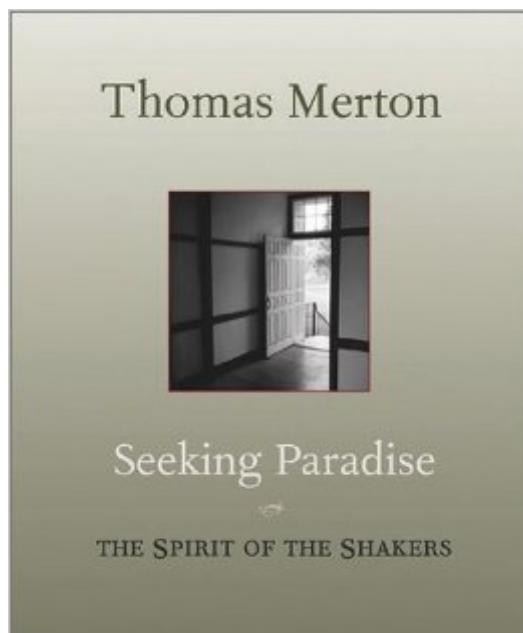


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Seeking Paradise: The Spirit Of The Shakers



Synopsis

The Shakers are largely remembered today for a legacy of extraordinary craftsmanship. But what was the spirituality that infused this uniquely American sect? Could it have any relevance for seekers today? These questions fascinated Thomas Merton, who sensed surprising analogies between the Shakers and his own monastic tradition. The essays, talks and letters collected here - joined by a stunning selection of Merton's photographs of a nearby Shaker village - present a haunting evocation of a lost tradition. In the Shakers' approach to work as a form of worship, in their practice of community, their simplicity and rejection of violence and their profound witness to the Kingdom of God he found lessons for all Christians. In their prophetic departure from the American myth of progress, efficiency and individualism, he found a message of enduring value and relevance for our time.

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Customer Reviews

The first impulse of the reader of *Seeking Paradise: The Spirit of the Shakers* might be to dismiss it as a coffee table book. It offers exquisite black and white photos and an admittedly short text. It is composed of a lengthy introduction, a couple of essays by Thomas Merton, and the transcript of a conference for novices which had been audio-taped more than forty years ago. It seems, initially, to be just another work capitalizing on the ongoing fascination with Merton's life and expansive interests. On the other hand, it represents a phase of his life which continues to be explored by scholars and general readers alike. During the early 1960s, when Merton was photographing the Shaker buildings, chairs, wide yards, and shadowed windows displayed in this work, he had already

entered the ecumenical and interreligious phase of his monastic life. As a young monk, he had studied and explicated the traditions of Christian monasticism and the contemplative quest for God in silence and simplicity. He had made real and attractive to a wide audience the hidden life structured around hours of prayer, straightforward work, and simple fare. In mid-life, though, he had launched into explorations of other traditions with which he felt affinity. It was in the early 1960s that he began to publish sayings of Gandhi, reflections from Chuang Tzu, and his own forays into Zen. He began to learn Japanese calligraphy and added illustrations to his work. His writings became more compressed, more episodic, more laced with koans. It is fitting, then, that Thomas Merton's considerations of the Shaker life and spirit are offered in a small volume, similar in format to his publications on desert Fathers and Zen masters. This book bears resemblance to his forays into the East. Like them, the perspective and the observations are undeniably those of an American monk who was deeply in touch with the political and cultural stresses of the United States just past the mid-point of the twentieth century. After an expanded introduction by editor Paul Pearson, the text by Merton offers us, in apt but brief observations, points for pondering about the Shakers. He remarks on: 1) the stark elegance of Shaker craft, in which he finds prayer-become-art form; 2) the dedication to quality, which he interprets as an act of reverence to the ideal of community, an ideal which demands the ultimate in serviceability and simple pleasure for the sake of the other; 3) the Shaker impulse to realized eschatology, which Merton finds in the Shakers' faith that a heavenly life could be lived in the here and now. It is probably a sign of Merton's times that he merely acknowledges, rather than plumbs, the Shakers' unique belief that their inspired founder, Ann Lee, was an incarnation of God-of the Holy Spirit. Merton's sense of the transitory and the ironic is present in the book, as it was increasingly in the writings which preceded his untimely death in 1968. He pays tribute to a religious experiment which can be read as both success and failure. The success of the Shakers, as Merton sees it, is the fact that their genius lives on in a style, a now-classic American craft, and in the practical resourcefulness that invented sewing machines and other homey, efficient items. A further success is that they developed and lived a variation on a way of life that persists, in various ways and in various faiths. Their ideals are, by and large, those which drove the Trappists who preceded them and the Taize community which came long after them. The Shakers were celibate, contemplative, and cenobitic. As Merton himself expresses it: "I feel deeply related to them in some kind of obscure communion" (p. 113). They tapped, as far as Merton is concerned, a universal impulse to counter-cultural, Spirit-driven community. The same affinities that attracted him to Zen monasticism piqued his interest in the Shakers: their passion for quality, their renunciation of the worldly, their steadfastness in living according to the dictates of their own

passion and perceptions, their undeterred spiritual quest. For Merton, the Shakers provided a still meaningful, and thus successful, example of fidelity unto death. Merton speaks of the Shakers' "Edenic innocence" (p. 79), their search for the "truth" of any work (pp. 97-98), their "prophetic function" in society (p. 112), and their obedience to "the law of all spiritual life [which] is the law of risk and struggle" (p. 117). The final comment from Merton, in this recently edited collection, is a bittersweet tribute. It is here that the failure mixed with their success comes in: "The Shakers apprehended something totally original about the spirit and vocation of America. . . . The sobering thing is that their vision was eschatological! And they themselves ended" (p. 122). This little book provides a snapshot of the Shakers' life, their drive for perfection, and their desire to be earthly citizens of heaven and heavenly citizens of earth. It is interesting, well done, and worth adding to one's collection of works by or on Merton and on American spiritual traditions.

This wonderful book has been stitched together from photographs which Father Merton took at a former Shaker settlement near Gethsemane, with a taped address to his Trappist novices and an article. It is supplemented with articles and photographs by the editor, Paul Pearson. The photographs by Father Merton are stunningly beautiful and objects for contemplation in themselves, perfectly balanced, full of depth and great interest, if for the composition itself as well as the subject matter. They are icons of Peace. One mild frustration, or challenge, is assuring which photos come from Father Merton and which from Pearson. The only way unfortunately is to consult the copyright page. As a published photographer I find Father Merton's photos far better than they ought to be, and beautiful. This is the other way to distinguish his from the editor's, who takes much more mundane photos. Father Merton's photos truly lead us into the mystical depths immanent in the reality of these old trees and leaves and old buildings and the space among them, and the furnishings within. In short, the photos are great, and the writing from Father Merton sublime. This is an area Father Merton was exploring just prior to his tragic assassination in Asia, and we see here the first sketches of writings and speeches not intended for publication, yet the gestation of his thought and prayers. For this we are truly grateful to the great Roman Catholic publishing house Orbis Books for presenting this volume to the public, even if Father Merton might not have presented it in this way. Orbis, and Pearson, have truly done the best they can with the dry bones which were left behind, and given these bones flesh and life, as in the Old Testament prophecy, and we thank them for it. Not as large as the typical over-sized coffee table book, but intended clearly for contemplation, and thus generously sized for a monk's reading plank. One simple page here is rich food for days of meditation; one photo for a life of meditation, and worthy of place upon a cell wall.

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Separated by just 45 miles and both settled into Kentucky in around the same time period (1806), there are some similarities. This book contains an introduction by Editor Paul Pearson, who points out two similarities of Merton and Shaker's view:
i. Embrace of monasticism (because the Shakers could be viewed such). Is not the Rule of St. Benedict welcoming of strangers similar to Shakers?
ii. Merton's vision of paradise consciousness "the original blessing" on the earth. Merton is also attracted to the "wonderful integration of spiritual and physical" in their work (and that is emphasized by the Rule). The book includes 3 short essays of Merton, and then a few selected Merton correspondences. The view of paradise on earth perhaps challenging, and did the Shakers really feel "they had been completely regenerated and were living the perfect risen life in and with Christ". One of my favorite Merton statements in the book is that "the peculiar grace of a Shaker chair is due to the fact that it was made by someone capable of believing that an angel might come and sit on it". So the challenge for me, is how to take that attitude for my own work, can I make a map that an angel may use? "The form had to be an expression of spiritual force". The second essay is an introduction to the book "Religion in Wood" by Deming Andrews, and looks at the work of William Blake to better understand the Shaker material. The photos by both Merton and Pearson greatly enhance the book.

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