

EXPLORING A DESERT AREA OF THE HEART

Review of

George Kilcourse

Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ

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Like all great works of art, true poems seem to live a life entirely their own. What we must seek in a poem is therefore not an accidental reference to something outside itself: we must seek this inner principle of individuality and of life which is its soul, or 'form.' What the poem actually 'means' can only be summed up in the whole content of poetic experience which it is capable of producing in the reader. **The total poetic experience is what the poet is trying to communicate to the rest of the world.** (*Bread in the Wilderness* 53)

The image George Kilcourse uses to describe the instrument that he will apply to Thomas Merton's writings, in order to evince the Christ implicitly found there as kenotic and communicate him to the rest of the world—to us—is that of a lens. A lens is intended to be trained on the object, and then, by adjustment, focussed to give clarity. With the reflection and refraction of light, the viewer who uses the lens to see more clearly is able to lessen the distance between the object being viewed and the mind's eye that wants the better view. The stuff of this book is not about poker or about flying, as its catchy title might seem to indicate; it is about clear vision in service of the christian paradox of peace. Using a passage from Merton himself, Kilcourse gives the goal of his work at the end of the Introduction: "to explore a desert area of man's heart in which explanations no longer suffice, and in which one learns that only experience counts" (11).

The Introduction, which sets the tone for and serves to contextualize the goal Kilcourse chooses in his study, gives deftly crafted sketches of theological developments in christology and tells of Merton's relation to them. The author tells where we will need to begin to look if we are to find the evidence that Merton's hidden Christ is found at the margins of church and society, whose tattered edges are peopled with kindred spirits enjoying true conversation with the monk-poet from Kentucky. The Introduction concludes with a useful map that details Merton's pilgrimage, which was made throughout the course of his life and writings and which persistently journeys towards the mystery of God's compassion, repeatedly showing its self-emptying presence through the beauty of weakness, the true source of human freedom.

This study of christology is as unique as it is compendious and broad sweeping. There are six chapters, each with delicate yet tough-minded titles drawn from Merton's own words and extended through his inspiration: "Abundance of the Heart: Merton's Experience of Salvation," "Shy Wild Deer: Personifications of the Inner Self in Merton's Poetry," "Dance of the Lord in Emptiness: Merton's Kenotic Christ,"

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JOHN-BAPTIST PORTER

“Son of the Widowed God: Merton’s Sapiential Reading of Fiction,” “A Summa of Offbeat Anthropology: Merton’s Antipoetry as Christology,” and “A Common Spiritual Climate: Merton’s Christology in Interreligious Dialogue.” In each of these chapters, an appropriate selection of Merton’s writings is carefully analyzed and interpreted to help the reader see, hear, and understand Merton’s own tapestry of the presence of the indwelling Christ and the resultant divinization of his lived and familiar human experiences.

In my first reading of this text by George Kilcourse, Professor of Theology at Bellarmine College in Louisville, I was reminded of the work that Etienne Gilson did in his *The Mystical Theology of Saint Bernard* (ET: 1940; Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1990). It takes enormous courage even to attempt a systematic analysis of a writer who is not in the least systematic. Gilson had that courage and was groundbreakingly helpful with the results he achieved. His work is still valued and often used; the 1990 reprint is indicative of this fact. It strikes me that Kilcourse also seems to be made of resilient stuff, if *Double Belonging* (Paulist, 1992), his excellent book on interchurch marriage, and this present work are indications of his courage and willingness to think. The author, with his comfortable mode of understatement, keeps reminding us that it is to Merton’s corpus of poems that we must turn again and again if we are truly to understand what he wants us to know about the Christ of his faith and experience. The poem, the author tells us in numerous ways, is Merton’s *act of art*. We have in fact heard this truth before. But because Kilcourse actually does turn to the poetry of Merton as a source for his kenotic Christology, that is the vision and blessing he shares with us in these pages.

Current cistercian scholarship, especially that of Marsha L. Dutton on Ælred of Rievaulx, contextualizes the orientation that the cistercian experience of the Gospel brings to the human person questing for God and experiencing the divinization of the self. We know for certain that the principal implication of the Incarnation, of Jesus taking human flesh, for the twelfth-century White Monks is that they record that their experience of the Divine is *chiefly* through other human persons—those with whom they share their lives. Similarly Kilcourse says in his Conclusion that

the Christ of kenosis subverts for Merton any complacency in his own spirituality. He discovers the epiphany of Christ in the human experience of poverty, in historical discontinuities, at the margins of Christendom, and in the rejection and vulnerability of the world’s scarred victims and despised outcasts. (225)

This statement is at least half of the picture, as Cistercians have come to experience it. Merton is in the right place, experiencing Christ at the margins and in the ugly, and he realizes that it is Jesus whom he seeks, that the margins have become central to his understanding the contemplative action of Christianity, and that the transformation of the ugly into the dazzlingly beautiful young bride is the measure of God’s compassion: God assisting us to see ourselves as God sees us.

Ace of Freedoms is not casual reading to be picked up during the stock market report. It is a book that asks time for serious rumination and a willingness to rethink our christological assumptions. It is a book that confronts its readers with the importance and the appropriate place of Jesus Christ at every level of Merton’s life and writings: in journal musings, in lectures, in scholarly treatises, in artistic expression, in devotional tracts, in both serious and leisurely correspondence, in private thought, and—most important—in his human relationships both within the monastic community and beyond the gates. The relentless, encyclopedic, and hermeneutical method Kilcourse uses gives witness to the intelligent, long, and mature thought that has couched this work. For all its astounding thoroughness, it is my intuition (after several readings) that *Ace of Freedoms* will only live as it is used. It has the potential usefulness of Frank Dell’Isola’s *Thomas Merton*:

A Bibliography or the more recent computerized *A Merton Bibliography*, compiled by Angert Bergfeld. Clearly not a bibliography or even a more ornate annotated bibliography, Kilcourse's work in service of kenotic christology begins where the bibliographies conclude.

Are there chinks in the armor? Not being any kind of expert in Merton, I must entrust to a more clever and more widely read reviewer the task of taking Kilcourse's lens in hand, putting it to the test on itself, and seeing if it can vindicate the kenosis of Jesus in Merton's published thought. From what I have been shown, it seems a likely case. To share in the detailed yet succinct analyses presented in this book afforded me a certain sober clarity about Merton's vision that I did not previously have and for which I am grateful. There are a few infelicities of fact (i.e., pages 5, 115, and 224), but these are only minor irritants. For this reviewer, there are four areas, quite different from one another, where development and improvement would be beneficial in any future reprint of *Ace of Freedoms*. The first three areas concern the author's work: his development and contextualization of Merton's monastic sources, his use of Merton's poems *qua* poems, and his writing style.

First, though a variety of substantive descriptions is used to describe Thomas Merton in these pages (understandably hoping to avoid a constant repetition of his name), rarely is the vigorous trappist heritage out of which he and his monastery were emerging mentioned. Some assessment of the effect of *le Trappisme*, in all its gloom and glory, seems to me to be utterly essential for a valid understanding of the intellectual development of a man who was formed as a Trappist monk. Though certain nodding in the direction of Gregory the Great is made, with slightly more reference made to Saint Bernard, it is carmelite John of the Cross who emerges as a principal spiritual force in Merton's writings. That this fact is true is no accusation but an important step in getting to a critical assessment of why Cistercian sources until recently were available in such paucity for those women and men being formed today as Cistercian cenobites.

Second, though Kilcourse convinces me of his understanding of the theological importance of the poetry, the use of the poetry in this work seemed to be at the service of the theology. If a poem is up to some task other than being a poem — evincing christological language, for example — then it is hard to feel the experience of the poem living “a life entirely [its] own.” The poem texts seem to be principally dealt with as elements in the theological project. It is an important project, and this is where Kilcourse is bold and daring. If, however, we are to experience the poem, *qua* art form and in its own life, we might hope that the author would want to lead us towards climbing inside the text so we could get on with savoring it. In the last line of the poem “Ars Poetica,” by Archibald MacLeish my point is well described: “A poem should not mean / But be.”

Third, though the work is punctuated with gentle stylistic hesitations and modest understatements, there is a contrasting profusion of descriptive adjectives refulgent throughout. For this reader, it served to work against immediately understanding the author's purpose by producing the sponge effect: though I perceived the clear, sound thinking of the author and profited by the illustrations of the excellent examples he provided, I found myself sinking into cottony words that mostly served to necessitate a rereading of any given passage. I am reminded of a postcard in my office of the high altar of an Austrian Cistercian church, built in the clean, beautiful style of the twelfth century and later overloaded with gilded everything.

My final concern is with the editing of the work. This book is witness to a literary genius. The academic press, however, has insensitively shrouded *Ace of Freedoms* in certain tell-tale signs of the dominance of the historical discipline over the literary. That is, with footnotes at the end, the reader constantly must turn back and forth, leaving the text for reference. It interrupts the reader rather than allowing him or her to experience a smoothness in reading. Misleading punctuation and minor grammatical turn-about (such as that instead of whiches) are present. And the question of the abundance of descriptive adjectives is better handled by editors than by reviewers.

But for these few items, this work of George Kilcourse will assist students and monastic men and women

alike to think seriously about the task of theology and will give guidance for doing the “sapiential reading of literature” that the writings of Thomas Merton encourage. It is my sincere hope that this book will be the lens that reflects the light and refracts the wisdom that Kilcourse’s mind’s eye perceives. He says: “Merton identifies the contemplative’s mission — ‘to keep alive a sense of sin’ as ontological lapse, not merely the violation of the external code” (135). The unprofitable shacklehold of external observances understood as the principal vehicle for the divinization of monks(!), which Tarppist know as *The Usages* and to which Merton may have been referring, is still the subject of research and debate in the Cistercian Order today. There is, I suppose, no more profound comparison to the human experience of life in Christ that we could wish to be presented to us: to live in the Spirit or to live according to the law. The ordering of our affections — what the twelfth-century Cistercians called the *ordo caritatis* — comes to us as a challenge from Saint Paul and the early Cistercians. In this work we meet it head on again in the Christ of Thomas Merton.

DID YOU SMILE?

by **Christine Jensen Hogan**

Did you smile, Son of David?
 Did you smile?
 Did you whisper in the stillness of evening
 Of the eloquence of clouds and stars?
 Did you bask in the exquisiteness of sunsets
 And look up to see the sky forever
 And spin around and around in circles
 To see it all
 Then flop down dizzy and awed,
 To feel the earth still spinning beneath you,
 The grass cool beneath your fingers
 As I do?

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