

Cosmopolitan: Thomas Merton's Urbane Spirituality

By Kathleen Deignan, CND

In the Janus soul of Thomas Merton, the silent, contemplative desert father's other half was an articulate and urbane master whose sophisticated voice sought dialogue with the cultural creatives of his day. A spiritual patron of both arts and letters, Merton was a worldly mystic who felt his true vocation was to be a spiritual companion to intellectuals, poets and social critics whom he recognized as the frequency holders and evolvers of the age. His mentor and inspiration for this ministry was the second-century master, Clement of Alexandria, "who was no Desert Father,"¹ and whose own practice of urbane spirituality inspired Merton's easy movement among the world's intellectual elites, as he learned, like Clement, to love "them all in Christ" (CA 2). In this brief essay, I wish to validate the claim that Merton is an *urbane* spiritual master, by which I mean that, if not physically dwelling in the city, he certainly lived there psychically and intellectually – and arguably sought the silence and solitude of his woodland wilderness precisely to engage more intensively in a cosmopolitan discourse that brought him into dialogue with the exceptional thinkers and writers of his time.

Thomas Merton: Cosmopolite, Monastic Urbanite, *Urbi et Orbi* Paedagogos

In the imagination of his readership, Thomas Merton more likely conjures images of Egypt's deserts rather than its greatest city, Alexandria. Yet in so many ways, Merton was destined to journey on a dual yet overlaying pathway: one that led to and through the wilderness places of the planet, and the other, to and through its cities and libraries. His own native disposition wed the civility and cultivated aesthetics of his artistic parents, and their own congenial longing for the silent innocence and beauty of nature. Few children of his time were home-schooled as Merton was in the fine and literary arts; few were tutored in such bifocal attentiveness to valleys and vineyards, and simultaneously to image and architecture – all in one gaze. Tom Merton was an international child, a precocious intellectual, who moved easily between his several worlds – all of which finally coalesced and coexisted in one small hermitage in the knobs of Kentucky where this extraordinary hermit traveled in memory and imagination to all those urban worlds that had finally led him to his bridal woods.

"The City" that inhabited Merton's imagination – the one he fled from and then to – was a parallax portal to grace. Clearly, most of his dramatic conversion experiences occurred in urban settings. The Eternal City of Rome awakened his first encounter with Christ mediated in the sophisticated aesthetics of Byzantine mosaics. Havana awakened him to popular religion and the cult of the Madonna. The great metropolis of New York fostered his intellectual awakening and conversion to Christianity, and was the most

Kathleen Deignan, CND is the director of the Iona Spirituality Institute at Iona College, New Rochelle, NY, and immediate past president of the International Thomas Merton Society. She is the editor of Thomas Merton, *When the Trees Say Nothing: Writings on Nature* and Thomas Merton, *A Book of Hours*.



Kathleen Deignan, CND

familiar hometown he ever really knew. Gentile Louisville triggered his magnanimous embrace of the world, his tender embrace of M; exotic Bangkok was the gateway to the Pure Land he had sought all his life. So cities, on the whole, were good to Merton, and for whatever duration he lived or traveled in them, they continued to live and move in him his whole life.

One of Merton's last and most mature – if not impenetrable – works is *The Geography of Lograire*, written for what he thought would be perennial revision in 1968.² To me it reads like a Joycean labor to chart the coordinates of his psychic location on Earth, a way to make and map his inner landscape drawn from dreams and nightmares, real and imagined. As his own practical and poetic exercise of constructing a world and a viable culture, he notes that his “tactic is on the whole that of an urbane structuralism”³ (*GL 2*). And due North in this geography of soul is a phantasm of themes that centers in his old urban neighborhood, the Borough of Queens in New York City and its environs: “the gasometers of Elmhurst, the freight yards of Woodside, the crematory in Brooklyn, a Harlem night club, the boats in Bayside Bay, the tunnel under the East River leading into Manhattan” (*GL 2*). This meditation, he assures us, is surrealistic.

Perhaps more kind to his urban past and more accessible are some of the poems written during his academic interval in Douglaston, Queens or Morningside Heights near Columbia, or Perry Street in the West Village, which afforded Merton domicile during some of the most joyous, fretful and formative years of his life. The springtime air he breathed in New York could be “full of courtesies,” its lanes laden with “sweet songs and strawberries”;⁴ its “bridges’ choiring cables” could jangle gently in the wind “And play like quiet piano strings.”⁵ But alas his swan song for The Big Apple was a “Hymn of Not Much Praise for New York City,” which

“ . . . never gives us any explanations, even when we ask,
 Why all our food tastes of iodoform,
 And even the freshest flowers smell of funerals.
 No, never let us look about us long enough to wonder
 Which of the rich men, shivering in the overheated office,
 And which of the poor men, sleeping face-down on the *Daily Mirror*,
 Are still alive, and which are dead.” (*CP 19*)

Ultimately, in “Figures for an Apocalypse,” Merton would write a condemning epitaph for his home town:

This was a city . . .
 . . . as callous as a taxi;
 Her high-heeled eyes were sometimes blue as gin,
 And she nailed them, all the days of her life,
 Through the hearts of her six million poor. (*CP 144*)

(And by the way Paris did not fare much better in his mind: it was a prison house, and London, cancer-ridden. There is also, for good measure, a “Dirge for the City of Miami” [*CP 7-8*]).

The archetypal “City” is for Merton the metaphoric manifestation of our impulse to build Babel, the corporate construct of dark and thick human ignorance and arrogance, desire and futility: “jungles of our waterpipes and iron ladders” descending into hell-realms of absurdity and suffering.⁶ How Merton longed for another city, evoked in a later apocalyptic figure, “The Heavenly City”: “Oh City, when we see you sailing down, / Sailing down from God, / Dressed in the glory of the Trinity” (*CP 148*)

It is ironic in a Mertonian way that he could only perceive that “City” in the silent and solitary wilderness of the Kentucky knobs. In his famous reportage of being there in *Day of a Stranger*,⁷ he writes of the necessity of living under trees he knows quite well and of the birds who live in them with whom he forms an “ecological balance” (DS 33). Yet just when we think our monk has gone native, he describes his quite sophisticated “mental ecology”: an imaginal neighborhood of enlightened spirits with whom he dwells in the woods, for as he says: “There is room here for many other songs besides those of birds. Of Vallejo, for instance. . . . Or the dry, disconcerting voice of Nicanor Parra . . . Chuang Tzu . . . a Syrian hermit called Philoxenus. . . . Tertullian” (DS 35). There is the deep vegetation of that more ancient literary forest: “that more ancient forest in which the angry birds, Isaias and Jeremias, sing” (DS 35).

Even some years before this telling, his urbane soul was outed in St. Teresa’s Wood – another Gethsemani sanctuary – where he admits walking with Kierkegaard and Henry Miller, Suzuki and Vinoba Bhave; traveling to Paraguay; discovering lyrics in the *I Ching*; reading *The Leopard* and Ungaretti – all of which deepen his sophistication – his love of wisdom.⁸ By any reckoning, Merton’s “mental ecology” is hardly a desert landscape; and even as he blames the degradation of rural Kentucky on those who have abandoned the land for the city,⁹ he reveals himself not as a farmer but as a voracious intellectual who needed the seclusion and sanctuary of the forest to move more profoundly into the urbane libraries of the world.

David Belcastro has explored other features of this paradox in Merton’s nature in a superb article called “Praying the Questions: Merton of Times Square, Last of the Urban Hermits.”¹⁰ Arguing that it is a category mistake to identify Merton with the world-denying Anthony of the Desert, he likewise proposes a more accurate prototype for Merton’s mode of Christianity in Clement of Alexandria, whom Merton extols as a mentor and inspiration. So by way of Belcastro’s bridge let us cross over (from all the depressing dreams and nightmares of Merton’s real or imaginal cities) to the metropolis of Alexandria in the second century – seat of the Eastern Roman Empire – to discover the ancient center of a truly cosmopolitan Christianity (a once and future Christianity?) and see why Merton felt so at home there.

If you have seen the film *Agora* by Alejandro Amenábar¹¹ you have some sense of the significance, complexity, dynamism and intellectual affluence of the ancient capital of Egypt. There the once greatest library of antiquity gathered all the knowledge of the world enscribled and rolled into its innumerable cubicles. A university city – a city of museums, temples, parks and palaces – its intellectual temper was broad and tolerant, its atmosphere liberal and creative, supporting for centuries contentious and congenial communities of scholars in their various philosophical, religious, mathematical and scientific schools and academies. As Christianity was itself an urban religion spawned in the megalopolis of Rome and the other cities of the Mediterranean, its nascent scholars and theologians migrated to these cosmopolitan centers of learning to begin a two-fold labor: to wed faith and learning and to wed the learned to the faith.

One of the earliest such seekers of wisdom was Titus Flavius Clemens, probably an educated Athenian steeped in Greco-Roman philosophy and its mysteries. Born at the end of the Apostolic Era, around 150 CE, he arrived in Alexandria as that city was in the throes of a neo-Platonic renaissance. What he heard there, in the newly inaugurated Christian school of Pantaenus, was an enlightened gospel all the more illuminating as it received and refracted the light and depth of

Greek philosophy, and reflected back its own luminosity on the myths, rites and superstitions that could be a sad prison, and where “decadent conventions . . . were consecrated by religion” (CA 12). This is the city where Christianity began to experiment with the high-order language of philosophy to articulate the profound event of the incarnation of divinity into human flesh, inspiring a new cosmology and theological anthropology that disclosed the true nature and destiny of the human, giving terrestrial and cosmic history a new trajectory, offering a more universal language to speak of the great mysteries revealed in Christ.

Like Merton’s, Clement’s conversion was a profoundly intellectual one, and after his matriculation in the Didascalium, he succeeded his teacher as the dean of the Christian school. During his regency, Clement transformed this first catechetical school and theologate from an exclusive house of formation to a forum for Christian exploration, inviting intellectuals, artists, poets, scientists, lawyers, businessmen and officials to engage their curiosity about the new wisdom. Though outshined in the history of Christian thought by his successor Origen, Clement distinguished himself as a “dialogian” more than an apologist for the emergent Christian faith (see CA 7). There was in him no trace of the later fanaticism that would polarize Christians and their neighbors; rather he was a man of great sophistication, “comprehension and compassion” (CA 3), pioneering a new and dangerous vocation which appealed completely to Thomas Merton – to teach a mode of Christian gnosis to the intellectuals and social sophisticates of a great cosmopolitan city.

Merton’s engagement with this “most appealing of the Ancient Christian writers” (CA 1) is noted in 1961, coinciding with his likewise fascination with the Sufis, Shakers and Chuang Tzu. This period proved to be another intensely creative season of fusion as many intellectual strands wove themselves together in his highly synthetic mind. He had recently discovered Clement’s trilogy: *Protrepitkos (The Persuader)* – a tract for the awakening of the pagan soul; *Paidagogos (Christ the Educator or tutor of the Christian soul)*; *Didaskalos (The Master Teacher)* – lost or unwritten, so in its place, the *Stromateis*, “pensées” or notes for the *Didaskalos*. Soon, Merton’s fascination became a tiny book, *Clement of Alexandria: Selections from The Protrepitkos*, an essay and translation of four excerpts, which was later summarized for the novices in a taped lecture that presented his homage to Clement as the first Christian humanist and mystagogue.

Having shared something of Merton’s introductory essay, I would like to pose a provocative question, and offer some speculative responses: what did Thomas Merton see reflected in the distant mirror of Clement of Alexandria that proved so attractive and important; what of Clement can be seen in the post-modern mirror of Thomas Merton; and what does any of this mean for our moment? But let us hold these questions in suspension for the moment. Remember that however much Merton resourced the past, and the Alexandrian school in particular, it was always in service of the present and the future, as he assures his monastic friend Dom Jean Leclercq.¹² “As soon as we start talking,” Merton reminds his novices during his Clement conference, “we are twentieth-century people – the only problem is it’s not twentieth-century enough.”¹³ He says this another way in a 1961 letter to Bruno Schlessinger where he decries a cultural philistinism permeating Church and society: “a pretended Christianity without the human and cultural dimensions which *nature* herself has provided, in history, in social tradition, etc., [so] our religion becomes a lunar landscape of meaningless gestures and observances.” He notes, “this is what is driving intelligent people as far from Christianity as they can travel.”¹⁴ He sounds the urgent need for a viable, well-articulated Christian humanism, to liberate us toward a deeply integral and evolutionary spirituality, indeed

toward a Christian gnosis that might awaken our pneumatic potential. He suggests a consultation with Clement, a revisitiation to the Alexandrian school in that vibrant era of complex trends that fertilized and accelerated the maturation of Christian self-understanding in dialogue with philosophical Jews, Gnostics and neoplatonists, mixed with desert fathers, and the countervailing Antiochene alternative – all of which he saw as the seedbed of future development: “How I wish I could be there to talk with you” about it (*CWL* 24).

Merton and his seedbeds – and all these heirloom seeds, encoding the genetic information for a robust hybrid cosmopolitan Christianity that could thrive in any climate, era and landscape of the world. So which of these seeds would Merton have us water now from the seminary of that ancient didascalium? What might take root in the secular soil of our age where religious wisdom is too often engineered by dominating institutions – in the scientific soil of our world dismissive of mystery, receptive only to measurable, verifiable actualities, the atheistic soil of our age so hardened by the violence and repression of dogmatism, made flat by and insensitive to the energy of transcendence and incidence, the materially saturated and contaminated soils of our world, consumed, wasted and blood-soaked, rendered insensible to the Christic seed promising a new season of grace for this Earth? What seeds of wisdom would our urbane master replant from the heirloom seminary of Alexandria?

First, he would plant the seed of a new Christian gnosis, a living, palpable, experiential apprehension of the underlying significance and meaning of all reality in the mystery of Christ. He would have us water the seed of that Christian enlightenment, planted by Paul and John ages ago, whose very microform is Jesus Christ, and whose macroform is the Mystical Body of Christ, maturing throughout history, and now in a critical season. He would have us nurture this gnostic seed with our desire, husband it with our practice until the mystical life flowered in us, so we could give away its fruit to a starving world. This is the seed of spiritual evolution, of recognition of our christic and cosmic identity (see *CA* 12). He would have us plant the seed of right effort and practice for the arduous labor of birthing the Christ life, a seed that would implant its information about how to listen deeply, pay attention and submit to the indwelling Teacher; a seed with more than catechetical information – mystagogical intuition that would guide our growth into the next phase of human evolution.

To nurture these seeds Merton would have us gather the organic matter all around us – the sweet or sour fruits of knowledge and experience growing in the gardens or wastelands of our world: its creativity, science, politics; high, low, pop culture; the remnants of its triumphs and tragedies – gather it all into our compost bins and let it mulch into a rich human wisdom – a new humanism – to nurture our compassion and deepen our interment in this world. He would have us integrate as much contemporary culture and philosophy into the new garden as possible, so its fruit would be palatable and nurturing to the people of our age.

To aid our deep integration into the world, Merton would have us plant the seed of dialogue that would flower into a fluency in unconditional conversation with all and any, confident that the silent Logos of Christ would prompt us in the underlying narrative of hope and communion which is the primordial speech of Christians. He would have us uproot the weeds of dialectic or diatribe, propaganda and publicity, and water the gift of tongues so that, with graciousness and wit, we might be in rapport with the people of our age, and share with familiarity and ease our Christian enlightenment – letting it shine as gently as “fireflies in the dusk” (*CA* 7).

To nurture the seed of dialogue Merton might invite us to an intellectual and theological commitment to leave a generous portion of our garden unseeded, unwatered, in the shade. An apophatic field of emptiness, a fallow field where the Logos falls silent, in order to teach us a liberating language beyond dogma and religious formula for stammering at the great mysteries in which we live and move and have our being. In this field we neither plant nor water but accept with disciplined humility the fundamental and admitted unknowing of our sometimes autistic generation. This is the post-modern landscape we share with scientists, atheists and other intellectuals for whom God, meaning, hope are in eclipse. On this common ground of solidarity we wait on the Logos to rescue us from babble and teach us again the wisdom that sounds in silence.

In this desertified world, where the soils of so many nations are soaked in blood, Merton and Clement would have us plant the heirloom seed of peace (see *CA 7*), a resilient strain of Christian non-violence born of dialogue and deep love for all that is human and more, born of compassionate and unconditional openness to the world. This seed, against all odds, gives rise to a new garden, and is the emblematic flower of the New Creation.

As we can see, Merton's Alexandrian garden is urban and urbane. It flourishes in the midst of the secular city. It is the cosmopolitan garden where he would celebrate his vow of conversation with the countless post-modern creatives he spent his life engaging. This was his given and chosen vocation as he confesses to Pope John XXIII in November, 1958:

It seems to me that, as a contemplative, I do not need to lock myself into solitude and lose all contact with the rest of the world; rather this poor world has a right to a place in my solitude. It is not enough for me to think of the apostolic value of prayer and penance; I also have to think in terms of a contemplative grasp of the political, intellectual, artistic and social movements in this world – by which I mean a sympathy for the honest aspirations of so many intellectuals everywhere in the world and the terrible problems they have to face. I have had the experience of seeing that this kind of understanding and friendly sympathy, on the part of a monk who really understands them, has produced striking effects among artists, writers, publishers, poets, etc., who have become my friends without my having to leave the cloister. I have even been in correspondence with the Russian writer who won the Nobel Prize in Literature, Boris Pasternak. . . . In short, . . . I have exercised an apostolate – small and limited though it be – within a circle of intellectuals from other parts of the world; and it has been quite simply an apostolate of friendship.¹⁵

But more than Nobel Laureates, he continues to engage all of us – untold millions – in this cosmopolitan spirituality, giving us the wisdom to live our lives contemplatively in a world of action.

So now, let us ask what Merton saw in the distant mirror of Clement and the Alexandrian experiment: he saw himself – a cosmopolitan, urbane spiritual master, educating us to live as enlightened Christians at the heart of the world.

1. Thomas Merton, *Clement of Alexandria: Selections from The Protreptikos* (New York: New Directions, 1962) 2; subsequent references will be cited as “CA” parenthetically in the text.
2. Thomas Merton, *The Geography of Lograire* (New York: New Directions, 1969); subsequent references will be cited as “GL” parenthetically in the text.
3. For a helpful overview of structuralism, see John Sturrock, *Structuralism* (Paladin Movements and Ideas Series) (London: Paladin, 1986).
4. Thomas Merton, “The City’s Spring,” *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 7; subsequent references will be cited as “CP” parenthetically in the text.
5. “Aubade – The City” (CP 86).
6. “Holy Communion: The City” (CP 39).
7. Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981); subsequent references will be cited as “DS” parenthetically in the text.
8. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 79 [12/26/1960].
9. “There is also the non-ecology, the destructive unbalance of nature, poisoned and unsettled by bombs, by fallout, by exploitation: the land ruined, the waters contaminated, the soil charged with chemicals, ravaged with machinery, the houses of farmers falling apart because everybody goes to the city and stays there” (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] 240).
10. David Joseph Belcastro, “Praying the Questions: Merton of Times Square, Last of the Urban Hermits,” *The Merton Annual* 20 (2007) 123-50.
11. *Agora* was a 2009 film directed by Alejandro Amenábar about Hypatia, the fourth-century Alexandrian philosopher-scientist who was killed in religious unrest; an agora is the Greek equivalent of a forum, a public gathering space in the center of a city.
12. See Thomas Merton and Jean Leclercq, *Survival or Prophecy? The Letters of Thomas Merton and Jean Leclercq*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002) 175: “The vocation of the monk in the modern world . . . is not survival but prophecy” [7/23/1968].
13. Thomas Merton, “Clement of Alexandria” (Kansas City, MO: Credence Cassettes, 1994).
14. Thomas Merton, *Cold War Letters*, ed. Christine M. Bochen and William H. Shannon (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006) 23; subsequent references will be cited as “CWL” parenthetically in the text.
15. *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 482.