

A Meeting of Angels: The Correspondence of Thomas Merton with Edward Deming and Faith Andrews

Kathleen Deignan
Mon 13 October 2008

Over the sink in the kitchen of Merton's hermitage is a Shaker spirit drawing, "The Tree of Life" that hangs like a memory of Merton's fascination with that Peculiar People called the Shakers. It was the gift of Edward Deming Andrews, the token of a friendship celebrated in this collection of correspondence edited with an introduction by Paul Pearson. From the time Andrews read *The Seven Storey Mountain* and heard stories about Merton's fascination with the Shakers from their mutual friend, Mark Van Doren, he had "longed to know him." Following that desire, in 1960, he took the opportunity to offer Merton assistance in writing his own book on Shaker religion. Although Merton's book never was written, its proposal did occasion an exchange of letters between the two Shaker admirers that reveals the warmth and affection of an unfolding relationship, marked by the cordiality, decorum and angelic affection of the people who had brought them together.

Merton was delighted to hear from Andrews whose several books on the Shakers he had read and he sincerely welcomed a dialogue partner on all things Shaker. The proximity of Gethsemani to the Pleasant Hill Shaker Village near Harrodsburg, Kentucky, had allowed Merton to visit there on two occasions awakening a life-long enchantment with the people whom Merton would later call "The American Celibates and Craftsmen Who Dance in the Glory of God." In Merton's photos of the settlement, which Pearson presents at the end of the book, we get to see through Merton's own eyes his appreciation of the aesthetic he encountered there, those spare and simple elements that formed a transforming environment for awakening the spiritual life in the balance of a built world that incarnated a vision of a harmonious transcendent world laboring, in the labor of the Shakers, to be manifest. It appealed immensely to Merton's Cistercian sensibilities and he felt an immediate resonance with "the silent eloquence of Shaker craftsmanship." And it was the scholarly work of Edward Deming and Faith Andrews that provided a kind of gloss on his own photographic texts, affording Merton richer access to the heavenly spheres perceived and embodied by the Shakers.

Where the Andrews were interested in the craft and culture produced by these Shakers, Merton was explicitly interested in the religion that informed them. In his initial reply to Andrews' offer, Merton made clear that his book would focus on the spirituality manifesting through the exquisite simplicity of their functional art and architecture. He acknowledged that he would first need to become an earnest student of Shakerism, noting that toward this end he had begun (but then neglected) a correspondence with a Shaker elderess from the Canterbury, New Hampshire society. He declared his intention to put on some Shaker practice by imitating their careful and honest principles, admitting that such an in depth study would require deep love, reverence and understanding. He confessed his tendency to be pulled into a multiplicity of intellectual curiosities that would betray the single-mindedness of the Shaker way. Yet he was committed to the project, and hoped that there might be a convergence of his several other interests with this one, because it could have great meaning for twentieth century America which had lost something of its soul: "I think the extinction of the Shakers and of their particular kind of spirit is an awful portent."

Clearly Andrews saw in Merton someone especially gifted to set forth "the mystical phases of the Shaker experience," since this had been left out of other works on the Society. In their occasional exchanges of books, he lends Merton several primary Shaker theological texts, among them Elders Wells and Green's *A Summary View of the Millennial Church*, and later the work of Benjamin Seth Youngs. Clearly their correspondence was becoming another platform for interreligious dialogue as

Merton facilitated a conversation among the Shakers and early Christian gnostics, and then the Cistercians, highlighting the common ground of simplicity from which they both arise.

Eventually Merton drew Andrews into other currents of interest playing out at the time in his omnivorous and multi-tasking intellect, always noting their resonance with Shaker spirituality: the work of Ananda Coomaraswamy, Clement of Alexandria, and his friend Mircea Eliade, to whom Merton wished to pass off the real work of elucidating Shaker religion. While Andrews stayed on track, elaborating the many features of the one phenomenon of the Shakers, Merton rode the successive waves of his inexhaustive allurements which they sparked. He confesses to Andrews his acute anxiety at the challenge to undertake the slow painstaking, single-minded study required to master the subject sufficiently, exposing his impulse to produce something more quickly to satisfy his need for "a result." In the end Merton admits that the theological world of the United Society is beyond his realm, and though there may appear some Shaker articles, there would never be a substantive book.

This admission did not weaken the interest or warmth which fueled their letters, however. There were other things to share, particularly their common cause of aiding efforts to restore Shaker Societies, particularly Pleasant Hill. Merton recognized in the Andrews dedicated conservators of the Shaker legacy which their careful scholarship was elucidating as a national treasure, making it available for other religious historians and scholars, and the world at large. They continued their illuminating musings on the legacy of the community whose all but impossible ideal still served a "prophetic function" in bearing some unique facet of the American psyche, with Merton lamenting the extinction of some rare, beautiful and important species of the American reality, particularly the expression of an original American monasticism. Merton reveals that he feels related to them "in some kind of obscure communion" and is eager to pass on to his novices their practice of humility and simplicity. He celebrates with Andrews the arrival of a newly made Shaker desk which will be the centerpiece of his hermitage study; and they share one single visit at Gethsemani, which immensely deepened their friendship. Finally Merton agreed to write the preface to Andrews' work in progress: *Religion in Wood*, a way for him to make good on the literary promise he had made four years earlier.

The correspondence reaches its unforeseen climax with Andrews' death in 1964, followed by a brief coda of exchanges over another year with his wife and colleague Faith, as she seeks Merton's advice on a fitting memorial to honor Edward's scholarly legacy. Merton's letter of condolence to her is generous and kind, saluting Andrew's vocation which has kept alive the Shaker spirit, and encouraging her to continue his significant work. He assures her that so kindred a spirit to the Shakers will be sharing eternity with "those angelic ones whose life and work he understood and shared." Her letters in response are long and thoughtful, confiding to her husband's friend the cares they had shared over the years. His letters in reply gradually become terse and somewhat formulaic, focusing on the promised preface to Andrews' final book, *Religion in Wood*. They end in 1995 with Merton's three sentence query about its expected publication.

In his fine introduction to this volume, Paul Pearson underscores the warm and affectionate friendship that deepened between Edward Deming Andrews and Merton from 1961 to 1964. As Andrews became Merton's Shaker mentor, he came to regard Merton as his spiritual mentor, an intimate friend. Fascinating to the reader of these letters is the way one can see the awakening of such intimacy in the variation, oscillation, and maturation of the salutations which change over the course of the correspondence:

Dear Brother Thomas Merton – Dear Mr. Andrews;
Dear Thomas Merton, Brother Thomas Merton – Dear Edward;
Dear Tom – Dear Ted.

A Meeting of Angels is another beautiful volume by Paul Pearson who has carefully presented in this and his earlier work: *Thomas Merton: Seeking Paradise*, a precious distillation of Merton's illuminating insights into the intriguing heritage of the American Shakers. I am personally indebted

to him for such a contribution to the Merton canon since it was Merton who first introduced me to the Shakers while I was a novice in the Congregation of Notre Dame in 1967 reading his beautiful essay "Pleasant Hill" in *Mystics and Zen Masters*. This first encounter with the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, enriched by the work of Edward Deming and Faith Andrews, likewise inspired me to write a book on their religion, *ChristSpirit: The Eschatology of the American Shakers*, without ever knowing that it was Merton's desire to have done the same, and Andrew's desire to aid him. So with Dr. Pearson, I salute the friendship between these two exceptional souls which he describes as "a rare meeting of spirits...the celebration of a meeting of angels," and offer this echo of a Shaker spiritual – which Merton so loved – to honor them both.

Gospel Kindred, how I love thee, tongue nor pen can not portray,
the very feelings of affection growing stronger day by day.
Bind these sacred ties together, knit with friendship ever true, and say to all that Christ the Savior is
creating things
anew
– Shaker Hymn