

Shakers, Trappists and the Inclusive Dance of Simplicity



Highland Views
Chris Highland
Guest columnist

My wife, a Presbyterian minister, drove with me, her freethinking Humanist spouse, to spend a few days at Pleasant Hill, Kentucky. We stayed in the "Farm Deacon's" stone house, a restored 200-year-old dwelling in a historic village founded by a community who saw themselves as the true Church of Christ – the "United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing," who believed they were "not of this world." We know them as Shakers. And, essentially, they are no longer of this world.

The Shakers held a radical, but not unusual, millennial doctrine. Christ was returning very soon and they needed to be prepared. John Dunlavy (1769-1826) was a Presbyterian minister who converted to Shakerism and lived at Pleasant Hill where he wrote, "The Manifesto," or, "A declaration of the doctrines

and practice of the Church of Christ." The treatise presents the biblical origins of the Shaker belief in the imminent return of Christ and how His special people should prepare for the heavenly journey. When that didn't happen (Adventists, Witnesses and other groups had a similar experience of disappointment), the Shakers settled down to a quiet, communal farming life, eventually fading from history. Yet, their village and philosophy of simplicity remain.

From Shaker Village we drove to Gethsemani Abbey where monk and writer Thomas Merton once lived. Merton wrote: "The Shakers believed that the conventional organized 'churches' had been reduced to ... complicity with the world ... money ... and an appetite for power." When active in un-conventional chaplaincy, I was impressed with Merton's interfaith work bringing together Buddhists, Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Christian monastics in dialogue.

In the Gethsemani chapel we sat in silence listening to the brothers chanting afternoon prayers. A beautiful, peaceful place for contemplation. After

prayers, as the monks walked passed us, I observed a curious thing. Not one of the 40 brothers smiled or glanced in our direction, giving nary a nod to acknowledge our presence. Now, I fully understand that monastic life, particularly Trappist, emphasizes silence, contemplative work and separation from the world. I retain some respect for that, even as a secular person. There can be value in living close to the land and doing the "inner work," centered in a simple life of poverty. However, I was struck by the irony of chanting praise and offering prayers for the human family while seeming to ignore guests. Would we distract the brothers from their communion with God?

This somewhat disappointing experience led me back to Merton, who often prayed in that chapel. He concluded his book, "New Seeds of Contemplation," with an invitation to an inclusive dance: "We are invited to forget ourselves on purpose, cast our awful solemnity to the winds and join in the general dance."

I compared this experience at the Abbey with the Shaker community. They too separated from "worldly" influences

yet also invited observers into their Meeting Halls to join in singing and dancing for hours of joyful music and movement. I've known enough priests, monks and nuns to be aware and appreciative of the diversity of practices within Christian contemplative traditions. This helps balance my limited experience with the Shakers and Trappists.

Returning to Shaker Village, a young Black woman interpreter invited our group of visitors to sing and dance in the Meeting Hall, reminding us how Shakers included women and people of color. Then we entered the large stone Centre Family house, fascinated by the architecture, furniture and the Shaker story itself. I stood staring into the faces of children in a large photo before reading of one influential individual in the early movement – John Whitbey (1792-1843). An interpretive plaque read: "John Whitbey's logical and rational approach to life drew him to the Shakers, but his free-thinking personality and writings ultimately rattled Pleasant Hill. Whitbey viewed Shaker elders as well-inten-

See HIGHLAND, Page 3D

Highland

Continued from Page 1D

tioned people but questioned their claim to divine inspiration.” He eventually wrote a personal account of Shakerism that “caused some Believers to question their faith, plaguing the Shakers for years to come.” Ah, the danger of freethought!

This is a stumbling stone for those who can’t wait to exit this dark dance floor for the bright ballroom above. What do you do when you’re earth-bound, stuck in the secular – the present world? You eagerly await the end, the flight to heaven, yet the promises and prayers fall unfulfilled. You either separate yourself from the human family and dance (pray, study scripture, etc) among yourselves, or you join the greater dance where everyone is welcome.

Shakers and Trappists offer something for our world, this world. And if the practices, piety and prayers cannot create an open circle for dancing, we can simply enjoy a silent (or singing) appreciation for the unshaken beauty of our world.

Chris Highland served as a minister and chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. His latest books are “Friendly Freethinker,” “Broken Bridges” and “A Freethinker’s Gospel.” Learn more at chighland.com.