Blake, he believed that “In the conflict between law and freedom God is on the side of freedom.” He considered fascism to be a “total submission to organized injustice. . . which has lost interest in holiness” and which supports “resignation under official brutalities.”

As an early proponent of ecological consciousness and action, influenced in part by Rachel Carson, he considered it to be “perhaps the most crucial aspect of Christian obedience to God today” to be responsible “toward creation and God’s creation and God’s will for creation.” This obedience requires “respect for nature and love for man.” He perceived that the worship and misuse of technology were alienating us from nature and destroying the planet, and he criticized a technological, atheistic humanism that makes humans into “insects” without “a human center and a human spirit.” He considered modern war to be “the right arm of technocracy” and was the first major religious leader to openly oppose the



Vietnam war. Critical of religious fundamentalism, he advocated deep interfaith exchange and was aware that his “interest in Buddhism has disturbed some of the Catholics, clergy and religious.” While at a Buddhist shrine in Sri Lanka in 1968, a few days before his tragic death, he had a profound experience of enlightenment.

In his last talk, delivered at an interfaith conference in Bangkok, Merton spoke about “Karl Marx and Monasticism.” He emphasized that “[t]he whole idea of compassion is based on a keen awareness of the interdependence of all these living beings,” and agreed “somewhat” with neo-Marxist philosopher Herbert Marcuse who criticized managerial societies, whether in the U.S. or in the Soviet Union, that are “highly organized technological societies” and that “end up being equally totalitarian in one way or another.” On his way to the conference, Marcuse stated that “the monk is essentially someone who takes up a critical attitude toward the world and its structures” and who declares that “the claims of the world are fraudulent.”

Officially, Merton died an accidental death due to receiving a shock from a faulty fan after stepping out of a shower at the Bangkok conference. But Fox believes it is likely that

he was assassinated by the U.S. government—probably by a CIA agent—because of his anti-war activism and support of conscientious objectors. For years, Merton had been receiving hate mail from government agencies. The FBI had a file on him, and the CIA illegally intercepted a letter he wrote to Russian author Boris Pasternak. His body was flown back to the U.S. on a CIA plane, and no autopsy was done.

Thomas Merton lives on through his profound and inspirational writings. Fox’s powerful portrait will inspire readers to play and pray, love and labor, congregate and contemplate—and to create a community of beings bound by compassion, justice, and joy. ■



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