

Introduction

OVER SIXTY YEARS AGO, Thomas Merton—monk, mystic, and writer—proclaimed that we are living in a post-Christian world. That is, the influence of the institutional church is in decline and the popular version of Christianity presented to society has in many ways become a caricature of itself. Merton did not have a defeatist attitude about this trend. Instead, he saw it as an opportunity for Christians to engage with the world in a new way; one that was not reliant on the historic size and stature of the church. More importantly, Merton believed that in the coming years the individual Christian would play a vital role, presenting the reality and message of Christ to a world that was increasingly indifferent to it.

Since that time, the religious landscape has continued to change, with the number of Christians steadily shrinking. While that trend is not new, we have reached a tipping point. In recent surveys, the number of people who identify as “None,” someone with no particular religious affiliation, outnumbers the combined total of all Mainline Protestants. In addition, research into the beliefs of religious teens shows that most of these young people either don’t know or care what their faiths teach. Instead, they profess a belief in a God that is “on call,” ready to aid us in a time of crisis, but who otherwise leaves us alone to live our lives. This is a God that prioritizes our subjective well-being without any calls to sacrifice in order to serve others.

All of these religious changes are occurring in a broader post-truth culture in which facts matter less and less, and our society is increasingly divided. This is easily seen in the devolution of our political system into bitter tribalism. While our nation has always been factional, we have entered a new era where beating the other side is more important than advocating for a particular issue, candidate, or course of action. We live in a time when

it is difficult for people to even agree on the basic facts to be interpreted and debated.

Technology has taken the inherent tendency towards sectarianism and propelled it to a whole new level. The internet, social media, talk radio, and cable news now make it possible to burrow further into our own point of view, surrounding ourselves with “news” that reinforces our own position. There is no longer a need to enter the marketplace of ideas. Instead, we can stay within the calcified walls of our own opinions, fortifying them with like-minded ones.

Percolating beneath it all is a pervasive kind of anti-intellectualism that in many ways contributes to and propels these forces. The masses are implored not to “be sheep”—we should not listen to expert advice but instead should follow our heart and do our own internet “research.” This is more than just healthy skepticism; it is an assault on the very concept of expertise itself. As a result, alternative facts and even alternative science now proliferate online. Facebook and YouTube contain thousands of pages and videos that promote these points of view, with many clips receiving millions of views. In them, creationism is elevated to Creation Science, pre-COVID anti-vaxers point to their own “facts” to argue against children being vaccinated against life-threatening illnesses, and conspiracy theories from the Flat Earth to QAnon prosper.

A number of prominent Christians have written popular books addressing how the faithful should respond to our post-Christian and post-truth world. However, most dwell on various elements of the culture war with much hand wringing about the fraying of our country’s moral fabric, and present a dystopian vision of the future of Christianity. Some declare that Christians are under attack from secular society, writing that “today Christians are the most persecuted and harassed religious community in the world”¹ and that things are so dire “the light of Christianity is flickering out all over the West. There are people alive today who may live to see the effective death of Christianity within our civilization.”² Many are fixated on sexuality, and homosexuality in particular. The rights of Christians, it is argued, have been subordinated to those of the gay community, with the Supreme Court’s ruling on same-sex marriage being the “Waterloo” of the culture war.³ One prominent Christian writer is concerned that today gay

1. Chaput, *Strangers in a Strange Land*, 214.
2. Dreher, *Benedict Option*, 8.
3. Dreher, *Benedict Option*, 9.

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Americans live openly rather than staying closeted, “living their sexual lives in shameful secrecy,”⁴ and warns that separating sex from procreation led to the creation of brothels featuring robots.⁵ While not all the popular Christian responses have been as dour or focused on sex, it is clear that more voices are needed. In this book, I want to introduce Thomas Merton to this conversation. It is geared towards a general audience, and as such, I provide background information about recent religious changes, the erosion of truth, and Merton’s life and writings so that they can be better appreciated.

How can a monk who lived in the woods of rural Kentucky and died in 1968 credibly speak to our current and unprecedented times? Merton, while intentionally living apart from society, had a unique perspective on it. As such, he recognized and wrote about many of the trends we see today. We live in a consumer-driven society that promotes values that often impede us from being our true authentic selves. In addition, concerns about war, the fight for racial equality, and the struggle to know the truth are as relevant today as they were when Merton wrote about them.

I do not intend to draft Merton into the current culture war for a number of reasons. First, doing so distracts from the focus of this work and has the potential to be, in itself, divisive. Next, pulling Merton into specific battles of the modern culture war does a disservice to him and his legacy. It is unfair to take Merton or any other figure out of their own milieu and insert them into a modern scenario that would have been completely foreign to them. Of course, people can make informed guesses about how Merton would respond to a particular issue based on his writings and overall approach to related subjects. However, Merton was like all of us: a person of a particular time in history. Forcing him to speak directly about an issue he never contemplated is at best speculative and has the potential to be intellectually dishonest. Often when authors or speakers declare that they know how a notable figure from the past would respond to a new hot-button social issue the results are the opinions of those authors and speakers, selectively quoting the historical figure to justify their own position. Fortunately, Merton wrote extensively about issues that are still relevant today, and there is no need to engage him in this way.

In this book, I explore how Thomas Merton can provide a message of hope and a step towards unity in these chaotic times. Specifically, I look at Merton’s writings and how he lived to provide a path for Christians working

4. Veith, *Post-Christian*, 107.

5. Veith, *Post-Christian*, 111.

to build God's kingdom in the world today. Therefore, in using Merton's life and writings as a model, one sees the importance of doing the following:

1. Don't retreat from the world—be an active part of it
2. Be a part of a faith community
3. Join in the suffering of others to work for change
4. Work for peace
5. Seek and affirm the truth wherever it is found

Despite all the challenges the world faced, Merton remained hopeful and believed that in this new era the unifying message of the gospel would continue to be preached. However, he believed that now “the purity of individual witness will take precedence over everything else.”⁶ There are no easy cures for the world's ills, but we cannot ignore them or fail to act simply because they seem to be insurmountable. Thomas Merton can provide a valuable model for each of us to be that individual witness to Christ in the world.

6. Merton, *Seeds of Destruction*, 198.