

Thomas Merton and the Deep Amerindian Past

Peter Ellis

Introduction

In her book *Thomas Merton and Latin America: A Consonance of Voices*, Malgorzata Poks suggests that though Merton's first interest in Latin America was fired by his visit to Cuba in 1940, it was, however, in 1957, from his contact with Pablo Antonio Cuadra and then from his relationship with Ernesto Cardenal, that Merton really began to explore in his mind a different, colourful, central and south American Catholicism. A seed was sown then that can be witnessed by Merton's record of Cuadra's suggestion of the importance of rediscovering one's 'inner Indian, the intimate Indian, the other American "I"'.¹

This seed germinated fully in 1967, the year before he died, when Merton developed it into an interest in the indigenous people of the Americas as a whole, fuelled by serious anthropological reading. The published material on this late interest of Merton's is limited to three book reviews/essays originally published in the *Catholic Worker* and two longer and more widely researched pieces on classical and modern Mayan cultures, all usefully collected and published in 1976, with a foreword by Dorothy Day, in the little booklet *Ishi Means Man*.² From 1967 on into 1968, letters and journal entries witness to an increasingly knowledgeable and absorbed interest in anthropology, especially marked in his epic poem *The Geography of Lograire*.

Despite its relatively minor appearance in the whole Merton oeuvre, the fact that he was bringing a double view – spiritual and political, contemplative and socially engaged – makes his contribution of great importance and interest today. This importance is enhanced by the fact

that only in very recent years has our relationship with our deep past become seriously relevant socially and spiritually. Lack of knowledge of, and illusions about, this relationship limits how we handle our present day ecological disaster, and misconceptions about it have bedevilled our dealings with other creatures and the world, and unfortunate prejudices about it have denied us the possibility of bringing together Christian and indigenous spiritualities. Merton focused fifty years ago on our refusal to allow our remote predecessors to have had a different identity and this theme of identity has now become a major issue. Too often we have assumed that our predecessors' identities were pale forerunners of ours, while it is increasingly now being argued that ours are instead a distorted form of what being human was originally. Merton brought to his anthropological reading his own conviction that our western sense of identity is a mistaken one and a damaging one.

Indigenous People

But before going any further it is necessary to explore the naming of the people being talked about at the outset of this paper as 'indigenous people'. It is such an indication of the treacherous ground that surrounds discussing the people of the Americas before and after contact with Europe in 1492 that almost every descriptive word used is problematic. Indigenous, aboriginal and native correctly identify them as first comers, but these descriptors have been used pejoratively by the second comers – the conquerors and settlers. Primitive and prehistoric people fit them into being the objects of supercession by history and imply they were inevitably going to enter history one day. Indian was Columbus' geographical misunderstanding. Peoples of oral culture is good and gives room to the idea that, in changing to a written culture, we have lost major attributes of being human for, in a nutshell, a society that has no written material is held together by the power of orality, by the sound and timbre and context of the spoken word and its evocation of social memory, as opposed to the written word which tends to impose organisation and social stratification. However, good though that descriptor is, what is used here is the idea, which was introduced by the French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss in the 50s and 60s, and of which Merton was aware, of indigenous peoples inhabiting cold societies and us hot societies.³

A cold society is one where the overriding aim of life for all is to do what has always been done. It is not that cold societies do not change, in fact they can change quite radically but never intentionally. Always for them the questions at the forefront of consciousness were: What did our

ancestors do? How can we maintain their world? The change from cold to hot is clearly marked and involves the appearance of a state system with its elite classes and elite tasks, money economies, elaborate priest-led rituals, architecturally dominating civic structures, and the use of writing, all supported by subventions from a subject peasantry in a property-owning economy. For us in Britain the change came with the Romans and in the Americas initially with the Incan and Aztec civilizations. It is quite possible from our position today to make much of how cold society people failed to invent things, to explore and expand, to create magnificent cultural artefacts, and to live in expectation of endless breakthroughs – all the attributes of our hot society – but increasingly we see that our lives of endless change, warfare, ethnic prejudice, damage to the environment, etc, can now be seen as unsustainable and increasingly unliveable.

This paper, then, goes through Merton's writings on the cold society pre-colonial peoples of America, bringing out from time to time four of Merton's key perceptions. These latter are then reviewed in the light of his more general views of human identity, and then compared with two lines of current thought on the subject, one anthropological and one theological. That will finally allow a return back to Merton once more and his suggestion that our dedication to the concept of individual identity might be looked at again from the perspective of our deep past.

Ishi, The Shoshoneans, and Two Leggings

Merton's first text was a review of a book published in 1961, *Ishi in Two Worlds*.⁴ Ishi was the last survivor of the Yahi a sub group of the Yana whose homeland had been hill country in California for a timespan measured in thousands of years but was threatened throughout the nineteenth century by pioneer expansion westward. Ishi's birthdate was around 1862 just before a final push for the removal of the Yahi led to fewer than a hundred of them withdrawing into the hills and from all contact with whites. Over a period of fifty years it seems these were reduced to the single person of Ishi who in 1911 finally left his homeland. Clad in a sort of canvas poncho and nothing else, his hair burnt to signify mourning for the last but one Yahi to die, he gave himself up to the modern world. Taken handcuffed to the sheriff's gaol by his finders, he was rescued, deeply traumatised, by a young lecturer from the department and museum of anthropology at Berkeley who thought he would make a good informant on a language unknown to scholarship.

The book reconstructs the world of the Yahi and their demise and gives a detailed account of the last five years of Ishi's life at the museum. Although his role was essentially as a showpiece for visitors demonstrating native skills, it was clear that in the course of his time in the department the anthropologists learned far more from him than he from them. The book also makes clear the value of the world of the Yahi compared to that of the socially fragmented white pioneers. Merton saw clearly, and this is the first of his key perceptions, 'once we see all sides of the question the familiar perspectives undergo a change – the savages become humans and the whites barbarian.'⁵ This reversal of the familiar perspective allows us now to see the nineteenth-century progress west across north America not as a pioneering triumph over great odds but as ethnic cleansing where people living kinder and more complex lives were overwhelmed by people living harsher and more simple ones.

Merton's next published engagement with US cold societies was in a review of a book of text and photos on Indian life called *The Shoshoneans* published in 1967.⁶ Merton's second big perception was highlighted by his printing it out in angry capitals. 'THE INDIAN', writes Merton, 'IS PERMITTED TO HAVE A HUMAN IDENTITY ONLY IN SO FAR AS HE CONFORMS TO OURSELVES AND TAKES UPON HIMSELF OUR IDENTITY.'⁷ He goes on to reason that of course they can never be like us and so can never have an identity. Therefore indigenous people live in denied realities and 'To be an Indian is a lifelong desultory exercise in acting as somebody else's invention.'⁸

This second perception that identity has been denied to cold societies derives from the first – that we see them as inferior to us. There has been a general refusal by western civilization to accept difference positively. To the new arrivals in the Americas in 1492 cold society people were seen as without kings, without laws and without faith. They had to be taught not to work only when they needed to, they had to be shown the necessity of government and the imposition of social structures, and they had to be disabused of free religious thought and so enrolled under definite belief systems. When these efforts failed their children had to be separated from them and brought up in the western way.

The last review article 'War and Vision' resulted from another book from 1967 called *Two Leggings: The Making of a Crow Warrior* written by Peter Nabokov, a native American historian.⁹ The book derives from the self-told story of an Indian – Two Leggings – recorded orally in 1923 and worked up to an organized and structured written account a generation later. Merton was particularly struck by how integrated the spirituality of Two Leggings was with his role as a warrior. The essence of Indian life is

the relationship with other beings who may occur as other humans but also as animals and as spirits in a reality which includes dream and vision. Merton explains that these form a human being's 'vision person'.¹⁰ Here we can see how different was the Shoshonean identity to ours. Our identity is refined down from a generality of human attributes and is often dominated by what we are not – not this gender, not this class. In contrast the Indian identity is precisely the opposite in that it moves toward generality. It floats freely across the different living species and across time. The fact that everyone is undefined and unsure makes cold society mutuality easy. The whole community, Merton noted, is involved in helping with the interpretation of each person's puzzling vision person. So Merton writes of Two Leggings' 'archaic wisdom' that protected him from our 'merely superficial, wilful, and cerebral existence'.¹¹

Mayan Civilization

The next two texts are longer and are based on wider research. Their subject in both cases is the Mayan civilization in Yucatan, central Mexico. The first, 'The Sacred City', about the classical period of Mayan culture which came to an end in 900 CE, is based on views that have changed since Merton's day.¹² Merton is responding in this essay to what he saw as a utopia that actually existed where the civilized arts were pursued in a peaceable undifferentiated society. This reading was based on a scholarly view in the 50s and 60s that no longer stands, following the subsequent discovery of written records attesting the centrality of elites based on the cities and their dedication to war. Thus we have a splendid and typical Merton essay making excellent points about modern consumerism, our dedication to technology and war, our obsessive concern with our own identities, and contrasting a 'peaceful timeless life lived in the stability of a continually renewed present' with our 'dynamic aggressive life aimed at the future'.¹³ In other words 'The Sacred City' is a wholly correct analysis of cold and hot societies unfortunately grounded on incorrect information.

Nevertheless a third perception can be highlighted where Merton explores the contrast of our subjective identities, chosen and fashioned by ourselves, with the objective identity of the past, which is defined by the social group. The cold society's objective identity functions by bringing together the cosmic and the worldly. The individual finds himself, says Merton, 'at the intersection ... of culture and nature ... established by the gods', where 'the visible and the invisible, the obvious and the unexplained' were 'balanced and fulfilled each other'.¹⁴ Merton

sees us in today's hot societies striving to integrate these things within a concept of ourselves and our identities that is unsuitable for the purpose, while they had a concept of identity entirely suited to their holistic and inclusive existence. We are 'acutely conscious of travelling', Merton writes, 'they were conscious of having arrived.'¹⁵

The final text is based on an account of the struggle of the indigenous Mayans for independence from Spain in the nineteenth century and particularly on a successful period in the midcentury.¹⁶ Merton makes a further, fourth, perception to add to the collection so far. This refers to the historical record of the core importance for the Mayan independence fighters of their Christian speaking-cross – a tree placed in the centre of a sacred space from which a voice came from God that encouraged, instructed and supported them. Like the Wizard of Oz the voice came ventriloquistically from a pit behind the sacred cross. During the wars there were two occasions of Spanish predominance when they broke through and desecrated the tree and pit. Unperturbed the Mayans redug the pit and reassembled the speaking-cross. Merton's point is that to understand this we need to go beyond our utilitarian cause and effect rationality and explore the actual experience of commitment to community and identity. Nietzsche saw it similarly: 'The falseness of a judgement is not for us necessarily an objection ... The question is to what extent is it life preserving.'¹⁷

Merton's key perceptions can now be reviewed. They are i) that the conventional view of hot societies as civilized and cold as primitive should be reversed, ii) that our lack of civilized behaviour is marked by our refusal to allow cold society peoples an identity in our hot societies, iii) that our hot society identities are made by subtraction down to the subjective individual while cold society identities are expansive and widen to include not only each other but other creatures and the landscape itself, and iv) regarding the Mayan perception of the speaking-cross, the cold society privileges feeling, mystery and enchantment, while we are forever looking for the disappointment behind the curtain which hides what we see as the *real* wizard of Oz. So our modern identities are often marked by our destructive attachment to seeing through and rejecting the transcendental.

Cold Societies and Modernity

Taken together these suggest that Merton would have no difficulty in accepting the idea that we have taken a wrong turning on leaving the cold society. His retreat to Gethsemani from the bars of New York, and then to

the hermitage from the abbey, are indicative and symbolic of going back and refinding the right path. We know that at Gethsemani Merton strove to retrace Christianity's route by returning to the Desert Fathers and Mothers, to the late medieval mystics, to the great forgotten tradition of contemplation. More widely he sought out the cold society thinking of the east that survives in Zen and eastern philosophers like Chuang Tzu. Merton's late interest in 1967 in cold societies belongs to this retracing of steps and shows that Merton was relaxed about going back further than the monotheistic Judaeo-Christian biblical accounts. In his 'Letter to Pablo Cuadra Concerning Giants', he writes, 'We must find him [God] in the pagan or we will lose him in our selves substituting for his presence an empty abstraction.'¹⁸ In an earlier letter to Cuadra, Merton talks of 'the spiritual richness of the Indian religious genius',¹⁹ and in a letter to Ernesto Cardenal he describes how we need 'to enter into the thought of primitive people and to live that thought and spirit as Christians'.²⁰

But it is Merton's questioning of human identity that most powerfully prefigures changes that are occurring both in current anthropology and in current theology. Looking first at anthropology, the material discussed above has become the view known as perspectivism.²¹ This is that living in close contact with other species and landscapes, as cold societies do, allows them to see both as having human perspectives and as acting as agents in the human world. Similarly the various human attributes, gender and spirituality in particular, are seen as common to all. So for the cold society inhabitant the individual human is seen much better not as a human *individual* but as a human *dividual* scattered between different perspectives.²² Everything depends on whose or what's perspective one might be inhabiting at any moment. This means the collapse of the key western concept of a fundamental difference between nature and culture since every object, place or creature inhabits both in a process of changing perspectives. In a cold society one's surroundings are laden with meaning since the various attributes of life play back and forth, human ones in animals and things and vice versa, and, spiritual ones from overwhelming cosmologies. The world is not a background utility but has its own perspectives as we do. The humans in it have many natures not just one *human* nature. Our relatively recent Cartesian obsession with our difference from the world, that we have intentionality, consciousness, language, reflection, subjectivity, and signification, etc, and everything else does not, can, perhaps, be modified.

The Challenge to Theology

The challenge of this basic sense of human nature to theology is great. However some views in contemporary Christian natural theology cover similar ground in their questioning of the view of the human as a privileged being. The theologian David Kelsey offers a good example. The very title of his 2009 book, *Eccentric Existence*, states his position that, like the cold society inhabitant, we don't have a separate existence central to ourselves.²³ Kelsey emphasises that God is that centre. We live, he says, on 'borrowed breath', repeating a basic Judaeo-Christian tenet, but argues that this means that the concepts of persons and personal are problematic usages, because from birth we are born into relationship, not solely with each other but with nature and the world, with creation as a whole. This makes biology, the life of the body, and ecology, the life of the environment with which the body interacts, indistinguishable. Not being the centre we cannot claim a special significance in comparison to other creatures. Our consciousnesses are not what it's all about. Instead they indicate what Karl Rahner called an 'orientation toward mystery' where beyond every statement lies a further question.²⁴

Much of this was foreshadowed by Merton fifty years ago, not just in the texts looked at here, but by his general critique of our hot society, by his questioning of identity, and also in the arc of his own life back into the woods. Not least among the things returning from our deep past to deconstruct our supposed verities, is the challenge to Christianity's situating everything within the human, seeing other creatures and the planet itself as subjects for us to objectify. Our deep past offers us the perspective of other creatures and the world as equal to ours. Merton criticised the way we deny identity to the other and saw how we also apply this policing of identity and of thought to ourselves. Can Christianity accept a world of multiple perspectives and multiple natures, and accept a God who might have created such a world? This would be a rediscovery of our inner Indian, our intimate Indian, our other American and western 'I'.

Notes

- 1 Malgorzata Poks, *Thomas Merton and Latin America: a Consonance of Voices* (Katowice: Agencja Artystyczna PARA, 2007), p. 155.
- 2 Thomas Merton, *Ishi Means Man: Essays on Native Americans* (New York/Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 2015).
- 3 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), pp. 233-4; Georges Charbonnier, *Conversations with Claude Lévi-*

Strauss (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), pp. 32-42.

- 4 Theodora Kroeber, *Ishi in Two Worlds: A Biography of the Last Wild Indian in North America*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961).
- 5 *Ishi Means Man*, p. 28.
- 6 Edward Dorn, *The Shoshoneans* (New York: William Morrow, 1967).
- 7 *Ishi Means Man*, p. 9.
- 8 *Ishi Means Man*, p. 10.
- 9 Peter Nabokov, *Two Leggings: The Making of a Crow Warrior* (New York: Thomas Crowell, 1967).
- 10 *Ishi Means Man*, p. 17.
- 11 *Ishi Means Man*, p. 20.
- 12 *Ishi Means Man*, pp. 60-81.
- 13 *Ishi Means Man*, p. 71.
- 14 *Ishi Means Man*, p. 66.
- 15 *Ishi Means Man*, p. 71.
- 16 *Ishi Means Man*, pp. 39-59.
- 17 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans R Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), p. 4.
- 18 Thomas Merton, 'A Letter to Pablo Cuadra concerning Giants', in P O'Connell (ed), *Thomas Merton, Selected Essays* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2013), p. 121. The letter is the final section of *Emblems of Season of Fury* (1963) which is included in *The Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1977), pp. 372-391.
- 19 From letter of October 13, 1958 in Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. C.M Bochen (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace, 1993), p. 180.
- 20 From letter of November 23, 1963 in *The Courage for Truth*, p. 143.
- 21 See for example: Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics, for a Post-Structural Anthropology* (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2014); Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment, Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).
- 22 Gerald Raunig, *Dividuum, Machinic Capitalism and Molecular Revolution* (Pasadena: Semiotext(e), 2016).
- 23 David H Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox press, 2009).
- 24 Quoted in *Eccentric Existence*, p. 75.

Peter Ellis — whose career has included time spent abroad teaching English as a foreign language, a spell living in a radical community committed to gospel ideals, and then many years in archaeology. His interest in Merton has brought him to recent Oakham conferences as well as two in the States.