

At Home in the World:

The letters of Thomas Merton and Rosemary Radford Ruether

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Rosemary Radford Ruether was an American feminist scholar and Roman Catholic theologian known for her significant contributions to the fields of feminist and ecofeminist theology. She is recognized as one of the first scholars to bring women's perspectives on Christian theology into mainstream academic discourse. She died on 21st May, 2022.

Between the summers of my years at university, a small group of friends and I took to writing actual 'snail mail' letters to each other, just for the sake of receiving regular post that wasn't a bill, a catalogue or a student loan repayment notice. These summers have given me an abiding love of written correspondence, and a lingering sadness that our world is not one which encourages this type of thoughtful communication anymore.

It was a joy to discover this year the existence of *At Home in the World*, the collected correspondence of Thomas Merton and Rosemary Radford Ruether. I confess, as Ruether does in her introduction, to being neither a Merton scholar nor even a Merton fan; however, Ruether's vigorous feminism has been of great importance to me in my theological studies over the last fifteen years. It was discovering her voice, among other feminists, that made me feel as if there might be a place for me after all within Christianity. She had a penchant for plain-speaking which appealed to me, an ability to cut to the chase without throwing out or misrepresenting the ideas she critiqued.

My theological studies were, for the most part, in service of a burgeoning vocation to the priesthood. It is as an urban parish priest, albeit one with a deep gratitude to monastic orders, and a pesky hankering to engage more than I am often able to with academic theology, that I read Merton and Ruether's letters. They contain rich and challenging themes for any Christian reader. I want to draw out just a few of those themes and their implications: the ruthlessness of this exchange, the intimacy, and the cheerful iconoclasm.

Ruthlessness

Ruether writes in her foreword that in this correspondence she appreciated that although Merton was twenty years her senior, he treated her more or less as an equal in their letters. **She admits, 'I tend to write missives without realizing it and then afterwards really worry if the poor guy has been trampled to death.' But Merton seems up for giving as good as he gets, even when what he gets is: 'I am really kind of disappointed in you. Do you realise how defensive you are, how you are forever proving, proving how good your life is, etc?' The candour with which she addresses him is more than the candour of an academic early on in their career. It is the candour of a lifelong Roman Catholic demanding better than the excuses of Catholicism with which she is no longer satisfied.**

And Merton, though slower perhaps to light the flame and burn it all down, is equally impatient with Catholic institutions and with himself. His **impatience manifests itself as diffidence rather than activism: 'I love all the nice well-meaning people who go to Mass and want things to get better and so on, but I understand the Zen Buddhists better than I do them.'** Though Merton corresponded with a number of theologians, one gets the sense in these letters that he is not satisfied with the way they have answered his own burning questions either. It is as if both Ruether and Merton need to give each other permission for ruthless honesty, with Catholic institutions, certainly, but more fundamentally with themselves. These letters contain a space for this ruthlessness — a privacy and a thoughtful ground for mutual, sharp honesty.

Naturally this makes me ask of myself: where are the spaces when I am able to be ruthlessly honest with myself, but not alone: when being witnessed by another person? How do I as a priest provide that witnessing for those in my parish? The temptation to reach on the shelf for the too-easy **churchy answers to life's questions is a temptation only avoided by being witnessed by, or providing witness for, another person.**

Intimacy

One striking but perhaps seemingly minor detail were the salutations that were used throughout the letters. Merton consistently writes, 'Dear Rosemary'. Ruether begins with Merton's name in religion, 'Father Louis', only gradually moving to 'Dear Thomas Merton', and later 'Dear Thomas', even though Merton often signs off his letters with a simple 'Tom'. For all their honesty and ruthlessness he is still a hermit and a monk in his 50s, she a theologian and a Catholic in her late 20s. That doesn't keep them from barbed, almost flirty jokes. Merton: 'How do you like my posh stationery — purely cynical in intent.' Ruether: 'I am just as fleshy as you, baby, and I am

also just as much a “thinking animal” as you.’ They know or know of many of the same people — theologians, activists, religious, bishops. This is another type of intimacy, that of moving in the same small circles with people who care about the same things. There is also the fact of them being both Americans, as am I. We are, as a nation, generally much quicker to intimacy than our siblings in Canada or the UK, though of course we have just as many unspoken social rules as any other country.

Ruether is much slower than Merton is to let her guard down, to joke, to refer to mutual friends and to call Merton by his shortened first name. Why? Firstly, perhaps, they are writing in the 1960s. Ruether is no doubt having to work much harder to be taken seriously as an intellectual in her own right than her male colleagues. Secondly, there is the age difference; and thirdly the ingrained Catholic respect towards monks which Ruether had imbibed, even with her doubts about monasticism as a valid vocation for a Christian who wishes to change the world. The one letter — notably, a form letter — **that she addresses to ‘Tom’ hits the reader like a seismic shift:** is this the beginning of real friendship, rather than genial but distanced sparring?

It is interesting to me that their correspondence began just at the close of Merton’s affair with a nursing student ten years Ruether’s junior. I do not think Merton’s intentions towards Ruether were dishonourable, but perhaps he was lonely. Furthermore, perhaps he was in the process of realising that interaction with women as women, and as serious intellectual partners, was something he wanted and needed to have. Here was Ruether, a capable equal, married with children living far away: a safe intimacy for an increasingly ambivalent hermit.

Iconoclastic Catholics

Both Merton and Ruether were all too happy to criticise their church. Merton writes: **‘[It is] the job of the monk to do this kind of iconoclastic criticism.’** Certainly his critical voice is one well known to those familiar with his life and work. At this time of their correspondence, Ruether was worshipping with what sounds like a very groovy Episcopalian congregation, but she was not at ease with the fact that such a sacramental, active, creative parish was not to be found within Roman Catholic churches local to her.

As a priest in the catholic tradition of the Church of England, I often wonder what God is up to when it comes to the churches in the sacramental tradition. Broadly speaking, will we see the reunification of Christian denominations this side of the eschaton? More specifically speaking, what do I do with all the former or current Roman Catholics who show up to mass in

my parish and stay for years, even though I am a woman wearing a chasuble, and the masses I say are definitely not valid according to the Roman church?

The answer to the former is, of course: only God knows. The answer to the latter is, I believe: that they are your parishioners, and that you must worship and work towards the Kingdom of God together. Though both Ruether and Merton remained Roman Catholics to the end of their lives, it was always with a desire for renewal within Catholicism, and with an openness to the Spirit at work beyond it. Though not a Roman Catholic myself, I hope that the space I hold for Christians of a sacramental tradition, whatever denomination they have been baptised into, is one that encourages two things which Ruether and Merton seemed to have in abundance. Firstly, both have an ecumenically generous approach to the Spirit and the Church. Secondly, both share a deep and even iconoclastic dissatisfaction with any institution, the Church included, that has lost sight of the Kingdom of God. Perhaps, in an age where many churches, Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox, are all too easily co-opted by demagogues, ideologies, and empires for their own ends, a kind of restless yet ecumenically generous iconoclasm is a Christ-like stance indeed.

Tying it all together

My husband asked me, when I finished reading *At Home in the World*, who came out better on the reading of the letters. I wanted to say Ruether because I know and like her more than Merton. But although she is the abler theologian, she clearly had a way to go before she would become the Ruether included on contemporary theology degree reading lists. Merton may be the more experienced contemplative, but his blind spots are just as **big as anyone else's. I cannot truly say that either comes out looking better** but rather that they seem, like the proverbial iron on iron, to have sharpened **one another's appetite for God and God's kingdom. The sparks of ruthless honesty, cautious intimacy, and faithful iconoclasm in their letters are certainly fun to witness.**

* *At Home in the World: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Rosemary Radford Ruether*, ed. Mary Tardiff OP (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 108pp.

* Merton's letters to Ruether are included in *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns* (London: Faber Paperbacks, 1989), pp. 497-516.

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