

Maybe it's time for me to let go of Thomas Merton

## Who do I pay attention to who may be prophetically controversial *today*?

by [Cassidy Hall](#) in the [December 1, 2021](#) issue



Thomas Merton's grave at the Abbey of Gethsemani, in Trappist, Kentucky (Photo by Jim Forest, used via Creative Commons license)

“How can we be sure younger generations learn about Thomas Merton?”

Every time I show *Day of a Stranger*, the documentary film I made about the Trappist monk, I’m asked some form of this question. Viewers find Merton’s words—which I excerpted from a set of stream-of-consciousness recordings made during his years as a hermit on the grounds of the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky—eerily prescient, and, like me, they want to share them with others.

This anxiety about Merton being forgotten has come up at every single Merton talk or panel I’ve been part of since 2011. That was when I quit my job as a counselor to travel to all 17 Trappist monasteries in the United States and began to work on my writing, films, and podcasts about contemplative life. Though I, a queer, young, non-Catholic woman, was an unlikely Merton ambassador, I was often invited to be a part

of presentations and celebrations of Merton's legacy. Every time, people would look around the room, take note of their mostly White, mostly grey-haired neighbors, and wonder how that legacy can last, whether his wisdom will be forgotten.

Typically I have responded with encouragement, mentioning Merton's interfaith dialogue, his modeling of friendship, or the expansiveness of his correspondence as the ways his legacy might endure. But at my last film screening, after much self-reflection on the question, I answered with my own question: "What's wrong with Merton disappearing?"

This month marks 53 years since Merton died in Bangkok after giving a lecture on Marxism and monastic perspectives. At the end of the lecture, he said, "We are going to have the questions tonight. . . . Now, I will disappear." It was only a silly little line at the end of a heavy and controversial talk, but perhaps it was also prophetic.

The desire to disappear is a well-known tension at the heart of Merton's work and his spiritual life, a desire that was often in conflict with his vocation as a writer. In 1946, 20 years prior to his death, he wrote in *The Sign of Jonas*, "I have only one desire, and that is the desire for solitude—to disappear into God, to be submerged in His peace, to be lost in the secret of His Face." In *Thoughts in Solitude*, written from his first hermitage, St. Anne's Toolshed, on the monastic property, and published in 1958: "As soon as you are really alone you are with God." In 1964, while attending mass after meeting with Zen Buddhist D. T. Suzuki, he wrote in his journal with apparent satisfaction, "No one recognized me or discovered who I was. At least I think not." In a 1967 recording, he says, "I am struck today I think, more and more, by the fundamental dishonesty about a lot of my clamor."

Merton was indeed controversial in his time, and his words remain relevant and often helpful. His correspondence and work explored and elevated other religious perspectives and experiences. He often seems to speak prophetically to the situations we find ourselves in today.

But Merton's most recent work is now more than half a century old. And while his conversations spanned gender (Dorothy Day, for example), sexuality (James Baldwin, though it's said he never replied to Merton, and I can't say I blame him), religion (Thich Nhat Hanh, Abraham Joshua Heschel, D. T. Suzuki), racial justice (Martin Luther King Jr.), and environmental justice (Rachel Carson), Merton, as a

White cis man and vowed monastic in a patriarchal church, perpetuates damaging exclusivity alongside his wisdom.

In truth, his prescience and ecumenism seem rare only if we're looking at White spiritual writers or reading exclusively Catholic work from the 1940s–1960s. Does this context make his views appear more radical than they really were? I have to ask myself, before picking up yet another work by or about Merton, Who am I listening to who may be prophetically controversial today? What words am I reading now, by those whose experience is tethered to the present moment in the fullness of their lives? What marginalized voices of experience am I listening to? Am I going to the source on these topics?

I've learned from womanist scholars that as long as I perpetuate the domination of only a few voices in spiritual leadership, I hinder movement toward liberation for all voices. I cannot learn from Merton what it's like to be a queer woman, or to be an LGBTQ person who is rejected by one's church, or to be Black in America, or to be a refugee. Merton can provide historical perspective and observations, but he simply cannot speak into an oppressive situation separate from his identity and experience.

Merton himself was often reminding us to go deeper, look harder, be willing to take the effort and time to seek out, read, and listen to the wisdom of voices missing from our libraries and bookshelves. I wonder if this is his true legacy—urging us to transcend his own contributions. To challenge the status quo, go beyond the comfortable, and heed the wisdom of the marginalized who have been too often overlooked.

Merton has words for those experiencing anxiety in the midst of change. In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, he writes of a crisis in the church in the 12th century, but he could have been writing about today:

In a time of drastic change one can be too preoccupied with what is ending or too obsessed with what seems to be beginning. In either case one loses touch with the present and with its obscure but dynamic possibilities. What really matters is openness, readiness, attention, courage to face risk. You do not need to know precisely what is happening, or exactly where it is all going. What you need is to recognize the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment, and to embrace them with courage, faith, and hope. In such an event, courage is the authentic form taken by love.

“What you need is to recognize the possibilities and challenges of the present moment, and to embrace them with courage, faith, and hope.” I wonder if this is how Merton might have answered the question of how his legacy can endure.

On my way home from my last film screening, I went out of my way to stop by Gethsemani Abbey. After a rain-soaked hike, I paused at Merton’s grave, marked by a simple white cross engraved with “Father Louis,” as he was known there. “They can have Thomas Merton,” he wrote in *The Sign of Jonas* of those who assumed they knew all about him solely based on his writing, “He’s dead. Father Louis—he’s half dead, too.”

What would happen if I let Thomas Merton die?

As I walked back to my car, I remembered the words from his essay “Integrity,” which had inspired my monastic travels in 2011: “Many poets are not poets for the same reason that many religious men are not saints: they never succeed in being themselves.” Maybe it is time to acknowledge that my long obsession with the words and wisdom of Thomas Merton did crowd out other voices and other perspectives, preventing me from hearing them fully—including my own.

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