

Merton, Berry, and Eco-Theology

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When Thomas Merton (1915–1968) reflected on the role of the contemplative, he concluded that “a contemplative will...concern himself [sic] with the same problems as other people, but he will try to get to the spiritual and metaphysical roots of these problems....”¹ Furthermore, Merton insisted, the contemplative will situate him- or herself within the challenges of history accompanied by the “Lord of History” who “weeps into the fire.”²

Using these comments as a catalyst, this essay speculates how Merton might have engaged the present ecological crisis. In formulating such a speculation, this article begins by recalling how Merton was becoming increasingly alert to ecological issues prior to his death. It then explores Merton's understanding of God's relationship with creation and how that relationship affects the goodness and sacredness of the created world. Finally, Merton's Christology is reviewed with a particular focus of how that Christology lends itself to an eco-theological perspective. In each of these discussions, it is suggested how Merton's theological reflections parallel those of Thomas Berry. Such parallels suggest how Merton himself might have examined both the “spiritual and metaphysical roots” and the presence of the “Lord of History” in today's ecological challenge. By suggesting that the foundations of their convictions are similar, it might not be impertinent to propose that, were he still alive today, Merton would share at least the general tenor of Berry's views.

Like Merton, Thomas Berry (1914–) spent a good deal of his life being formed by monastic discipline. He entered the Passionist Order of preachers in 1933, seeking a contemplative existence which “would provide the time and context for meaningful reflection.”³ That reflection was nourished by Berry's keen interest in the literature of the Church Fathers and the Far East. The latter interest eventually culminated in Berry producing many articles and two texts on Eastern religions and spirituality.

A longer version of this essay was published as: “The Whole World...Has Appeared as a Transparent Manifestation of the Love of God: Portents of Merton as Eco-Theologian,” *The Merton Annual*, 9 (1996): 90-117