

Integrating the Fragments

Review of

The Merton Annual Volume 23

Edited by David Belcastro and Gray Matthews

Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2010

330 pages / \$19.95 paper

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The articles collected in the latest volume of *The Merton Annual* reflect the dialogue that took place during the 2009 ITMS Eleventh General Meeting in Rochester, New York on the theme “Bearing Witness to the Light: Thomas Merton’s Challenge to a Fragmented World.”

Gray Matthews’s “Introduction: Facing the Astonishing” (7-12) points to the significance of the word *dialogue*: the prefix *dia* means to “go through” the *logos*. The image of God is within each person, but divisions have separated people into types and have hidden and shut out that astonishing image within. Yet through conversation the astonishing in each of us can break through, and a deep meaning and a deep communion can occur. Thomas Merton understood and experienced that deep communication and communion among religious and monastic traditions. The articles in volume 23 provide many diverse insights and much wisdom from what Merton learned through his encounter with deeply spiritual men of other traditions.

Merton’s “Preface to Dom Denys Rutledge’s *In Search of a Yogi*” (13-19) is reprinted to encourage further research into Merton’s interest in yoga practice and philosophy. Merton’s journals indicate that he completed this preface in November 1962. Merton considered yoga to be necessary for enlightenment. He thought Dom Denys, himself a contemplative, was in a good position to evaluate yoga. Dom Denys approached his study with an open mind and a fully Christian distinction between the natural and the spiritual. Merton learned from Dom Denys that although there were similarities and differences between eastern and western monks, there were some truly holy men in India who devoted their lives to seek God, just as sincerely as Christian monks did.

In his article, “Thomas Merton – Final Integration through Interreligious Dialogue” (20-28), Father James Conner, OCSO shows Merton as an orphan, an exile and a pilgrim, who throughout his life tried to overcome his homelessness and the contradictions within himself. Father Conner suggests that Merton attained final integration through his deep study of Christian

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Scriptures and through his experience of interreligious dialogue.

Judith Simmer-Brown, a practicing Buddhist and a scholar of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, states that her mentor, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche (1939-1987), founder of Naropa University, considered Merton a true yogi, a committed spiritual practitioner. His conversations with Merton inspired him to dedicate a series of Buddhist-Christian meditations in memory of Merton; in the 1980s, Simmer-Brown was the director of those conferences. In “The Heart Is the Common Ground: Thomas Merton and Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche in Dialogue” (47-58), her reflective account of the friendship that developed between Rinpoche and Merton, who met in Calcutta, India in 1968, she explores Merton through the eyes of Rinpoche, who encountered Merton at a most critical time of his life after a month-long retreat at the most sacred cave in Bhutan. Rinpoche was much younger than Merton, but he was rigorously trained in Buddhist philosophy, scripture and meditation. He was a meditation master who had also studied comparative religion, philosophy and fine arts in Oxford. He authored *Born in Tibet* (1966), the account of his escape from the Chinese who invaded Tibet. He was fluent in English, a published author who had lived in the West and knew world religions and Christianity. Merton enjoyed meeting Rinpoche, whom he recognized as a genuine spiritual master whose meditation and talks were extraordinary. Rinpoche was much impressed by the quality of Merton’s presence. Simmer-Brown believes that in Merton, Rinpoche met a different breed of Christian – one who gave him a sense of Christian spirituality that he had only glimpsed previously. Rinpoche felt that he was meeting “an old friend, a genuine friend . . . the first genuine person I met from the West” (54). A yogi is someone for whom spiritual transformation is the goal and contemplative practice is the means to that goal. Simmer-Brown says: “Rinpoche instantly saw that Merton was just such a yogi who did not want to lose the core inspiration of the contemplative life” (56). Simmer-Brown concludes her essay with the thought that when “true yogis and yoginis meet, they do not get stuck in doctrinal or institutional matters; instead, they meet at a heart level of personal insight, respect and mutual care” (58).

Fiona Gardner’s article, “A Kind of Arduous and Unthanked Pioneering” (59-66), discusses a person’s capacity to hold within and personally experience all that is true and best in other spiritual traditions as an ultimate internal experience that could be described as *satori* or enlightenment. Gardner cites the experience of the following persons in the kind of pioneering that Merton did: the Irish Jesuit, William Johnston, who went to Japan and began contact with the emerging Zen-Christian dialogue; Henri Le Saux, a Benedictine monk who became an Indian hermit known as Swami Abhishiktananda, who experienced the anguish of feeling caught between the nonduality or *advaita* he found in Hinduism and the Christianity that had nurtured him; and the poet Kathleen Raine, a scholar of William Blake and Yeats, who rejected her Protestant upbringing to become a Catholic. Gardner describes the arduous process of interiority that each of these persons went through, and concludes that there is only enrichment in experiencing what is best and true from other traditions.

Rachel Fell McDermott’s article “Why Zen Buddhism and Not Hinduism? The Asias of Thomas Merton’s Voyages East” (29-46) and Tyson Anderson’s “What Matters Is Clear” (67-

79) raise provocative questions regarding Merton's attraction to Buddhism instead of Hinduism and his use of words to express his experiences. McDermott notes three principal elements of the Hindu tradition that were problematic for Merton. He was uncomfortable with the Hindu emphasis on the guru, the teacher to whom a disciple owes obedience and loyalty even at the expense of his own judgment, and the tendency of the Hindu *swami* or yogi to be itinerant may have turned Merton off. Secondly, he was uncomfortable with the Hindu emphasis on image worship. Finally, McDermott infers that Merton would have had problems accommodating the caste system. Although McDermott is sympathetic to Hinduism, she concedes that Merton's journey to Asia was his own and we can only celebrate his effort in all that he did to share what he saw and its effect in his interior life. Merton, she says, provides an inspiration to find grace outside the familiar.

Anderson contends that Merton's Polonnaruwa experience in which he says "what matters is clear" is an exercise in contingent language. It is Merton's language set within the context of his own personal experience. Anderson's attempt to understand what it is that matters and what that has to do with us now is also not very clear because he links the issues of violence, Merton's affair with Margie, and the Polonnaruwa experience. In his *Asian Journal*, Merton himself expressed his difficulty in talking about his Polonnaruwa experience with others: "Polonnaruwa was such an experience that I could not write hastily of it and cannot write now, or not at all adequately. Perhaps I have spoiled it by trying to talk of it at a dinner party, or to casual acquaintances. Yet when I spoke about it to Walpola Rahula at the Buddhist University I think the idea got across and he said, 'Those who carved those statues were not ordinary men'" (*Asian Journal* 230). When Merton wrote "the idea got across," it seems that Dr. Walpola Rahula, a Buddhist monk and a leading authority on Buddhist scriptures of various schools in Colombo, had understood him and had affirmed his Polonnaruwa experience.

"Striving Toward Authenticity: Merton's 'True Self' and the Millennial Generation's Search for Identity" by Daniel Horan, OFM (80-89) is a fascinating and timely analysis of one of the challenges the millennial generation face as they seek to discover their identity. Horan uses Merton's understanding of the true self as a model for today's youth in discovering an authentic identity. He devotes special attention to how technology has complicated their search for authentic self-understanding. The young adults Horan speaks of as the millennial generation, those who were born in or after 1982, have grown up having access to computers, the internet, cable television and cellular phones; therefore, another term that refers to them is "digital natives." Their identities are unstable and insecure. Horan equates their "digital self" to their "false self." Their "digital self" is the identity created in Facebook, communicated in Twitter, and constructed as an avatar in virtual worlds like "Second Life." This "digital self" is a public image that is constantly changing, representing the person the millennial thinks he/she is. Horan shows Merton's true self in the core of our being as constant and real. It may be awakened or discovered when we live in relationship with God and others in a landscape of peace and silence.

Joseph Quinn Raab's deep and stimulating article, "Insights from the Inter-contemplative

Dialogue: Merton's Three Meanings of 'God' and Religious Pluralism" (90-105), looks at the tension between openness to the ways other traditions bear witness to the light of truth and the affirmation that Christ is the fullness of that light. He clarifies how Merton understood his own Catholic faith in relation to the wisdom he encountered through his dialogue with deeply spiritual men of other traditions. Raab's process of clarification involves sorting out the various meanings of the word "God" as Merton recognized and employed them, and relating them to his Catholic point of view. The three meanings of the word "God" Raab discusses are: (1) the mystery which transcends our capacity to fully grasp; (2) "the transcendent mystery of the absolute and unconditioned [equated] with love and compassion, with radical freedom, with human fulfillment in joy and peace" (96); and (3) the meaning of "God" which is specifically Christian and Trinitarian and involves personal communion with Christ. Raab sees Merton as always moving toward synthesizing and integrating seemingly disparate views.

Edward Kaplan, Saul Magid and Martin Kavka lead us into a deeper understanding and appreciation of Merton and Abraham Heschel as individuals, as friends, and as living witnesses to life. Reflecting on the friendship between Merton and Heschel in "Abraham Heschel and Thomas Merton: Prophetic Personalities, Prophetic Friendship" (106-15), Kaplan writes that their words, their actions and their prayers evoke the presence of God. As he recalls Heschel's description of the prophet as a man who feels fiercely, who speaks for God and for oppressed people, and as he studies the intensity of Merton's and Heschel's conversations related to the Declaration on the Jews during Vatican II, Kaplan suggests that men of different religious traditions should meet on the level of fear and trembling and of humility and contrition. Magid, in "Be Alone, Together: Religious Individualism, Community and the American Spirit in Emerson, Merton and Heschel" (116-31), uses Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance" as a framework for examining the tensions between the individual and the community in the writings of Merton and Heschel. Magid believes that although Merton and Heschel appear to have assimilated Emerson's idea of self-reliance, they continued to regard their community as a healthy facilitator of faith. Kavka's essay, "The Ends of Anxiety in Merton and Heschel" (132-148), considers Merton and Heschel as "powerful narrators . . . of the anxiety of faith, the inability of faith completely to resolve anxiety" (132). Both Merton and Heschel teach that anxiety is a complex element of religious renewal.

"'A Son of This Instant': Thomas Merton and Ibn 'Abbād of Ronda" (149-83), Patrick O'Connell's analysis of the "Readings from Ibn 'Abbad" which Merton adapted from the French study by Paul Nwyia, is brilliant and deep in its interpretation, completely sensitive and meticulous in observing how Merton chose the words in translating Nwyia's work to bring out effectively the spirit and personality of Ibn 'Abbād. O'Connell considers "Readings from Ibn 'Abbad" to be "the most extensive and significant product of Merton's study of Islamic spirituality published during his lifetime" (150) and calls our attention to how carefully Merton selected expressions of Sufi wisdom that could elicit a reflective, meditative response from the reader, just as he, Merton, encountered and responded to the richness and depth of Ibn 'Abbād. The section, "To Belong to Allah" is most beautifully expressed. Recognizing Merton's use of

“Allah” in this section instead of “God” as used in previous sections, O’Connell expounds the ontological and volitional meaning of belonging to God – the “submission” at the heart of Islam that is also in the biblical worldview of Judaism and Christianity. O’Connell comments that at this juncture of Merton’s poetic rendering of Ibn ‘Abbād’s writings the similarities between the Muslim teacher and Western interpreter and audience have become evident and it did not seem strange for Merton to use the Arabic term for God. The title of O’Connell’s article is taken from Ibn ‘Abbād’s admonition, “Be a son of this instant,” which means that one must not be preoccupied with the past or the future; instead, one must be completely attuned to the present moment, to the present situation in which God has placed you. It means that personal encounter with God’s word in the present moment is possible only to the person who is attentive and receptive in this instant to the divine presence. Ibn ‘Abbād teaches that the proper response of “a son of this instant” to God’s call is gratitude.

Nass Cannon’s “No Mirror, No Light – Just This! Merton’s Discovery of Global Wisdom” (184-96) is a meditation on Merton’s recovery of the true self. David Golemboski’s “What Kind of World Lover? Thomas Merton on Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Death-of-God Theology” (197-211) attempts to discover Merton’s answer to “what kind of world lover?” and how he distinguished Dietrich Bonhoeffer from Death-of-God thinkers.

Paul Pearson’s “‘A Dedication to Prayer and a Dedication to Humanity’: An Interview about Thomas Merton with James Conner, OCSO” (212-39) provides the readers with Father Conner’s recollections of Merton as a brother, a confessor and a teacher. Father Conner, a native of Tulsa, Oklahoma, entered the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1949. He became one of Merton’s scholastics from 1951 to 1955 and became Merton’s undermaster of novices from 1958 to 1961. Father Conner describes Merton as an excellent judge of character. He relates that when he became vocations director, there were some instances when his opinion on people differed from Merton’s. Father Conner says that Merton would talk out a misunderstanding with him, but would never hold a grudge. He responded to him with real brotherly affection. He learned from Merton not to take things too seriously – though at times Merton, himself, could take things over-seriously. He values the way Merton put God and prayer first and Merton’s appreciation of each one for who they were in spite of all the quirks present in individuals such as Fr. Urban, Fr. Raymond and Dom James Fox. Father Conner points to Merton’s dedication to prayer and dedication to humanity as Merton’s legacy. He says: “I am certainly very grateful to Merton for all that he has meant to me, and been for me, and to me” (239). Since Fr. Conner has served as editor and a reviewer of the AIM/MID (Monastic Interreligious Dialogue) bulletin, a question missing from this interview is the extent of Merton’s influence on Fr. Conner’s longstanding involvement in interreligious dialogue.

In David Belcastro’s masterful “2009 Bibliographic Review – Beneath the Habit of Holiness” (240-59), he reminds Merton *aficionados* that we need an *aggiornamento* to connect Merton studies with the creative discourse that is going on in other fields of study.

The review symposium on Christopher Pramuk’s *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (260-85) is an educative experience. Each of the reviewers, Daniel Horan, OFM, Edward

Kaplan and Lynn Szabo, and Pramuk in his response to them, enrich our reading of Pramuk's book and understanding of Merton's *Sophia*. There is an astonishing presence at the heart of this review symposium! Matthews and Belcastro did a marvelous job of editing volume 23.