

Thomas Merton, Shakers and the paradise myth



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

Mother Ann Lee, founding matriarch of the community known as Shakers, brought her message from England to the New World in the 1770s. The “New World” she and her small entourage of believers sought was beyond America (beyond this world!), but it began here. Mother Ann once said: “There is no dirt in heaven” yet she envisioned American soil perfect for planting paradise.

At Pleasant Hill, the restored Shaker Village near Lexington, Kentucky, we picked up a copy of Thomas Merton’s “Seeking Paradise: The Spirit of the Shakers.” As a Cistercian (Trappist) monk living at Gethsemani Abbey not far from Pleasant Hill, Merton was keenly curious about this early heretical community. He understood the term “Shaker” referred not only to the joyous dancing in their Meeting Houses but to the way the spirit would seem to be “shaking the whole community in a kind of prophetic earthquake.” They believed their movement would “shake” the world in preparation for the return of Christ.

While awaiting that End Time, the Shakers worked the land and concentrated their efforts on crafting beautiful buildings and furniture. Their unique craftsmanship was, according to Merton, “not only a manifestation of their practicality but a witness to their common faith. Indeed one is tempted to say that it is a better, clearer, more comprehensible expression of their faith than their written theology was.” Merton goes on to state: “The inspired Shaker simplicity, the reception of simplicity as a charismatic gift, as a sign of truth and of salvation, is powerfully and silently eloquent in the word of their hands.” What they did, what they made with their own hands, and even their silence, spoke more loudly than their beliefs. What they created was who they were, it embodied their belief—a silent eloquence. As Merton later wrote: “This wordless simplicity, in which the works of quiet and holy people speak humbly for themselves. How important that is for our day ...” In the mind of the monk, “The Shakers remain as witnesses to the fact that only humility keeps [humankind] in communion with truth, and first of all with their own inner truth.”

Mother Ann planted many words of wisdom. “Do be truthful; do avoid exaggeration.” “Whatever is really useful is virtuous though it does not at first seem so.” “Order is the creation of beauty.” Even with this simple wisdom and gentle lifestyle, the Shakers were

misunderstood and persecuted. As earthly time passed, celibate and not celebrated, their tools were laid down in the shops, buildings abandoned, dancing ceased (the last two aged Shakers live at Sabbathday Lake in Maine). Yet the simple, silent eloquence of their craft lives on.

In 1962, Merton was invited to an exhibition of Shaker drawings but couldn’t attend. In a letter to an organizer, Mary Childs Black, he wrote: “Their spirit is perhaps the most authentic expression of the primitive American ‘mystery’ or ‘myth’: the paradise myth.” The Shaker community sought to return to the Garden of Eden and create a kind of heaven on earth, yet also set their hopes on a heavenly meeting place above. They presented an alternative to “the secular vision of the earthly paradise” where “the Indian had been slaughtered and the Negro was enslaved [and] the immigrant was treated as an inferior being.” The new world they imagined was radically different than the prevailing myth of an American paradise. Shakers believed in “something totally original about the spirit and the vocation of America.”

Merton concludes his admiring reflections on Shakerism in his letter to Mary Childs Black with his own startled, and perhaps sad, realization. The Shakers not only saw the potential of America to be a new Eden, they worked, they existed, to make it so. And, “The sobering thing is that their vision was eschatological! And they themselves ended.”

With their faith in a heavenly paradise, their eyes on the garden above, they became absorbed by the land, part of the gardens, orchards and fields of Kentucky, Maine and elsewhere. Merton quotes another writer who asserted there was “an atmosphere of settledness” among the Shakers, “as though they were part of the land itself.”

How many religious communities share that intimate relationship with the earth?

There is a certain sadness, or disappointment, when we consider the Shakers. For me, it’s similar to the description of some in the early Christian church, experimenting with a new community, living by the words of Jesus. No one was isolated, no one suffered alone – “no one in need.” And extending this beyond Christianity, beyond religion itself, who are the ones “shaking” our world today? Are we able to hear their “silent eloquence”? Who is in need? Who shares a dream of building (or recognizing) paradise here today?

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